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Globalisation, Place and Gender

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Abstract: Current processes linking different parts of the world together economically and culturally are referred to as *globalisation*. Though this term has gained immense popularity within a short time, critics have argued that it is hard to find empirical evidence that the world is becoming 'one'. A crucial question is then *how* to look for such evidence. In many studies of globalisation, the general view taken is that of 'global', meaning that one searches for a global overview, or outlook, which is situated at no specific place. The present paper argues for a shift of focus, reasoning that to understand what is global we have to start with the local. The experiences of the global take place in particular local places, and to study such processes of change we need to situate our study in such a way that we can study the relationships between the local and the global. The particular place where our study takes place is rural Malaysia. Changes related to industrialisation are often spoken of in rather deterministic terms, in the sense that the local population are 'victims' of a global shift, whereas we argue for an alternative approach, analysing women workers as agents of change within their local community. Globalisation also mainly refers to external forces imposed on local actors, whereas we find the local to be imperative for the strategies of industrialists, as well as for the present processes of change.

Keywords: Globalisation; Gender; Place; Industrialisation; Malaysia

1. Introduction

People's living conditions change throughout history. Earlier, societies changed in different directions because of great variations in local resources and local conditions. Changes took place gradually. Today, however, new information technology, industrial production and world trade, migration patterns, even environmental problems, transcend the borders people have previously constructed, which influence all society. Changes take place more rapidly and it is hard to find places which remain untouched by this global influence. As human beings we become more alike, we gain global offers, we consume the same, we produce for a global assembly line and we get global problems. We are exposed to a 'global journey'. (Vilby, 1997; authors translation)

The above is a summary of the introduction to a new textbook on *globalisation*. In both this and other books on this topic, current processes linking different parts of

the world together economically and culturally are referred to as globalisation. Hence, globalisation is equated with growing integration of national economies, but the concept may also refer to rapid worldwide influence of some dominant social, cultural and political norms and practices.

In the textbook quoted above, a very complex phenomenon is summarised as one and the same process, and the outcome of the process is not questioned: 'we' are all being more alike. However, though this term has gained immense popularity within a short time, critics have argued that it is hard to find empirical evidence that the world is becoming 'one' (Hirst and Thompson, 1996; Waters, 1995). A crucial question is then *how* to look for such evidence. In the literature on globalisation, the point of view generally taken is in terms of the 'global' as well, meaning that the reader gets a global overview, or outlook, which is situated at no specific place. A critique that has been raised is that such an outlook actually originates from somewhere while it still pretends to be 'a gaze from nowhere', in accordance with a recent critique of the view of science more generally (Haraway, 1991).

In this paper, we will not review the variety of conceptualisations and approaches for interpreting globalisation put forward in the literature. Rather, we will explore some crucial arguments which may illuminate findings from our own research. We shall argue that to understand what is global we have to start with the local. The experiences of the global take place in particular local places, and it does not make sense to isolate the local from the global. People's practices always take place in a physical and social context, in which they create and recreate their livelihoods. Hence, practice and context are integrated concepts, as are the local and global. To study processes of change in a particular place we need to situate our study in such a way that we can study the relationships between the local and the global. The local place is the receiving end, but is at the same time the arena where social practices are situated and where the new realities of people are created. Whereas the concept of globalisation gives the impression of an impersonal drive moving the whole world towards the same direction, it is our aim to identify some actors within the process. Here, accordingly, an interplay of the local and the global does not only mean that global impacts may be modified locally but even that local actors may influence the practices of global actors.

Our focus is on a particular place and a particular process, namely foreign industrialisation in the fast growing economy of Malaysia[1]. In 1987/88, we undertook a study of young women workers in a company in a rural area in southern Malaysia. In 1995, we came back to re-interview the same workers and study the development in the area. The place we studied is located in the State of Johor, where rapid industrialisation has taken place during the 1980s and 1990s. Foreign industry has been welcomed, and within a decade it has become common for young women to be industrial workers. We shall relate local developments to the following central discussions on globalisation: What external, global influences may be identified and how do people respond (external and internal drivers of change)? What changes and adaptations may be identified at individual and local levels (change and continuity)?

[1]We should make the reader aware of the fact that we made our revisit prior to the present economic crisis in Southeast Asia. Some of our findings may be modified accordingly.

Do places become more alike (the divergence-convergence debate)? Searching for the relationships of the local and the global, the challenge here is twofold: to study the local place as the meeting ground between foreign industry and women workers and the subsequent changes in women's lives; and to study the meeting ground of foreign industry and local place, in which the women workers are acting as agents of change.

Changes related to industrialisation are often spoken of in rather deterministic terms, in the sense that the local population are 'victims' of a global shift. The perspective of victimisation is generally prevalent regarding women's position as workers in a global economy. They are often depicted as being 'dragged into' this economy as a cheap workforce. Though the latter is often true, it leaves out the story of how these women evaluate their circumstances, make conscious choices, ask for advice from each other and seek to benefit from the options for change. The evidence of our data is the wide variety of choices women make, facing the same circumstances of a society in transformation from a rural community to an area of rapid industrialisation. The variety of individual careers in fact tell us that the women make choices according to how they can benefit from the new circumstances. Increasing foreign influence seems to have resulted in a widening of options to choose lifestyles, types of work and career patterns.

