

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This introductory chapter is divided into five sections. The first section introduces the study undertaken on Chinese women in industrial home-based sub-contracting in the garment industry in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It elaborates on the purpose of the study and the research questions. It discusses significance and limitations of this study. It explains the methodology used in the research and analysis and finally gives an overview of the Chapters in this thesis.

1.2 **Women Home-based Subcontractors in the Garment Industry : An Introduction**

This study offers a glimpse of the ordinariness distinctiveness as well as the uniqueness of the life of a group of Chinese women industrial home-based subcontractors, who would otherwise be invisible. It focuses on the case of home-based subcontractors in the garment industry. It examines the circumstances leading to the women's involvement in home-based sub-contracting. It aims to generate an appreciation of the complexity of their lives,

their predicament over the conflicting demands of productive and reproductive work.

These women sub-contract from the garment makers to sew, cut and embroider material at home while caring for the family. In the study they talked about their relationship with the factories, their daily work schedules, methods of compensation and payment and the nature of their work. They opened a window to their past, present and their future.

The study illustrates these women's relationships with their husbands and children, friends and other relatives, and the factories from which they subcontract. But are their toils, efforts, and contributions as well as sacrifices valued and costed by their families, the factories and by themselves? I hope that a deeper interest and concern for the complex issues related to home-based industrial sub-contracting can be developed as a result of this study.

1.3 Purpose of the Study and the Research Questions

This study attempts to give visibility to Chinese women industrial home-based subcontractors in the garment industry in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Only Chinese women were chosen as the subject of the study as this is the most dominant group of home-based sub-contractors in the garment industry. The ratio of Chinese to Malay workers in the garment industry in 1981 for example was 4.3:1 (Hing, 1986). The fieldwork for the study was carried out over

different periods of time during the years 1992-1996 in the area of Kuala Lumpur.

The thesis attempts to place some of the questions on Gender and Work center-stage. Central to the research is the cost and value of women's productive and reproductive work to the economy and the household. Is it costed and valued? To what extent and how much importance does the garment industry and the families of these women home-based subcontractors value the work and contribution of the women home-based subcontractors? Is their work valued and costed by the garment makers, their husbands and children and the home-based subcontractors themselves? Do they estimate the cost or the value of these contributions? Do they consider these work to be of great worth and importance to the industry and their family well-being? It focuses on the case of the Chinese women home-based subcontractors to examine these issues.

It discusses the entry of women into the labour force and the feminization of labour in Malaysia as a result of increasing foreign investment in search of cheap labour for labour intensive industries in the light of the New International Division of Labour. It studies the pattern of the participation and non-participation of women in the labour force and its causes. It examines the participation of women in the informal sector and specifically in home-based subcontracting in the garment industry.

It proposes that the rapid growth of the garment industry in Malaysia was made possible by the activation of the industrial reserve army of Chinese girls

and the greening of these girls for the secondary labour market. These women and their husbands socialized in the traditional thinking of gender division of labour, accept that women bear the primary responsibility of childcare. As a result these women after marriage and childbirth, face the feminine dilemma and withdraw from the labour force. Though spatially restricted by their domestic responsibility, these women, still strong in their desire to be gainfully employed, resort to home-based subcontracting.

Though home-based subcontracting offers many benefits to the garment industry, garment makers use reproductive work to cheapen the productive labour of these women and generate capital accumulation and surplus. The state and the industry in conspiracy utilize this informality not to cost and value the work of these home-based subcontractors. The tying of production to reproduction causes the home-based subcontractors as well as their families not to cost and value the contributions of these Chinese women industrial home-based subcontractors in the garment industries in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study aims to contribute to two main areas of knowledge. The first is in the general area of women and work and second in the specific area of home-based sub-contracting.

The pioneering works of researchers and theorists like R.E. Pahl (1984), Veronica Beechey (1987), Lisa Ostergaard (1992) and Caroline Moser (1993), have contributed significantly to our understanding of gender and work. Work has been defined as activities for economic returns and generally excludes housework (ILO, 1976; Ostergaard, 1992; Moser, 1993). The principle of gender division of labour underlies the separation and differentiation of men and women's roles, typecasts women primarily in the domestic role with responsibilities for child-care, management of the home and home-making and men principally in the role of financial provider.

However, changing social and economic conditions loosened the dominance of men in the labour force after the Second World War with the entry of married women into the labour force. While many factors facilitate the feminization of labour, some of these institutionalized forces work in conspiracy to restrict and hinder their participation and defines the nature of their participation.

This study on women home-based subcontractors hopes to contribute to the on-going debate on gender and work and offer a deeper understanding of the feminization of labour and the related issues of women as secondary labour and the greening of women as cheap labour.

