

Preface

This series of studies was launched at the beginning of a new millennium and, even then, it was clear that the brave talk of a new era was destined to remain nothing more than the empty rhetoric of promises unfulfilled. Around the world, workers and communities are increasingly the victims of dangerous workplaces and polluted environments. In all countries, too many people remain without jobs or under-employed. And with the global financial system in disarray, the tension between jobs and health is even more exacerbated.

In the United States many workers need more than one job to lift themselves beyond the poverty level, as the jobless numbers escalate. In much of Europe, unemployment rates appeared to be intractably high and, we fear, are likely to become even worse. In Asia and much of the developing world, workers slave in workplaces at wages that are appalling low and under conditions that threaten their lives and those of their families. In Africa, ravaged by AIDS and war, only the lucky few can put bread on the table.

Across the globe the threat of environmental catastrophe, the erosion of indigenous cultures, and the exploitation of workers continues unabated. Recurrent economic, social, and environmental crises threaten those among us who have made small gains. Illusionary stability can only be achieved with loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank that come with stringent conditions to curtail even the minimal workplace and environmental health and safety regulations that may be in place. In the era of the so-called “triumph of the market” all is not well.

Pia Markkanen’s extraordinary, first-hand investigation of the dangers of home work in the shoe industry in the Philippines and Indonesia is an important contribution to our understanding of work, health, and the global economy. She also carefully documents the intersection of gender relations and hierarchy with the social relations of “globalized” economic development and reveals the important implications for the health of women, men, and children as toxic work enters the home.

The book is particularly important because gender is too frequently not discussed by occupational health and safety investigators. The disruption of the traditional household by an invasive market capitalism has important implications for the psychological and social health of women and the family. Traditional or modern methods of political participation—trade unions, political parties—may not be open to women in developing countries and they therefore may be without a formal voice in political discussion about development. New forms of participation are developing for women—political, social, even entrepreneurial—which have important implications for health and development. For analytical and ethical reasons, Markkanen has seen that gender requires careful attention. Home work in the shoe industries of the Philippines and Indonesia provides her with an excellent lens through which to examine issues related to gender and work in the global economy.

To be sure medical advances and public health initiatives have reduced the fear of disease and early death for many. Standards of living have improved for some, and the awareness of threats to health and environment has made many more workers willing to fight for healthy lives. But much remains to be done, especially when the “free marketeers” minimize the role that democracy and government play in protecting the lives of citizens throughout the world. The “market” will never solve all of these problems.

So, does this mean that there is nothing we can do? Of course not. Rather, it means that we have an especially difficult task ahead. We must understand this era with good analysis and innovative strategies. We cannot look back to a golden progressive age or halcyon socialist past, nor can we forget the lessons we learned. What we must do is engage and understand what is going on in the world, and develop and propose viable alternatives and progressive strategies. This in essence is the purpose of this book series and the point of our focus. Pia Markkanen’s work ensures that gender and family are not neglected in this approach.

This book series begins at the point of production. Work is essential to all our lives. Work is where things are made, good things as well as bad things. While work brings income and meaning, it also brings danger and threats to health. The point of production is where goods and services are produced but it is also the source of environmental contamination and pollution. In other words, work, health, and environment are intimately linked. In this series authors analyze and describe the relationship between what goes on in the workplace, the consequences for the public health, and environmental degradation. We define health and environment broadly. Health is not limited to the absence of disease or to individual health. It must also mean a healthy and sustainable economy, a democratic and participatory

politics, a workplace where the rights of workers are respected and enforced, and communities that are sustainable, crime free and nurturing of the physical and mental health of all. Finally, to achieve such sustainability, it is essential that we give appropriate attention to gender and family in social and economic development.

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Figure 1. Preparing footwear patterns in Thailand, in 2001. Photo by the author.



Figure 2. Preparing footwear patterns in Thailand, in 2001. Photo by the author.



Figure 3. Gluing and priming footwear soles in Thailand, in 2001. Photo by the author.



Figure 4. Gluing and priming footwear soles in Thailand, in 2001. Photo by the author.