Such findings led us to the issue of globalisation. It is our view that studies of change brought about by an increasing globalisation of industrial production have to include the scrutiny of how people create changes for themselves and their communities. Our aim is to integrate the two perspectives. How do foreign industries, integrated within a global economic system, relate to local people and vice versa? Taking a local place and local actors as our point of departure, how can we relate the processes of globalisation we observe as a concept and a perspective; how is such a perspective relevant to a discussion of social change and continuity, and for the changing situation of men and women?

2. Globalisation: A Contested Concept

The concept of globalisation refers to processes and actions which are not new, even though it has only been accepted as a significant academic concept since the mid-1980s. Our critique of some of the textbooks is, as mentioned initially, that the very complexity of the phenomenon is not problematised although the term globalisation refers to several processes of different character and with possibly different outcomes. It specifically relates to economic restructuring and the interdependence of the world in the twentieth century. Earlier, development theory debated changes related to measurable attributes such as education, occupation, income and wealth (modernisation theory). Globalisation, however, is seen as something broader, referring to several parallel processes of social and cultural character as well (Featherstone, 1990). Kearney (1995: 548) refers to a concept of globalisation as,'social, economic, cultural and demographic processes that take place within nations but also transcend them, such that attention limited to local processes, identities, and units of analysis yields incomplete understanding of the local'. Robertson (1992: 8) adds a dimension of consciousness; thus 'globalisation as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole'.

At present, scholars generally acknowledge the increasing influence of the outer world on local places. Our perspective is related to that of Giddens, who stresses the interdependence of local and global events: 'GIobalisation thus can be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa ... Local transformation is as much a part of globalisation as the lateral extension of social connections through time and space' (Giddens, 1990: 64). In these processes of change, it becomes vital to consider both Western and non-Western societies as dynamic actors. Although both types of societies transform differently, it becomes pertinent to understand that non-Western local traditions are also historical and dynamic and are not static localities suddenly exposed to change because of increasing Western influence.

According to Ghai (1997), globalisation relates to three spheres of society: the economic, the social and the cultural sphere. He identifies the social sphere as comprising social relations and customs as well as consumption patterns and lifestyles. The cultural dimension includes the important domain of values, religion and identity. He mentions the role of 'global' leisure pastimes, such as viewing television, films and videos, listening to popular music, playing, sports and dance, even spreading of political ideas relating to pluralism, democracy, free elections and human rights. Ghai claims that globalisation in the social and cultural spheres has been marked by discontinuities and contradictions. Even where Western influences seem strong, they have often been adapted to indigenous style, so also within the domain of politics. Moreover, new consumption patterns and lifestyles have primarily benefited affluent minorities in the non-Western world, while the vast majority of populations in these countries do not have access to these new sectors of production and consumption.

Within the sphere of economics, Ghai (1997) claims that globalisation is reflected in an increasing acceptance of free markets and private enterprise as the principal mechanisms for promoting economic activities. This affects the trade in goods and services, capital flows, foreign investments, communication and migration patterns. Such global economic integration has led to some sharp inequalities between countries. In Asia, this has led to polarisation, in the sense that some countries have benefited at the expense of other less developed ones. We find this a nuanced description of the many forces driving the process of globalisation and the possible diversity of outcomes. Worldwide expansion of capitalism and technological progress are set at the core of this process.

The literature takes different stands on the debate whether globalisation implies the levelling out of social and cultural differences, often referred to as 'the convergence–divergence debate' (Massey and Jess 1995). Some scholars argue that all, or, nearly all, societies move towards the same level of industrialisation and material welfare (Vilby, 1997). Accompanied by a globalisation of media and consumer cultures this assumes that people and places become more alike. This is connected to the question of whether there is a diffusion of Western social and cultural goods to the east and south, and a similar process of modernisation is taking place worldwide. The opposite standpoint, however, is that there have been different paths to and forms of industrialisation and welfare. In substantial ways people and places develop differently. This is a question we find highly relevant to our study of Western industrialisation in Asia.

With reference to our study area, we find that it may not be a process of either – or. This point is emphasised by Baum (1974 and 1980, in Robertson, 1992), who argues that societies will converge in certain respects (mainly economically and technologically) and diverge in others (mainly social relational). According to Robertson, this injects the issue of social continuity into the debate. Our interpretation of the concept of social continuity is to change in a way which does not conflict with traditional social values. Such an issue is particularly important in view of gender roles and gender relations. While women take up work in the industrial sector and in many ways may seem 'Westernised', the traditional expectations of a woman may still be the same as before or even become more traditionalist. While becoming more alike to women elsewhere in certain respects, there may also be cultural restraints as well as unwillingness to change. In other cases, new options available locally may lead women to change their life patterns substantially, thus transgressing established norms. In such cases of 'social discontinuity' more flexible interpretations of traditional norms and increasing independence at the individual level may be the outcome. We thus see a need to identify in what respects there is social change and social continuity, at the individual and local levels. In this sense, globalisation may imply homogenisation as well as diversification.