The second contribution is in the area of knowledge about the garment industry and home-based subcontracting. There are limited academic or trade writings on home-based sub-contracting in the garment industry in general and

even less on Chinese women in industrial home-based sub-contracting in the garment industry in Malaysia (Hing, 1986; Pawadee, 1993; UNIDO, 1993; Ng, 1994b)

Despite its significant contributions and its salience to the garment industry, sub-contracting - especially home-based sub-contracting - have not been much researched. The issues surrounding the subject are not properly understood due to lack of studies on the subject. Few studies have been done on subcontractors in the garment industries (Rao and Husain, 1983; Pawadee 1993; Erwan Agus Purwanto, 1998; Neetha, 1998, Deyo 1999; Vagneron, 1999). Home-based sub-contracting has remained outside of the national data gathering system. As a result, published data on home-based sub-contracting in the garment industry, is very limited. Even more so published material on home-based sub-contracting in the garment industry in Malaysia . There are very few published statistics on home-based sub-contracting, which can be obtained from government, trade or industry publications or surveys.

The lack of study on women home-based subcontractors in the garment industry itself, contributes to the invisibility of women in development and makes their contributions neither costed nor valued. Though little research has been done, there is an increasing interest to value women's unpaid household work including home-based productive work for cash income. This study aims to enrich the records of women's accomplishments so that home-based subcontractors' contribution in the future will be costed and valued.

1.5 Methodology

1.5.1 Area and Periods of Fieldwork

According to the concentration of apparel companies, as at 31st. December, 1993, the Federal Territory ranked third, after Johore and Pulau Pinang (MIDA, 1993). The area of fieldwork was Kuala Lumpur, primarily in areas of Chinese concentration – Salak South, Kepong, Jinjiang, Old Klang Road, Sungei Besi and Cheras. In previous researches primarily in the informal sector in Malaysia (Loh-Ludher, 1993,1994) and the garment industry, I have encountered home-based sub-contractors in the Kuala Lumpur area. Approaching the contacts either garment or garment related factories and subcontractors acquainted during previous researches, I was introduced to more and more subcontractors in the Kuala Lumpur area. The focus on Kuala Lumpur had no special significance, or special reason. It was selected mainly because the subcontractors could be located and identified. This was an important reason for the choice as there was no formal register or record of subcontractors to form the sampling frame. As home-based workers had the tendency to avoid authorities, contacts from earlier researches formed the main lead and were vital to locating and identifying the home-based subcontractors.

The fieldwork for this research was carried out during different periods beginning October, 1992 till February, 1996 over a period of almost four years. The fieldwork stopped and the analysis of the data collected was initiated in mid 1996. However, the writing of the thesis was only completed in early 2001.

During this period (1997-1998) Malaysia experienced economic turmoil due to the currency exchange buoyancy. This economic crisis shook the fast growing economies of Asia e.g. Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea and the Philippines. The other countries opted for International Monetary Fund rescue plans while Malaysia chose currency exchange control. All these countries suffered economic setbacks with low growths.

This had a great impact on the garment industry. Garment being a recession prone industry reacted to this downturn. Garment factories scaled down and fled in search of lower labour cost. Many factories relocated to Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia and Vietnam. This affected the nature of the industry. After the recession, some of the factories primarily the lower end ones which closed and relocated did not revive. Those that survived the shakeout were primarily the higher-end producers for up-market brand garments.

As the fieldwork had stopped from February, 1996, and the severity of the economic crisis of July 1997 was unknown till after 1998, it was not possible to revive the fieldwork. Because of this reaction and consequences, it was decided that the research done till 1996 would not be updated. The data based on the moment of research would reflect that economic moment. Thus the analysis was not influenced by the changes after that economic moment. Fortunately revisits were made in the Chinese New Year of 1997, 1998 and 2000 to the home-based subcontractors to assess the impact of the economic turmoil on their work and lives. Informal discussions and interviews during

these occasions focussed on the work situation and family circumstances enabled collection of information for the Postscript. The impact of economic crisis on home-based sub-contracting and garment industry is analyzed and presented in ' The Postscript'.

The fieldwork was carried out over six different periods over the four years :-

- (i) First Period - October 1992 to February 1993
- (ii) Second Period – May 1993 to February 1994
- (iii) Third Period - June 1994 to September 1994
- (iv) Fourth Period - January 1995 to March 1995
- (v) Fifth Period - June 1995 to September 1995
- (vi) Sixth Period – November 1995 to February 1996

October, November and December are three months when producers for domestic market are busiest preparing products for the festive season and so most likely to be in the factories. January and February are slack times when garment makers are likely to agree to give interviews. In the festive time of January and February, culturally it is most acceptable to visit acquaintances and friends and one is more likely to be welcomed into the homes.

May to August , especially during the month of July is a period when international fashion and fabric fairs and exhibitions take place. Manufacturers are often overseas during this period attending these shows to preview coming

trends and styles, secure orders and promote sales. Parts of June, August, November and December are school holidays for students in Malaysia. These were the times for observing relationships of the home-based subcontractors and their children. It also provided an opportunity to note the effect of the presence of children on the routine and schedule of the subcontractor.

During the first period (October 1992 to February 1993) fieldwork was concentrated primarily on the garment makers and initial visits were made to renew acquaintance with five home-based subcontractors whom I had met during a previous research in 1991.

