

Chapter 11

The Changing Roles of Female Labor in Economic Expansion and Decline: The Case of the Istanbul Clothing Industry

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Introduction

Since the 1970s, there have been substantial changes in the organization of production throughout the world. Under waves of deregulation, flexible ways of organizing production have been implemented in order to open markets, to achieve sustained economic growth, and to adapt to changing conditions (Schoenberger, 1988; Hirst and Zeitlin, 1991; Amin, 1994). Increasing integration into world markets through export-oriented production undoubtedly creates new employment opportunities; however, for many developing countries, the only opportunity to take part in the world economic system has been through the export of labor-intensive products. Women have been recruited into these globalizing production systems on a massive scale as low paid, and often temporary, workers (Peck, 1996). Women's position in export-oriented relations of production includes not only their widespread participation in marginal *formal* sector jobs, but their extensive participation within informal work relations, including but not limited to homework (Beneria and Roldan, 1987; Benton, 1990; Lawson, 1992; Peck, 1992; Phizacklea and Wolkowitz, 1995). Although working conditions are not satisfactory, gaining access to waged employment has been an important step for many women.

Decreasing barriers between nation-states and increasing flows of capital and goods have increased the interdependence between different parts of the world (Dicken, 1988; Leyshon and Thrift, 1997). While liberalization provides new opportunities, many argue that nation states have increasing difficulty regulating national economies, which has meant increasing economic volatility and shorter economic cycles (Ohmae, 1990, 1995; Drache and Gertler, 1991; Gerny, 1993, 1996; Jessop, 1994). The crisis periods in these cycles negatively impact employment opportunities and the working conditions of disadvantaged segments of labor markets, especially female labor.

In this chapter, we use our research on female labor in Istanbul's clothing industry to examine the effects of industrial boom and bust cycles on women's lives.¹ First, we trace how women gained entry into new globally oriented production systems during the clothing industry boom period (1980–95), exploring how entry into factory production shifted women's identities and roles both in the family and in society. We argue that the restructuring of production not only generates new labor processes, but also creates new relations between home and work (see also Nippert-Eng, 1996; Castells, 1997; Weyland, 1997; Felstead and Jewson, 2000). Second, we examine how this segment of labor has been affected during the periods of vulnerability and economic downturn after 1995. Our analysis demonstrates that as the state loses capacity to intervene during cyclical economic downturns, women workers suffer most directly because of their more marginal position in the labor market.

The article is divided into four main sections. The first section briefly discusses theoretical debates that shape our inquiry, while the second section examines the structural characteristics of a rapidly expanding clothing industry during the late 1980s and early 1990s in Turkey. The third section turns to the changing work patterns and identities of women workers during those years of rapid growth in the clothing industry. We argue that the incorporation of women into the clothing industry, usually second-generation migrants from rural Turkey, had a significant impact on gender identities and roles within migrant families. The fourth section traces the ripple effect of economic crisis, and the contraction of the clothing industry (2000–1), on women's identities and family survival strategies. Our conclusion reflects upon the challenges of analyzing the dynamics of gender and work on global assembly lines prone to cyclical downturns such as those that have occurred in the Turkish textile industry.

Female Labor in Industrial Restructuring: Theoretical Aspects

Theories of economic restructuring and the emergence of new systems of production have focused mainly on forms of flexibility that enable producers to adapt to volatile conditions in globalized markets. Several studies have explored the impact of restructuring and flexible work organization on labor processes and labor markets (Storper and Walker, 1983; Massey, 1984). However, while these studies consider gender as a characteristic of labor, they do not view gender divisions of labor as an integral part of the restructuring processes (Christopherson, 1989; Jenson, 1994).

The role of gender in industrial restructuring has been theorized in two key ways. One approach, which can be defined as the marginalization thesis, emphasizes the role of women in the family and domestic divisions of labor, arguing that gender divisions in the home put women in a disadvantageous position in labor markets (Kessler-Harris and Sacks, 1987; Walby, 1990). From this perspective, gender inequalities in labor markets arise from cultural factors, such as patriarchal relations within families (Mies, 1986; Pessar, 1994; Stratigaki and Vaiou, 1994; White, 1994). The second approach explains the disadvantaged position of women at work in terms of the structure of the labor market itself. According to this perspective, the labor market is divided between a primary sector required to meet the

technological needs of producers, and a secondary labor market consisting of other workers whose particular skills are expendable and who must therefore accept lower wages and insecure conditions (Doeringer and Piore, 1985). Women are generally confined to the latter (Benton, 1990). According to this approach, female labor is exploited when necessary and used as a reserve army.

When thinking through these two different approaches in the context of globalization it is possible to analyze the disadvantaged position of female labor, especially in export-oriented production. According to these paradigms, industrial restructuring, especially in developing countries, increases women's share of employment due to the absolute and relative growth in the informal sector and in the share of temporary, low paid jobs with no social security (Beneria and Roldan, 1987; Pessar, 1994). Domestic and international capital draws on female labor because it is the cheapest and most exploitable.