Another interpretation of the global is that it is more often presented as being 'decentred' from specific national territories and takes place in a global space (Kearney, 1995), thus being different from transnational processes which are anchored in, and transcend, one or more nations. This view may be contested by one crucial question, namely whether much of what is taken as evidence of an increasing globalisation actually is of transnational character with solid national bases, such as economic and media enterprises (Hirst and Thompson, 1996). We find that this latter view challenges the concept of globalisation as referring to less intentional and more abstract, impersonal processes taking place without reference to specific actors. Furthermore, the actual situation may be a combination of both: in some cases, global actors are easily identified, such as multinational enterprises, whereas in other cases, such as increasing communication via new media, they are not. Hence, globalisation may be connected to both what *appears* as impersonal processes, such as flows of technology, money and popular mass culture, as well as more personal processes that are articulated locally, and sometimes differently by young and old, women and men. It becomes pertinent, therefore, to identify what types of external influence one is talking about and how they are acted upon locally.

Another factor complicating an 'impact analysis' of globalising processes on local places is that the limits between external and internal processes are blurred. For instance, has religion or world view been introduced as a critical factor in globalisation (Robertson, 1992; Waters, 1995), but is this to be considered a local or a global issue? In this regard, globalisation implies a blurring of the distinction between what is external and what is internal. Thus it may give rise to a wide variety of ways and means whereby people shape their own identities and create or recreate their lives and communities. Of interest here is to focus on what actually takes place on 'the meeting ground' between the local and the global and how this 'meeting' is articulated. Gender relations are being negotiated, as are authority structures, norms and values in regard to different social groups.

The dimension of external versus internal processes of change is highly relevant to our focus on foreign industrialisation. During the 1980s major emphasis was put on external processes, especially through the scenario of Fröbel et al. (1980), who described how capital was moving jobs from rich countries to poorer ones, attracted by cheap labour. A new international division of labour (NIDL) was created, where women had become a primary labour resource. Many feminists saw the poor working conditions and low wages in this industrialisation as superexploitation (Nash and Fernandez-Kelly,1983; O'Connor and Wong, 1983), whereas others (e.g. Lim, 1983, 1985) pointed to the positive result of offering women better economic opportunities than before. Foreign companies, the external force, were seen as the actors performing these changes.

At that time, limited attention was given to local processes. We understood this when we began scrutinising the theory of NIDL with regard to the employment of women in export-oriented industries for their special attributes as hard-working, conscientious and loyal workers with nimble fingers. We found that motives of industrial relocation were more complex than just recruiting cheap labour (Lund and Lie, 1989), and we found that the image of the female industrial worker portrayed in much of the literature was rather stereotyped, and regarded women as a passive labour force. On the contrary, we found, that women workers were acting as agents of change in their local communities, economically as well as socially (Lie and Lund, 1994). New patterns of behaviour may be analysed as internal responses and adaptations to change, but since these varied considerably one could not say categorically that they are the result of external factors or of local traditions. Moreover, not only did the strategies of women change over time, but so too did the strategies of foreign industries. Consequently, when we are dealing with an increasing contact of worldwide social relations, we understand that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away, but we can also observe that it is not a one-way process. In this way, globalisation challenges our perceptions about what is actually local and internal.

Today, globalisation may also lead to deterritorialisation, as many people live outside their native communities because of war, unemployment or poverty. According to Kearney (1995), such deterritorialisation obviates any notion of bounded cultures in the traditional sense. Many people are displaced. At the same time, says Kearney, the constantly increasing volume and intensity of global transmission of information, images and ideas require a reconsideration of 'presumably bounded cultural areas'. This assumption gives rise to interpreting places and local identities as more complex than before. We may deduce that, depending on what is your occupation, gender and social situation, you may face a situation where individuals cohabit, but only share partial, overlapping identities with their cohabitants. In our case, a similar complexity is shown, as people are being exposed to a new 'rurban' reality. The entrance of foreign industries has led to a new economic structure, enabling people to work outside their traditional villages, but at the same time benefit from modern urban goods and services. The people who live and work within a rural and agricultural reality cohabit with people who live and work within an urbanised and foreign influenced reality.

From the different theoretical perspectives of globalisation presented above, there remain many questions, but we cannot deal with all of them. What we will emphasise here is the relationship between place and gender in view of (1) the interrelationships of the local and the global, or ways in which global processes affect the local ones and vice versa; (2) how global, or externally imposed, changes may affect a local

population differently, thus influencing relationships between men and women; and finally, (3) we shall ask whether increasing globalisation actually means a process of homogenisation with Western influence expanding worldwide and being adopted in remote places.