During the second period efforts were made to continue interviewing the garment manufacturers. In the course of it, I realized the unsuitability of the time, as the owners often cancelled appointments to travel overseas for fairs, shows or to meet clients to secure orders. Because of the time sensitivity of the business and the lack of trade information of the garment industry in Malaysia, garment manufacturers often do not schedule their travel to fairs and exhibitions well ahead of time. The second period was then spent more on gathering information from the Malaysian Textile Manufacturers' Association (MTMA) and other garment related organizations about the garment industry. The interviews of the garment makers were resumed during the fourth period.

More contacts were established with the home-based subcontractors during the second period and this was followed up during the third, fifth and sixth periods when fieldwork was mainly focussed on the participant

observations of the subcontractors and their families to establish the work arrangements and the relationships with the children.

1.5.2 The Samples

The research involved two samples – the first sample is that of the factories, tailors, boutiques and other garment manufacturers/ makers which employ the services of home-based subcontractors. The second is the women home-based subcontractors.

Ideally, the two samples would be drawn randomly from the respective sampling frames. However, both populations were not known. There was no existing list of all garment makers especially small and micro- enterprises and owner operated ones. A few were members of an industry association like the Malaysian Textile Manufacturers' Association (MTMA). Even when listed in the MTMA directory or Yellow Pages and other advertising directories, there was no indication if they used the services of home-based subcontractors and the women home-based subcontractors.

The home-based subcontractors, on the other hand, were not part of the registered workforce and there was no register or record of the population of subcontractors to use as a sampling frame. The Malaysian Textile Manufacturers' Association (MTMA) and garment factories had informal listing

of names of small and medium sized factories, which subcontract from manufacturers but did not have a record of home-based subcontractors.

Interviewing all the garment factories or tailors in the geographical area of Kuala Lumpur to find the sample was impossible. Thus the only practical means was to start with four sources to locate the garment makers, which subcontracted. The first source was from the Malaysian Textile Manufacturers Association Directory 1992 and from the Malaysian Textile and Apparel Manufacturers' Association. From the listing of 64 garment manufacturers, 18 had factories located in Kuala Lumpur. The second source was the Telekom Malaysia Yellow Pages 1992 for Selangor and *Wilayah Persekutuan*, a total of 33 establishments advertised under the category of garment wholesalers and manufacturers and another 29 were listed under Clothing Wholesalers and Manufacturers. Telephone calls were made to these 80 companies to enquire if they subcontract to other production units. Of these, 52 were not willing to respond. Probably it was out of fear that the inquiry was from authorities checking on illegal operations. Out of the remaining 28, a high 85% said that they had used subcontracting at one time or other. Further telephone interviews were made to these 28 companies. Of these 28, only twenty permitted interviews in person. During these visits, I attempted to drop in on 16 of the factories, which did not accept interviews on the phone. Of these, 10 of the 52 non-responding factories allowed personal interviews. Generally, telephone interviews and casual drop in visits were not successful to solicit interviews on

what was considered a 'sensitive' subject like subcontracting as the respondents were cautious. The probability of deceptive and erroneous information was high.

The third source was those factories, tailors, boutiques and other garment manufacturers that I was acquainted with or knew from past encounters at seminars and functions organized by the Malaysian Textile Manufacturers' Association or from the contacts made during a one month research attachment to a label weaving factory in 1991. The label, though small, is an important complementary part of a garment. It describes the garment size, gives its washing instruction, place of origin and brand. During the attachment, I had followed the members of the sales team to visit factories and other garment makers. Starting with these few contacts, the samples snowballed and built up to twenty. The fourth source was through a reverse process tracing the factories introduced by home-based subcontractors. Subcontractors helped to introduce a total of twelve factories and garment makers from whom they had experience sub-contracting or those garment makers they knew were subcontracting to home-based workers. These two methods were successful in helping to secure 32 respondents for interviews. The past contact or introduction reduced the suspicions and fear. Thus the total number interviewed in person was 62.

The home-based subcontractors were introduced by two groups – the factories, tailors and boutiques which subcontract and sub-contractors who introduced fellow subcontractors. The snowball sampling of those introduced by garment makers and fellow subcontractors was a more effective and fruitful

way. Due to the self-perception of the women home-based subcontractors of the informality of their work (not 'serious' work) and their preferred avoidance and distrust of authority, these home-based subcontractors, was not a ready group for interview. The introduction by a common acquaintance allayed fears and suspicions and literally opened the doors.

A total of 152 names were collected from the garment makers interviewed. However, only 126 were in the Kuala Lumpur area, with others outside of the area of fieldwork. Out these 126, only 74 agreed to be interviewed. This high refusal rate of the home-based subcontractors was mainly due to fear of exposure and the reluctance to reveal themselves.

Out of these 74, there was difficulty interviewing nine because of language. My research assistant and I were only fluent in Bahasa Malaysia, English, Mandarin, Hokkien and Cantonese. These are the main languages or dialects among the subcontractors in the garment industry. There were nine who were not interviewed because they were not able to speak these five languages but were fluent in Hakka, Teochew, Hainanese and other Chinese dialects. Another group that was not interviewed were those who were reluctant. When my assistant and I returned to interview, 10 were uncooperative and declined. Only 55 home-based subcontractors were willing to collaborate and were interviewed to establish the profile of the group.