Introduction

My first visit to a home-based shoe workshop in Thailand, in 2001, was an epiphany. The visit was the first chance I had to observe how the global market turns homes into manufacturing sites. It appeared that I had arrived in a residential neighborhood with apartment units in three and four story buildings. But a shoe workshop was tucked away in one of the units. At the front door, stacks of shoeboxes were ready to be transported to a subcontractor.

At the street level floor were two women sitting cross-legged on the floor cleaning and polishing dozens of pairs of shoes. On the second floor workers toiled surrounded by raw materials, boxes, tools, cooking equipment, glue cans, sewing machines, finished and unfinished shoes, and electrical wiring. Some of them ate a meal, drank a cup of coffee, or smoked cigarettes amid the clutter. As pieceworkers, they could not step away to eat. Some mothers had children with them. The clutter represented a serious fire hazard, and toxic fumes emanated from open glue bowls, glue containers, and cleaning and polishing chemicals. Little by little, reality unfolded. Home-based footwear manufacturing is fraught with serious safety, health, and environmental hazards. Perhaps, because I am a chemical engineer, chemical safety practices captivate me. The International Labour Organization's (ILO) project on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) in the footwear sector wanted me to explore why the adhesives used in shoe manufacturing are hazardous solvent-based ones as opposed to available safer water-based ones. Reading the labels on the adhesive containers I found that most of them nicely explained how to apply the product to get a solid bond; none of them provided information how to use the solvent safely and about the ingredients, and their health effects. Workers had never heard about material safety data sheets (MSDSs). Soon, I witnessed comparable conditions in Indonesia and the Philippines. After observing over 50 shoe workshops I concluded that working conditions in the informal shoe production economy are extraordinarily dangerous (see Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4, pp. viii-xi).

The places where people in developing countries live have become home factories where a variety of goods are produced in very hazardous conditions. Shoes are an example of such home-produced goods. All family members—wives, husbands, and children—may participate in the shoe production and be exposed to solvents, dusts, and a range of other hazards. Because home-based shoemaking belongs to the informal economy, its workforce remains largely beyond the reach of the labor protection laws, social security benefits, and systematic labor union organizing efforts. Nevertheless, when home becomes the work environment, public and workplace health concerns converge. Even though safety and health in the informal economy have been increasingly addressed by various international organizations and academic research projects during the past decade, life-threatening hazards still do not get the attention they deserve considering that the informal sector employs the majority of the world's labor force.

The purpose of this book is to describe working conditions in informal sector shoemaking in Indonesia and the Philippines, their gender dimensions, and national and international policy implications. Qualitative investigation techniques were applied during October–December 2002, including 52 in-depth interviews, more than 50 shoe workshop walk-through inspections by local evaluators and the author. The findings of this study sketch an overall picture how various forces—local and international—influence work environment in informal sector shoemaking.

The use of organic solvents—in particular adhesives, primers, and cleaning agents—makes the shoe manufacturing sector a particularly hazardous occupation. This study illustrates an example of the global need for safer and healthier chemical alternatives and the necessity to introduce them at the beginning of all use and supply chain applications. At the same time, the study presents the complexity of the problem when considering safer alternatives substitution at the source. Hazardous chemicals cannot be controlled efficiently by those at the bottom of the production.

Use of chemicals in home-based production is not limited to shoe-making—it is just one example how global markets have introduced chemicals, materials, and production processes into developing nations. In societies where the majority of the population earns a living through the informal sector, and where the industrial and governmental infrastructures are weak, chemicals are often used in settings where socio-economic disparities—in particular poverty—facilitate the acceptance of dangerous practices. These health, safety, and environmental consequences can be tragic and will have serious global impacts.

The informal shoe production industry provides a snapshot of the risks and driving forces associated with the use of toxic chemicals. Globalized markets have produced situations where major chemical use and disposal occurs in some countries while final product consumption occurs in others. The challenge for eliminating or minimizing chemical hazards is to link local and regional conditions to effective preventive programs at an international level of chemicals management.