3. The Local Context: Place and People

A conventional understanding of place is as a particular physical location which is characterised by fixed sets of social characteristics (Women and Geography Group, 1997).

A more recent way of conceptualising place, however, is to start from the premise of increasing globalisation. The 'sameness' of places is questioned, and one asks how it is most appropriate to think about place in view of globalisation. Place can then be seen as an 'intersection of sets of social relations which are stretched out over particular spaces ... [and] the distinctiveness of place is seen to rest in the combination of social relations juxtaposed together in place and the connections they make to elsewhere' (Woman and Geography Group, 1997). Such an interpretation implies that when we study the women who live in Malaysia we have to consider how they relate to people inside and outside of their community. It is how they bring together their various experiences and act locally which constitutes the distinctiveness of their community (Lund, 1994).

As mentioned earlier, the context of our study is rural, southern Malaysia. The State of Johor has recently been transformed from being primarily an area of rubber and palm oil estates to an important industrial area. The rapid transformation in the area is linked to the industrial development in neighbouring Singapore. The workers in the new foreign industries are mainly young women recruited from the rural villages who have become first-generation industrial workers.

The Norwegian company we studied in 1987/88 had a workforce of young Malay women, recruited from nearby villages and still living with their parents. The company was export-oriented and labour-intensive, producing fishing tackle for the Asian market. It had about 190 employees, though varying during seasons. The educational level among the workers was high,[2] whereas the work tasks were simple. The wage system was based on a combination of basic wages and several forms of incentives. In addition to individual production incentives, other extras included attendance bonus, yearly production bonus and several awards presented at an annual celebration. These were partly awards to best workers, partly lucky-draw prizes, and consisted of household items of considerable value. The company had a personnel policy that attracted young women. A main characteristic was its all-female milieu, from the top to the bottom level of the organisation. This was of great importance because limited contact with men gave it a reputation as a safe place to send young daughters.

To study the impact of industrialisation on the local female population, all the workers from one village were interviewed and also the workers' mothers. The

[2]53% of the workers had completed secondary school of the higher or lower grade, whereas 16% had completed primary school only.

village chosen for the in-depth study was a rural settlement (a FELDA scheme[3]) of oil palm producers. Although Malaysia has a multi-ethnic population, most settlers were Malay and thus Muslims. The settlement had a homogeneous population of middle-aged couples who had been recruited from the landless, rural population during the 1960s and 1970s. Most of them had large families and at the time of the study the eldest children had grown up. Many young daughters had taken up work in the newly established foreign industry. Buses picked up workers early in the morning. Although some went as far as Singapore, the Norwegian company attracted labour because it was located in the countryside not far from the village and was perceived as providing a protected female environment that would not affect a woman's reputation. In Malaysia, industry's recruitment of young women workers has been associated with increasing sexual freedom (Daud,1985; Ong; 1987).

Eight years later, we revisited the area to interview the same women again.[4] In the first study, we concluded that there was a perfect fit between the company's need for labour for low-skilled, repetitive work and the local population's need for cash income and employment for the young generation. We found that the young women were 'squeezed' between overlapping expectations: on the one hand to fulfil their parents' expectations to become dutiful daughters and live up to traditional standards of morals and values; on the other hand to meet new demands for achievement and learning and be a 'modern woman'. Thus we were interested in finding out how the women would cope with these conflicting expectations. We also expected growing ambivalence once they were past the age of being a young daughter and met the expectations to be an adult. The questions we asked when we returned were which choices the young women had made for their lives as grown-ups in the present socio-economic reality, and whether different choices gained local acceptance. Below, we shall analyse the options of women workers and the choices they had made when we met them again. However, let us first turn to the changing reality of the local community to see whether globalisation is a relevant dimension for analysing the role of both gender and place.

4. From a Rural to 'Rurban' Reality

Since our last visit Malaysia's industrial development has prospered, making the country one of the most successful and resourceful economies in Asia. The State of Johor, where we did our study has in fact become one of the areas which have

[3]In 1956, the Federal Land Development Agency was created to cope with increasing, rural poverty. Until that time, most of the economic benefits of the agricultural sector accrued to foreign investors owning and controlling large estates and associated commercial interests. Peasant agriculture, on the other hand, had been impoverished under the growing pressure of landlessness and indebtedness. Hence rural development attracted increasing attention during the 1960s as an alternative to urban-based industrialisation and the commercialised plantation sector.

Economic and social progress constituted the twin objectives of the FELDA's land development programme. The rural landless were provided with economic agricultural holdings on the basis for improving their economic status. FELDA schemes are so-called 'integrated' land settlement projects. Each scheme is packaged as a new society, complete with rural roads, water supply, dwellings, schools, a health clinic, a community hall, a mosque, shop, houses, irrigation and drainage works, transportation, marketing and processing facilities.

[4]If the worker had moved, another member of the household was interviewed about her career since the last interview.

changed the most. Big industrial estates and new towns have been constructed around Johor Baru town. Both men and women commute daily to work in the constantly expanding industrial and service sectors.