This application of open sampling was used based upon a few reasons. At this initial stage, the selection was indiscriminate, except for the willingness

to co-operate. At this stage, the theoretical relevance was still unsure as only a few of the past research has indicated any need for specificity i.e. to guide initial sampling choices (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

From this group of 55, due to the absence of a satisfactory sampling frame for the whole population, cluster and multi-stage sampling was applied (Moser and Kalton, 1974). At first, those interviewed were clustered into clusters based on the type of garment makers from whom the home-based workers subcontracted, the stage of the process subcontracted, the products of the garment makers and the size of the production unit. From each group a few, not necessarily a proportionate number of samples were selected for in-depth study. Factors such as age, marital status, number of children, education level and work history were not regarded as variables for clustering as these were factors perceived as significant variables for establishing the profile of the home-based subcontractors.

The selection, to a large extent, was influenced by the openness and willingness of the subcontractors to permit me into their homes. Careful steps were taken to convince, assure and win the confidence of these women to ensure acceptance. This was a necessary and unavoidable condition. Discriminate sampling was thus used to maximize the opportunities for returning for participant observation and for verifying of story lines and filling in missing data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Entry to the home and by implication intrusion into their privacy and life, was only possible if the women and to some extent the

other members of the family, were willing. Frequent visits for multiple in-depth interviews and participant observation would have been impossible otherwise. This method of selection, may or may not, necessarily present a bias. If it did, it was an unavoidable one.

A manageable number of thirty was selected through the process of discriminate sampling for multiple in-depth interviews, home visits and case studies. The number of thirty was decided to achieve a balance of generality and intensity. Given the limitation of time coupled with the willingness of subcontractors to expose and invite entry to their privacy, the number had to be manageable. The women were primarily the sampling unit while contextual information was collected from the other members of the households i.e. the husband, the children, members of extended families. All the husbands, children and members of the households, nuclear or extended, were all interviewed and involved in participant observations

1.5.3 Methods

In deciding on the methodology, I faced the dilemma of balancing intensity and generality. The desire was to have intensity without losing something in generality. The method chosen reflected the variations and the reality. A qualitative rather than a quantitative approach was adopted as it was more sensitive to the women under study and it better captured the voices of the

women in their own understanding and terms. This was also founded on the belief that women have not one but many voices and the individual and the collective voices needed to be heard.

The methodology selected allowed me, also a woman, to develop a special relationship with the subjects - the home-based subcontractors. The researcher employed a feminist perspective that advocated not a singular methodology but a combination of methods (Roberts, 1981; Reinhartz, 1992).

The subjects studied, home based Chinese women subcontractors in the garment industry, and necessitated this approach of a combination of methods because of the complexity of the context under study as listed below :-

- These women who worked at home, were often viewed by the authorities as illegal and functioning in the informal sector. Thus they feared being reported to the enforcement authorities ;
- The primary reason for this choice was that the respondents were a group of women who found articulating in conceptual terms of needs, wants and desires difficult. The Chinese cultural background of the working class, with its low level of education, did not encourage the free expression of ideas and thoughts. Women were not always empowered to speak out. Often what was said might not be what was exactly meant. Much more could be known through observations and listening to casual conversation than from what was said. It should be pointed out that the respondents' lack of ability to

articulate their thoughts did not mean they were not capable of thinking or they were not thinking people.

- Subjects of study were also children and husbands and other members of the households, the dynamics of their relationships, their normative behavior, their gender division of work as institutionalized by the patriarchal kinship structure as well as the changes brought about by the home-based work of the women ;
- The study was viewed as an intrusion into a private sphere, the home, which was also the place of work

(i) *Interviewing Garment Makers*

The garment makers were from four sources. For the first three groups obtained through the 'Yellow Pages'; directory of garment factories from the Malaysian Textile and Garment Manufacturers Association as well as factories introduced by garment related factories, telephone calls were made to enquire about the deployment of subcontractors using the telephone interview guide for the initial survey (Appendix 1.1). The telephone interview guide primarily aimed at determining if the garment maker employed the services of home-based production workers as subcontractors. During the teleconversations, efforts were also made to request for an appointment for a face to face interview. Positive responses were followed by visits to the garment makers.

During the drop-in visits, interviews were conducted using an interview guide (Appendix 1.2). The person interviewed in order of choice was first the owner or co-owner. If the owner were not available, then the production manager was interviewed. The refusal rate was higher among small and micro enterprises for fear of exposure to authorities. Reluctant and cautious subjects would probably give deceptive and erroneous information.