This has challenged the rural structure and economy of the Johor region. Many resettlement schemes have been converted into private agribusiness estates, others have been converted into sites for industrial development, while yet others stay basically rural. Jobs are readily available in both the agricultural and the industrial sector. To the young, however, jobs in services and industries are most attractive, as they are well paid and identified as progressive and future-oriented.

We found that even if our case study community had stayed rural and the palm oil prices were now generally good, a lot of the inhabitants were no longer involved in agricultural work. At the same time, the production pattern had become increasingly privatised. Hence, for the young generation the village had to a large extent become a residential area for people working outside the village. Furthermore, several settlers had given out their land for rent. Consequently, we could observe a consolidation process among the settlers: those who wanted to continue with agriculture, actually a gradually diminishing and elderly group, and those who go for work in the industrial (mainly women) and tertiary (mainly men) sectors, actually an increasing group. Hence, we can observe a change from a situation where agricultural work provided the basic and substantial income, to a situation where industrial and service-related work dominates.

Applying the concept of 'rurban' indicates a levelling out of the distinction between the urban and the rural in the area. Although we did not interview the women who had left the village, to marry or get a job in the city, we could observe that there was less difference between the urban and the rural, with regard to housing, lifestyles, services and goods. This seemed to be partly due to increasing mobility of FELDA inhabitants, better services and infrastructure, and more contact outside the village from an early age. Although many people were no longer farmers and entitled to land in the village, they chose to live here. Many had married within the village, others got non-agricultural work inside the village or not too far away. Due to the resettlement policies, services here (schools, clinic, roads, shops, electricity) were recognised as cheap and good, land was still accessible and housing was already provided by the FELDA administration.

Thus lifestyles may become more similar in rural and urban localities at the same time as the local community differentiates internally. In some families, several members are working outside of the village, participating in the modern economy, whereas other families rely mainly on traditional sources of income. Although the FELDA settlement was constructed for agricultural purposes, the inhabitants have managed to adapt to the new and globalised economy. What one can observe is a constant moulding of new and old practices and lifestyles.

5. Three Women, Three Choices: New Patterns of Differentiation

Let us consider some of the options for a new generation of women in the settlement.

Noraini is 31 and got married 4 years ago. She continued her work at the same factory since we last interviewed her and until her marriage. Three months after the

marriage she left her job. Now she has two children: one is 2 years old and the other is aged 6 months. Her husband is a lorry driver and 1 year older than she is. She says that their parents arranged the marriage.[5] The couple live in the FELDA, in her parents' house. She says that her mother is old and that they share the housework. Noraini tells us that she cannot have a job because of the children. Her sister, however, who lives in a nearby town, is married, has one child and works in a factory. The sister's child stays with the grandmother in the FELDA settlement. Thus, Noraini looks after three small children.

Siti is now 28 years old and got married at 21. When we met her first she was 20 and she told us that her parents had arranged for her to get married. She left the factory before the marriage. Her husband lived rather far away, and she moved to his house. The husband is working as a lorry driver for the municipal council. Two years after she got married, she had her first child and now has two children. Siti has her own income by running a foodstall, like her mother used to do. She cooks the food herself, sets up the stall in the evening and brings the children with her.

Rohani looks to us like a 'modern woman' in dress and appearance, and she also tells us that she 'likes to follow the trends'. She got married when she was 31, and her husband is the same age. She has a small girl and a baby boy. She has been a factory worker since she left school. In 1990 she left the Norwegian company, then worked at another factory for a while, and shortly before she got married she started working at a small electronics factory in the FELDA settlement, only a few minutes away from home. Her husband works in town rather far away, as a supervisor in a supermarket. He lives there during the week and comes to see his wife and children during the weekends. The couple live in her parent's FELDA house. Her mother looks after her children while she is at work. Two of her sisters' children also live in this house and are looked after by the grandmother.

Considering the differences in lifestyles among the young women it seems futile to ask what is according to Malay tradition and what might be considered 'imported' from outside or a result of increasing globalisation. New options have led to new choices at the same time as the choices are rooted in traditions. One woman has an occupation which dates back to traditional village life by running a foodstall. Another is a housewife. It may be questioned whether being a housewife is according to Malay tradition. In traditional village communities women were economically active as producers and vendors of agricultural or home-made products (Firth, 1966; Strange, 1981). Of the mothers of these industrial workers, many were working as rubber tappers while they were married and had children; others did farm work or different types of homeworking (Lie and Lund, 1994). Leaving one or more children with the grandmother is also according to tradition (Massard, 1988). The ideal of the full-time housewife is by some considered an import from Western culture which was eagerly adopted by the advocates of Muslim resurgence. By posing women as caretakers of the public morality, they advocate a strengthening of the family combined with the increasing seclusion of women (Heyzer et al. 1989). The position as a

[5]There are different versions as to what extent the parents decide upon marriages. The women say that today often the arrangements made by the parents take place after a girl and a boy have decided they want to get married. Only when the young people do not find a spouse will the parents themselves actually arrange for it.

housewife might alternatively be considered that of a childminder, making it possible for other women to be employed as industrial workers. Some of the women with full-time employment would pay relatives or neighbours for looking after their children. Even grandmothers who traditionally would do this anyway, were sometimes paid.

When young women took up work in industry, this changed the sharing of work tasks between mothers and daughters. In the 1980s, when we interviewed the workers the first time, they were still living with their parents. The daughters were then relieved of some of their duties at home. Previously a daughter would be expected to relieve her mother of such tasks, thus leaving the mother more time for economic and social activities. Then, daughters had instead taken over the mother's responsibility for a key part of the family income. In the 1990s many of the young generation of women have continued to work in industry even if they are married and have small children. Grandmothers are the most important childminders, even having the children living with them. Thus the young generation's wage work is to a large degree dependent upon the relationship of two generations of women: mothers who have become grandmothers, and daughters who have become mothers.[6]

Rohani is one of those working in the new industries, while living in her mother's house and leaving her children there while she is at work. By appearance she looks more 'modern' than other women in the village, with her hairstyle, fashionable tights and T-shirt. The emphasis one may put on fashion as symbols of change is to us somewhat unclear. This may be so because it is also unclear to the local population what this actually means, illustrated by a quotation from the father of a young worker: 'She's wearing pants these days. I don't know what she is up to' (Lie and Lund, 1991). The quotation also reflects an increasing gap of understanding between generations. Whereas the young generation actively participates in the new global economic system through their work in industry, the older generation who spends very little time outside the settlement recognises it more indirectly by cash incomes and new consumer goods available for the household.

Locally, people are affected differently by foreign industrialisation, most strikingly in the sense that some are active participants whereas others are affected only indirectly. The most peculiar of the local change processes we have observed is that a formerly most protected group, namely young women, have been the spearhead in the process of transformation of the local community. Whereas young women entered the new occupations and became familiar with foreign companies and the production of foreign goods, young men sought employment within local services (transport and house building) or stayed within the agricultural sector. The older generation recognises changing patterns of employment and authority within the family and have to sort out what moral standards and lifestyles are compatible with the new status of their daughters. More cash income has affected housing standards and brought new consumer goods to the homes. Also the level of consumption and the difference between modernised and traditional homes vary between local households. Thus, industrialisation has resulted in new patterns of differentiation locally.

[6]More about changes in the relationships between generations can be found in Lie (1999).

6. Women as Agents of Change

Our study was mainly concerned with the impacts of foreign industrialisation on the lives of rural women. Studying the women workers and their role within the family, we found them acting as 'agents of change' in their community. In times of economic crisis in palm oil production during the late 1980s, young women workers contributed importantly in a pooling of resources to sustain the level of living in their parents' households. As the first generation of industrial workers, they were the pioneers of Malaysia's drive towards industrialisation. We also studied the coping strategies of various types of FELDA households. Some households struggled hard for survival, and the contributions from grown-up sons and daughters were important in this regard.

In 1987–1988, nearly all the workers at the Norwegian company were young, unmarried and female. According to the management, the workers left their jobs when they got married, although this was not an explicit part of the company's employment policy. The majority of the workers had been there for 2 years or less, and only a small minority had worked there for more than 5 years (Lie and Lund, 1994).[7] When asked if they planned to leave their job upon marriage, most of them said that they would. Some, however, wanted to stay, and some said it depended on circumstance. The latter referred mainly to economic needs, but also to whether jobs would be available where they were going to live in the future, and whether the husband would allow it. Thus, at that time the work pattern seemed rather standardised in the sense that industrial work was something young women did in the period between school and marriage. As they left school usually at the age of 15 or 17, and the ideal age for marriage was considered the early twenties, this meant a working period of about 5–8 years.

To the company, this was a labour force very appropriate in relation to their needs. The jobs consisted of simple, repetitive tasks which the management considered fit for young female labour. The training period was not very long, and thus a stable workforce was not really important to the company. Wages were low, and the company could offer no prospects for those who stayed, except for the few who might advance to supervising or quality control. The workers were constantly referred to as 'girls' and sex and age were the most important criteria for recruitment. So far, the study confirmed most findings on export industries and the exploitation of young, female labour (cf. Nash and Fernandez-Kelly, 1983).

Today, we may question whether we were open enough to the new possibilities which were implicit in the new economic, social and cultural structures of the FELDA communities. There may also have been more variety in the situation and scope of women than this picture portrays. The FELDA was seemingly a very homogeneous society concerning social background, ethnicity and religion, and all settlers got similar plots of land, a house and access to the same services such as schools and health service (the settlement project package). It was, however, actually in a process of developing into a stratified community due to differences in resources, skills and connections. The new work opportunities have accelerated this process.

[7]The company had been established in 1980.

At that time, however, women were not offered much choice if they wanted employment. The company was established in a rural area, and it was the one most easily within reach from the village. In the mid-199Os, however, there was more choice and flexibility due to the proximity to new large industrial estates and the possibility of working on a piecemeal basis at home. Many new factories were established, there was a high demand for labour within different branches, wages had raised substantially, and transport had improved.