The key points in the interview guide administered on the owners or production managers in the garment industry in Kuala Lumpur area were :-

- Background of the business
- Product of the garment maker
- Subcontracting work employed by the garment makers
- To whom did the garment makers subcontract?
- Nature of home-based subcontracting
- Background of home-based subcontractors
- Home-based Subcontracting arrangements
- Benefits and challenges of home-based subcontracting
- View about home-based subcontracting
- Policies and Regulations affecting home-based subcontracting

The factories after the interview, convinced of the non-threatening nature of the research as well as the potential benefits to the industry, often introduced other factories, which subcontract to home-based workers. The garment makers also introduced home-based subcontractors for study.

(ii) *Informal Interviews of the Home-based Subcontractors*

A combination of multiple methods was used. Often research methodology emphasizes objectivity, efficiency, separateness and distance. The methodology chosen here hopes to allow room for an integrative, interactive and subjective approach without sacrificing efficiency and validity.

The method chosen for the first stage was the open-ended informal interview. This was followed by in-depth interviews, participant observation and case study. From the initial survey, a total of fifty subcontractors were interviewed using an interview guide to draw up the profile of sub-contractors. From this group, a cluster and multi-stage sampling technique was applied to draw clusters of subcontractors subcontracted from factory owners, medium small and micro-sized, tailors and others.

Then multiple in-depth informal discussions were conducted with thirty women subcontractors. This process of study was a slow and deliberate one with repeated visits made during the period of 1992- 1996. Initial visits were more to build trust between the home-based subcontractors and I. Without trust, it would have been difficult, in fact impossible, to intrude into the privacy of the homes and lives of these women. Distrust and suspicion might not only mean outright refusal to be interviewed but polite acceptance with inaccurate or deceptive information.

This involved informal discussions with the women using open-ended questions guided by the research questions. Written questionnaires would create

suspicion and fear leading to non-collaboration since these women were part of the informal sector. Responses were listened to carefully without obviously transcribing or recording the remarks. Reconstruction of the interview normally took place right after, often in the car, a short distance away from the home of the subcontractor so as not to lose the information. Often notations were made about the attitudes and feelings and other non-quantifiable variables not usually covered in the survey. It attempted to look for subtleties imbedded in a woman's speech e.g. hesitations, pauses and changes in tone and pitch. These subtleties often uncover the feelings of women, showing humanness and individual characteristics (Reinharz, 1992; Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996).

Often the visit and discussion was initiated with an 'icebreaker' to help women to relax and talk about themselves, putting them at ease and convincing them that the discussions had relevance to them as individuals. Very often I started off with a self-introduction, finding ways to reach out to these women through common points of interest so as to narrow the distance between the women under study and I, without the women perceiving the research as an academic or intellectual exercise. Care was taken that the women did not have feelings of inadequacy. This might lead to their concealing information and opinions, often perceived by the women themselves as 'unimportant' or 'too trivial' to mention.

At the initial stage of the fieldwork to establish a relationship, the conversation mostly opened with discussions about children and their schooling,

childcare and homework. Later visits often opened with concern about the children's health and schoolwork and the women's leisure time use. Often the women would seek my advice about their children's education, her own health and some questions about dealing with authorities, be it applying for a passport or legal problems of a relative.

The women often expressed in detail their personal history, recounting anecdotes of their youth, working life or when they were newly married. This was very useful and important as it discussed the stages of their lives and decisions taken in the course of their employment leading to sub-contracting in all their complexities. Care was taken at these points not to impose external meanings and interpretation of events. These perceptions were checked for reliability with more observation and more questions in subsequent visits because of the complexity involved.

Within the Chinese patriarchal family structure, women rarely spoke or gave opinions publicly of anything much less on their own living conditions and changes introduced or decided by husbands or in laws. Though these women were not isolated socially and in some cases, had active public and community roles, much of the conversation, expression of opinions were centered around the women's reproductive role and other topics often referred to as 'women's talk'. Thus it was not easy to draw out opinion on decision making, family relationships, gender division of labour, control of money and even more difficult, impact and changes to their lives. As home visits became more regular

and more visits and discussions were conducted, a close bond was developed with these women. This was extremely helpful in gaining a greater understanding about their feelings and their experiences.

Because the site of sub-contracting was in the home, its dynamics impacted greatly on family life. Thus the impact on other members of the household - the husband, the children and the extended family members formed an integral part of the study. The husband and the children's versions were especially vital to the study and must not be omitted. The husbands were more guarded and less open than the children. The husbands tended to consider my presence, more of an intrusion into the privacy of their homes. The majority regarded some of the survey interests especially about income and expenditure pattern with distrust and were less willing to comment.

(iii) Participant Observation

Participant Observation was included to supplement and complement discussion. Participant observation enabled me to watch and note the phenomena around me and gave more meaning to the responses to the questions, conversations and interviews (Moser and Kalton, 1974). As the women and children were less articulate, observations helped to gain insights and understanding especially in areas, of sensitive subjects or topics which the interviewees were less comfortable to share, such as family pressure, marital relationships and well-being of family.

In the course of home visits, I observed and participated in the life of the families. I developed an intimacy with the women and invested my subjectivity in the research and in return learned in great depth and richness about their feelings and their experiences, influenced by my own self-disclosures. By adopting a sharing, non-hierarchical approach between the women and I, I was able to achieve a better understanding of women and their families. At the same time, I was able to raise my own consciousness and also the consciousness of the women about the women's lives and their gender relations within the dynamics of the home and within the institution of the family.

In the course of the many visits, the women were able to bring out their concerns and issues regarding their work, which were important to them. Both became keenly aware of the dominance of sub-contracting over women's lives and that of their families'.

It generated provoking discussions about the challenges and demands of sub-contracting arrangements, the power balance between the subcontractors and the garment makers, the vulnerability of the subcontractors and its related insecurity.

(iv) Case Study

It became apparent that to get into greater depth of the study, a case study approach would be helpful. From the results of the profile survey of the

sample of fifty-five women, it was decided that the case study method be used in order to conduct an in-depth study of a group of thirty cases.

In “A Modern Dictionary of Sociology” by George A Theodorson and Achilles G Theodorson” case study is defined as

‘a method of studying social phenomena through the thorough analysis of an individual case. The case may be a person, a group, an episode, a process, a community , a society or any other unit of social life. All data relevant to the cases are gathered and all available data are organized in terms of the case. The case study method gives a unitary character to the data being studied by interrelating variety of facts to a single case. It also provided an opportunity for the intensive analysis of many specific details that are often overlooked with other methods. This approach rests on the assumption that the case being studied is typical of cases of a certain type, so that through intensive analysis generalizations may be made which will be applicable to other cases of the same type.’

(Theodorson quoted in Reinharz, 1992:164)

In depth focus on the lives of these 30 women and their families allowed deeper insights from the perspectives of these women allowing complementing generalization of points with illustrations from the stories told by the women themselves. The in-depth study of a limited number of cases,

thirty cases in this study, would avoid the limitation of generalization but would contribute provoking thoughts to generate discussions on the sub-contracting home-based work and family life.

The case study method was employed in this study to explain the process of development over time, the interaction and dynamics of sub-contracting home-based work and family life, the reproductive and productive roles, to illustrate this idea of home-based sub-contracting and domestic work and to explore uncharted issues.

Case study approach allowed a more in-depth biographical account or oral history, probing many facets of the women's lives, sharing experiences which otherwise might be lost in questionnaires and interviews. It allowed reflection on the lives of the women and self-reflection of their life experiences through the passage of time. It also allowed me to generate inductive summaries.

While case study was employed as a method of study, it was also used as a method of presentation in the analysis. Because it would be too voluminous to be presented in its entirety, sections of these case studies were extracted to lend voices to the points of analysis and give 'flesh' and 'spirit' to these accounts (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996).

It would have been good to use photography or slides, even better video filming to highlight aspects discussed in the case. Photography would be able to capture a more fluid and fruitful context for understanding and data gathering,

and to promote empathy between the research and the subcontractors. Photographs would have allowed a way to understand the subjectivity of the women who had difficulty with language and to show aspects of their life and behavior. However, as the subcontractors and their families feared exposure of their 'illegal' work and were mindful of privacy, permission to photograph them were not usually given. The identity of these women and their family members had to be concealed and assurance given for due confidentiality. As photographs could not be widely used, depicting some of these candid scenes in drawings was an alternative to illustrate the finer points observed.

1.6 Analysis

The data gathered for this research was more qualitative than quantitative. While the quantitative data from the research helped to present an overview of the profile of the home-based subcontractors in the study, the interpretation of the data had to go beyond this superficial explanation. As the study involved women who rarely gave opinions about themselves or their work publicly, the analysis had to take into account more than what were articulated. The general profile was thus, supplemented by the larger analysis gleaned from the voluminous observation during the numerous visits to the homes besides oral accounts given by the women. These biographical accounts were also supplemented and complemented by the notes of attitudes and emotions from

participant observation, which gave 'flesh' and 'spirit' to the responses. There were, of course, instances where the assertions risked being unsubstantiated, influenced by presuppositions or pre-dispositions. This was unavoidable as the interaction between the subcontractors and I was mutually influencing and interactive over the long period of the study. However, through the use of extracts from the women's own voices, their stories, it was hoped that any distortion or bias could be minimized.

The multiple in-depth informal interviews over time proved to be thought provoking for the women and stimulated self-awareness and self-analysis throughout the period of study. This evolving process too, could not be presented in mere figures and statement of facts but was captured through the case study method.

The analysis of the predicament faced by the women working at home involved various inter-linkages between the individual household and the wider social and related economic structures. The complex and intricate relationships between individuals (e.g. subcontractors and husbands, children and extended family members), and individuals and institutions (e.g. subcontractors and garment makers) illustrated the centrality of the household as the site for home-based production and reproduction of social life. It offered a picture of the lives and predicaments of these women within these dynamics.

This thesis is written in a manner to invoke a special relationship with readers by emerging a norm of self-reflexive reporting of the discussions/

observation process. It was apparent that the women have multi-layered reality – lived reality, reality constructed by need, reality based on patriarchal ideology, each one as real as the other. All these realities are valid, if not equally so. These differences in their realities have to be included in the analysis.