Re-interviewing the workers, we found that they had made different choices. Above we depicted three life patterns but we could not say that any of them was the preferred one, or the one idealised in the local community. In fact, about one third of the now married workers were housewives, nearly one third were still industrial workers, and nearly one third worked in the informal sector.[8] Continuing to work in industry does not mean staying on in the same factory but to move on when there are new opportunities. Also, the ideal age of marriage seemed no longer to create pressure on them, as the age of marriage varied from 16 to 35. More than one third were above the preferred age, and were actually between 25 and 35 when they got married. To be able to postpone marriage means more choice: there are, for instance, more opportunities to find a spouse of one's own choice, to get more work experience and to spend, as well as save, one's own money.

Apparently, women now have a wider choice. If they had adhered strictly to local traditions, the most appropriate had been to leave one's job upon marriage and preferably make an income by working from home or within the local community. If 'globalised', would this imply work in the modern sectors, a move to the city and consumption of foreign goods, including such things as clothing and make-up?

What we find is a variety of adaptations and ways of seeking benefits from the new economic opportunities. The money one earns is mainly used on consumption locally, preferably on an extension of the FELDA house so that the young couple can set up a separate household. Other young couples are saving money for buying an apartment flat outside the FELDA. The dress code seems rather liberal but not particularly foreign. Fewer women wear a headscarf or a mini-telekung in 1995 than in the 1980s. Still, a sarong is preferred within the home and outside many wear traditional Malay dresses. The latter still retains a market for local dressmakers.

Thus, we do not find conformity to either a traditional and local, or to an imported and foreign lifestyle. People seem to adapt to foreign industries by allowing women more freedom of movement. The easy acceptance of women's wage work during such a short timespan, however, may be because it is not considered a completely new phenomenon, but also according to tradition that both spouses contribute to the family economy. In addition, a woman may feel obliged to contribute economically to her ageing parents (Lie and Lund, 1994; Rudie, 1994). In this way, foreign industrialisation may contribute to local change but at the same time as strengthening local traditions.

[8]Of 35 workers, 31 were married and one was about to be. Of those who were married, 12 were full-time housewives (all of whom had small children), 10 were industrial workers, and 9 were working in the informal sector. One was a student. Of the four who were not married, three worked in industry whereas one had completed higher education.

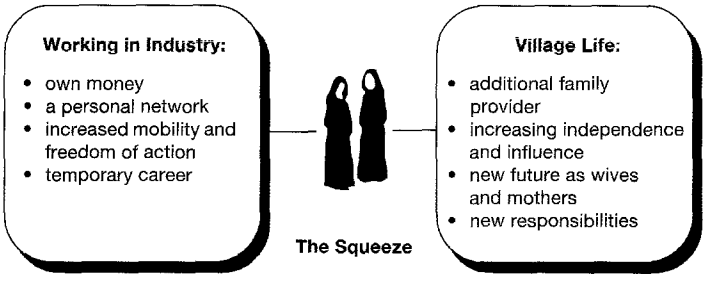

Fig. 1. Women in between.

7. Gender at the Meeting Ground of the Global and the Local

As already indicated, our previous publication (Lie and Lund, 1994) depicted the situation of the women workers in the way as shown in Fig. 1, at the interface between 'The global' (foreign industry) and 'the local' (village and family). This model puts women at the centre stage of development, as being major instigators for change. As a result, female factory workers were described as being basically in a 'squeeze' between old and new tasks, old and new norms and expectations of female behaviour, and old and new economic structures.

What we found when we came back to our case study village was that, although women had married since we were last in the village, many had continued to work in the industrial sector. They had become working mothers, having arranged their daily lives in efficient and flexible ways, a few by working piecemeal at home for a contractor, more often by arranging for somebody to look after their children during work hours. Thus, they have become active participants in the new market economy and had consolidated their role as workers and change agents. Their husbands generally seem to value their work for the good of the common household. Some had even gained prestige and status on traditional terms within the new economy, as they could now afford to go to Mecca to make their vows. But we also see that, although all are affected by the new economic reality, it does not mean that all are affected equally in the sense that their ways of participating vary substantially.

On the basis of the follow-up study, depicting a variety of choices and life patterns, we cannot say that the transnational character of economic life and the relocation of industry have specific impacts and implies a globalisation of local cultures. We would rather say that change has taken place, but that the local articulation of change may be as much a product of local traditions and local strategies as a result of foreign influence. In which ways then, is the concept of globalisalion helpful for the analysis of local processes of change due to foreign industrialisation? We will argue that to understand these processes we have to analyse it as several interface situations in which the significance of the local level needs as much attention as the global or foreign forces at work. Studying the literature on globalisation, however, attention is more one-sidedly directed at foreign impacts, or a general process of Western influence over the world, mediated by such agencies as transnational companies, transport, tourism and the media.

How, then, can we analyse the *external* versus the *internal* drive in social transformations? Studying foreign industrialisation in Asia generally implies that focus is directed at external forces. There is, however, every reason to focus also on how local conditions influence the strategies of foreign industries, thus making industrialising processes, as well as social processes of change in industrialising communities, diverge. The foreign company we studied has adapted to local customs in many ways, mainly to attract local female labour. This has mainly meant adjustments to a moral code of the local Muslim society, which has been taken seriously. The company has been highly successful with this strategy, but at the same time this makes it in some ways more similar to local firms than to a company in its home country. In view of this, it becomes obvious that the recruitment of young women to work in industry has led to profound changes within the local community. However, this does not necessarily mean that these women become more Westernised.

Moreover, foreign industrialisation is not only a result of external strategies. One might well say that companies are attracted, and actively recruited, by local governments by the government's economic policies including incentives, tax exemption and the supply of infrastructure. Of importance to the industrialists is an increasing surplus of skilled young labour. This is due to national transformations, such as higher level of education and rising age of marriage, scarcity of land for young couples and diminishing belief that farming will provide a stable income. Thus, local strategies shape the process and the outcome of external forces and are not unconditionally influenced by them. As exemplified above, although most research focuses on how foreign companies change the lives of young women, also the lifestyles of young women locally influence the strategies of foreign industrialists.

Hence, we are faced with a situation where women may be actors for the 'global economy', but at the same time expressing local concerns. As argued above, although capital is global, the foreign company has adapted and therefore hardly exposes the workers to real foreign or Western influence, although their new freedom of action and having their own incomes mean that foreign industrialisation implies local change. The ways in which they utilise this situation to their own benefits are both rational and according to their own cultural and social norms and standards. They are also context-specific and local, as well as international and global. This is an intriguing situation of interface: a meeting ground is created where the global and the local meet, and where new ideas, strategies and actions are articulated and created. Where one might expect increasing homogenisation, the opposite has taken place, given the increasing diversity in choice and adaptation. Consequently, we may deduce that at the individual level, as well as at the level of the local community, globalisation has a differential impact as differential praxis is expressed. We cannot say unconditionally that some have chosen modern lifestyles whereas others are more traditional. To be a working mother in a foreign industry could on the one hand be considered path-breaking, but on the other hand it is also a way of fulfilling traditional obligations by new means.

The findings challenge the understanding of globalisation as leading to *convergence* of local cultures. It is being argued that we share more, and the world increasingly becomes one and equal. People may have the same experiences although they live at different places, then also values tend towards becoming more equal. Waters (1995), however, argues that in spite of the fact that the world is becoming more and more

united this does not mean integrated. The problem is that it is often not clear what types of globalising tendencies one is actually discussing. The concept of globalisation is mainly connected to three types of phenomena: the media, communications, and the economic system of production and trade. Our study focuses on the latter, i.e. a new international division of labour within the system of production. Although people around the globe are all linked to the same system of a globalised economy, this does not mean that they have the same experiences, because they make different links of the same chain. A globalised economy means differentiation in regard to a global division of labour. The gains and losses thus are unequally distributed between regions as well as social groups.

Finally, can we speak of homogenisation when, firstly, only parts of Asia are industrialising while other countries may even be marginalised due to the very same processes? And, secondly, at the same time as parts of Asia are industrialising, parts of Europe are de-industrialising. Many places in Europe, – communities which have been shaped during a long industrial history – are now going through great transformations due to a changing economy; factories are laid down, people are seeking employment in the service sector, there is unemployment and decreasing populations. Thus social communities and working class cultures are under transition but not in the sense of becoming similar to the industrialising communities in Asia. Neither are industrialised countries a stable model to which industrialising countries will become increasingly more equal. Globalisation thus becomes important as a process of differentiation, expressing great variety locally and regionally.

8. Epilogue

Our visit to Malaysia took place prior to the economic crisis which hit Asia in 1996. Today, political turmoil due to recession, unemployment and lay-offs are the order of the day. Malaysia, which has for the last decade imported labour from neighbouring countries, is now facing an unemployment rate of 3.5%. Already 27,500 out of more than 800,000 illegal immigrant workers have been forced to leave the country. 200,000 Indonesian workers have been told to leave by the end of 1998.[9]

The Asian crisis has created a more nuanced debate on the role of globalisation and the way capitalism works. There is debate on questions like whether the process of globalisation has gone too far, and whether marginalisation is one effect of globalisation. In a gender perspective, there is need to identify how groups and individuals may, or may not, participate in the process of globalisation. We have seen in our study area that social and economic processes of change have taken place very fast during the last decades. Its local and individual impacts have been profound. Our future concern will be to identify the impacts of the crisis, not only those on the labour force, but on the local community they belong to. We understand that local lives, livelihoods and lifestyles are in a process of constant, and still rapid, change. Whether our female industrial workers have only played a time-specific and temporary role as agents of change is therefore still to be seen.

[9]Dagbladet, 6 April 1998.

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