The feminist interests in the analysis also required a redefinition of some concepts, which might be tainted by the women's own valuation of the domestic role of women and productive work. It sought to examine the value women placed in their work, their definition of 'success', which encompassed factors other than economic value. The women helped to revise concepts and understanding, helping me to see the world differently, uncover previously neglected and misunderstood worlds of experience. e.g. worker's satisfaction, worker and employer relationship.

Though the case study method was used as a methodology, the information obtained was not presented in the form of cases because of the voluminous length of each case. However, the voices of these women still needed to be heard and therefore were presented as 'her stories' organized under the different topical headings. The voices gave powerful illuminations and profoundness to the analysis.

Secondary data used in the analysis were till the year 1996. It was frozen at that moment in time and deliberately not updated for the primary data was also reflective of that moment. Data and information collected from visits after 1996 were presented in 'Chapter 8: Postscript', as it was not representative of

the fieldwork moment. The period 1996-98 was a time of turmoil in the economic environment due the bouncy of the currency exchanges in Malaysia and its Southeast Asian neighbors, which have considerable impact on the garment industries.

Garment being an industry prone to recession reacted to this downturn. Garment factories scaled down and relocated in search of lower cost labour. Many factories shifted to Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia and Vietnam. This affected the nature of the industry in Malaysia. After the recession, some of the factories could not be revived. Those that survived the shake-out were primarily the higher-end producers for up-market brand garments and those who could react fast enough to the changes.

Because of this reaction and consequences, it was decided that the fieldwork data collected till 1996 would not be updated. The data based on the moment of research would reflect that economic moment. Thus the analysis was not influenced by the changes after that economic moment.

However, revisits to the sub-contractors were made to study the impact of recession on home-based sub-contracting since garment is a recession-sensitive industry. Revisits were made in the periods of December 1997, Chinese New Year Period of 1998 to determine the impact of the recession on the life of the thirty home-based subcontractors. Twelve of the subcontractors were visited during the Chinese New Year, 2000. Telephone calls were made to

all thirty in May 2001 to update on their status. The analysis of the findings is presented in the Postscript.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

This study looks at Chinese women in industrial home-based sub-contracting in the garment industry in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This study was carried out over the period of 1992-1996 in the area of Kuala Lumpur. Only Chinese women were chosen as the subject of the study as this is the predominant group of home-based sub-contractors in the garment industry. The study was made based first on an open sample of fifty-five home-based subcontractors and case study of a manageable discriminate sample group of thirty sub-contractors. The small sample size was often questioned on its representativeness as it limits generalization of its findings. However, the sample size was purposely kept small to allow an in-depth study and the use of case study method to avoid generalization and give humanness to the life of these women.

One factor that has limited the fieldwork, though not significantly, was language. My assistant and I could fluently speak Bahasa Malaysia, English, Mandarin, Cantonese and Hokkien. As the in-depth interviews, participant observations and case studies require a good command of the language of the subjects studied, we were not able to include in the sample for case study, those home-based subcontractors who could not speak these five languages and

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dialects well. Nine of the cases who spoke Hakka, Teochew and Hainanese, had to be excluded because of this limitation.

The fieldwork began in October 1992 and ended in February 1996 over almost four years. Analysis of data began in mid 1996. However, the writing of the thesis was only completed in early 2001. The long delay in completing the thesis was due to several problems I faced, which, in themselves attest to the fact that women who seek professional advancement face many obstacles.

I was female Administrative & Diplomatic Officer in a male dominated Administrative and Diplomatic Service of the Government of Malaysia. I am a mother of four children. My husband is a family physician. I contribute actively to community development especially the advancement of women through my active participation and involvement in local, national, continental and international community development programs and projects as well as in conferences.

I enrolled as a Ph.D. student in April 1992 after my request for a two-year no-pay study leave was approved. My superior, himself a Ph.D. holder, viewed my eagerness to pursue a Ph.D. as being over ambitious for a woman. It took a year of negotiation and an intervention by a female deputy director, to secure the leave. In October 1993, my leave was prematurely terminated and I was asked to report back to work, since such leave was viewed as a privilege rather than a right. Returning to full-time work caused an interruption to my research and fieldwork. In the meantime, my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Jamilah

Ariffin was seconded to Universiti Teknologi Malaysia in Johore. It took another three months before a supervisor, Dr. Rokiah Talib, was assigned. In October, 1998, Dr. Rokiah Talib reached retirement age. It took a further nine months for another supervisor, Dr. Shanthi Thambiah, to be appointed.

The writing of the thesis began in 1994 and a major part was completed by 1996. Towards the end of 1996, I requested early retirement. It took six months for this to be approved during which I was transferred to two different positions. In October, 1997, my retirement was approved. I made a career-change from the Malaysian Civil Service to consultancy work. The writing of the thesis suffered frequent interruption during the three years, 1997-2000. From late 1998 the writing of the thesis resumed intermittently in between consultancy assignments with the encouragement of family and Dr. Shanthi Thambiah. I had contractual assignments, which she was obliged to fulfill. The assignments required constant training programs and fieldwork within Asia and occasionally in Australia, Africa and North and South Americas. However, it should also be acknowledged that these overseas assignments have served to enrich my understanding and knowledge.

Another limitation of this study was that the analysis was based on the periods of fieldwork from October 1992 till February 1996. Fieldwork did not resume after February, 1996 and analysis began in mid 1996. Only occasional revisits were made to the homes of the home-based subcontractors during the Chinese New Year of 1997, 1998 and 2000.

It did not take into its analysis the period of economic crisis of 1997-98 because the fieldwork had stopped from February, 1996, and the severity of the economic crisis of July 1997 was not fully realized at that time. It was not possible to backtrack to conduct the fieldwork. Thus, it was not possible to include the period after 1996 February in the analysis. The data based on the moment of research could only reflect that economic moment. Thus the analysis was not influenced by the changes after that economic moment.

However, information from secondary sources and data collected from the informal discussions during the revisits were analyzed in the Postscript. It assessed the impact of the currency turmoil and economic recession on the garment industry and the work situation and life of the home-based subcontractors.

1.8 Overview of the Chapters

The chapters are summarized below :-

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses the research questions and analytical issues as well as the significance of this study. It then discusses the methodology chosen and finally gives an overview of the Chapters in this study.

CHAPTER 2 - WOMEN AND WORK : A REVIEW

This chapter reviews the literature related to women's productive and reproductive work and examines the factors that facilitated the feminization of the labour force. It looks at how some factors facilitate women's participation in the labour force and also work in conspiracy with institutionalized political and social forces to subordinate women workers and limit the nature of their participation. It reflects on how the lack of gender sensitive policies and intervention programs cause women to experience the feminine dilemma and work-family conflict related stress and strain causing women to withdraw from the formal sector into informal sector including home-based subcontracting.

CHAPTER 3 - WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOUR FORCE IN MALAYSIA

This chapter discusses the nature of women's participation in the labour force in Malaysia with a special emphasis on the participation of Chinese women. It reviews the industrialization program in Malaysia and its impact on the feminization of labour. It discusses the reasons for the comparatively lower rate of labour force participation of women especially Chinese married women after childbirth. It examines the Chinese culture and public policies and programs, which may have contributed to a disabling environment for women workers causing them to withdraw from the formal sector into the informal sector and home-based work.

CHAPTER 4 - THE GARMENT INDUSTRY IN MALAYSIA : THE ROLE OF SUBCONTRACTING

This chapter presents the findings from both primary and secondary sources on the garment industry. It addresses the nature and size of this industry, tracing its trends of growth and decline. The findings are based on documentations of the Malaysian Textile Manufacturers' Association and garment industry-related publications as well as interviews of sixty-two garment makers. It discusses issues and concerns of the industry especially about its labour intensive nature. The industry is plagued by labour shortage and resolves to subcontracting as a solution. The nature of the garment manufacturing process allows the breaking up of its process and making it viable for sub-contracting. Here the benefits of subcontracting including home-based subcontracting are examined. The findings also focus on the nature of home-based subcontracting and its related issues.

CHAPTER 5 -HOME-BASED SUBCONTRACTORS IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY : A PROFILE

The findings from the interview with the fifty-five home-based subcontractors and the in-depth study of the thirty cases of the home-based subcontractors are presented. It describes the profile of these home-based subcontractors and uses the voices and stories of these women who share

glimpses of the complexities of their lives and the circumstances leading to their involvement in home-based subcontracting.

CHAPTER 6 – PRODUCTIVE AND REPRODUCTIVE WORK ORGANIZATION OF HOME-BASED SUBCONTRACTORS IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY

This chapter presents insight into the organization of the productive and reproductive work of the women home-based subcontractors. The findings regarding their conditions of work, the organization and arrangement of their work, their compensation payments and other benefits are presented in this Chapter. It also examines the power relationship between the subcontractors and the garment makers. It notes the contributions of these women to the industry and to their families.

CHAPTER 7 - CONCLUSION - WOMEN IN INDUSTRIAL HOME-BASED SUBCONTRACTING: NEITHER COSTED NOR VALUED

This chapter analyzes and summarizes the findings and discusses the future of home-based subcontracting in relation to the development of the industry. It draws on the literature review and relates it to the findings of the industry and the home-based subcontractors in the light of the research

questions. Although vital to the garment industry, are the home-based subcontractors costed and valued?

CHAPTER 8 - POSTSCRIPT : SUBCONTRACTORS REVISITED

The 1997-98 economic crisis had varying effects on the garment industries and the lives of the subcontractors. It caused the garment industry to re-engineer to survive. Manufacturers adopted different strategies from downsizing, relocating to neighbouring countries and shifting from low end to higher value-added products. The home-based subcontractors helped the factories to cut overheads by allowing the manufacturers to externalize the costs from the factories to the subcontractors. They offered the manufacturers the adaptability and flexibility they needed to meet the uncertain demand of the recession. Most of the home-based subcontractors continue subcontracting. They continue to contribute to the viability of the industry and supplement family income without being valued and costed.