While these theoretical debates increase our understanding of the ways in which industrial restructuring, gender divisions and labor markets interact (Peck, 1992) they often overlook considering workers as "active agents" in the processes in which they participate. Consequently, the individual strategies and aspirations of employees responding to changing characteristics of labor markets are not taken into account. While it is undoubtedly true that labor processes and gender divisions are also shaped by labor markets (Peck, 1992), women's attitudes to employment opportunities and their economic strategies require further attention if the role of female labor in industrial restructuring is to be understood.

In the context of women's lives and families, the transition to formal factory employment is usually a life changing experience. How do these industrial processes transform gender relations, at home, at work, and in the larger society? As importantly, as these same industries experience contraction, how does this process affect these same women and their newly constructed lives and identities? What are their strategies of survival?

According to the literature, during periods of prosperity women search for external job opportunities, especially in the formal sector, whereas during crisis periods, they try to find solutions with the collaboration of family members. Some of these "internal" strategies include increasing domestic food production and cooperation among families (Gilbert, 1994; Delarocha, 1995), changing consumption norms, buying cheaper products and services, decreasing expenditures for education, housing, and health (Kanji, 1995), returning back to home-villages (Drakakis-Smith, 1996), and enforcing the participation of all members for family income (Eraydin and Erendil, 1999a, b; Turkun-Erendil, 2002). Our analysis of women in the clothing industry shows that under the new survival conditions, the burden is not only on women, but also on the other members of the family, including children. This view is supported by findings of several studies in Turkey (Kumbetoglu, 1996; Kandiyoti, 1988, 1998; Hattatoglu, 2000, 2001; Dedeoglu, 2002).

These perspectives inform our inquiry into women's involvement in Istanbul's clothing industry, from the early 1990s through 2002, by showing us the new demand and supply conditions in this era. As demand is mainly shaped by new types of flexible production labor requirements, supply is related to the changing roles of women within their families and the society as well as the conditions of the economy in transition. Therefore, the new roles of women in the production process

have to be evaluated not only as an economic issue, but also as a process of social transformation.

Industrial Restructuring of the Clothing Industry and Female Labor

The 1980s witnessed a turning point in economic policy in Turkey, from the protectionist strategies that dominated in the 1960s and the 1970s, to liberalization and privatization policies designed to promote the country's integration into the world economy. As in many developing countries, the export-oriented growth of the Turkish economy began with labor-intensive export production that nominally made best use of Turkey's "comparative advantages" in the international market. The textile industries were among the first to expand as a result of these liberalization policies, stimulated by direct government support, the falling costs of labor, and increasing productivity levels (Yeldan, 2001).²

New economic development policies in the 1980s encouraged many domestic firms to become involved in export production. The Turkish state began to offer direct financial incentives for export industries, and officials created a myriad of institutions designed to facilitate export production, such as Eximbank. Export promotion policies and the deregulation of trade enabled the rapid growth of textile exports, growth initially dependent on existing industrial capacity. The value of clothing exports rose dramatically from US\$130 million in 1980 (9 percent of total exports) to US\$2898 million in 1990 (22.4 percent of total exports) and to US\$6100 million in 1995 (28 percent of total exports) (ITKIB, 2001). Despite this phenomenal growth, however, the income generated from exports was not enough to overcome the lack of domestic investment capital, a structural constraint on the further expansion of textile production after the mid-1990s.³

The growing internationalization of the Turkish economy in the 1980s created some economic growth, but it also made Turkey vulnerable in new, unexpected ways. After the 1990s, Turkey experienced a shortening cycle of successive economic contractions tied to events in global financial markets. The 1994 crisis, caused by local financial policies, was followed by a severe downturn in 1997 and 1998 related to instability and contraction in the Asian and Russian markets. Finally, Turkey experienced successive financial upheavals in November 2000 and February 2001, ones tied to financial instabilities caused by overvalued national currency. These economic downturns all had important negative impacts on employment and income at all levels of society. Unemployment levels reached up to 7.7 percent in 1998 and rose further to 8.5 percent in 2001 (DİE, Statistics on Turkey, 2001). Many firms simply closed. In the year 2000, the share of newly established firms in the total was reduced to 20.1 percent, while closing companies reached up to 27.8 percent of the total (DİE, Statistics of Companies, Cooperatives and Firms, 2000, 2001).

Cyclical downturns in the economy and rising global competition negatively affected some clothing firms. The 1994 crisis led to shrinking export levels, especially in the textile and clothing sectors in Turkey. This crisis was particularly serious for producers exporting standardized lower quality goods and the large numbers of subcontractors that proliferated during the boom years. The crises experienced in 1998 and 2001 led to similar contractions but also demonstrated the differences

between firms more clearly. Firms with stable export relations with EU countries or the USA, particularly those producing high quality products with fewer competitors, even profited from crisis conditions due to substantial devaluations and depressed wage levels.⁴ In contrast, firms with high debt loads or ones that depended on failing export markets, such as Russia, experienced dramatic economic reversals. Lower quality standardized textile producers experienced a contraction of demand during this cyclical downturn and quite a large number of firms experienced bankruptcies, while others tried to survive by decreasing production, firing workers, lowering wages, and halting investments. Some firms, on the other hand, migrated to other production sites, namely Bulgaria and Romania, due to more advantageous profit-making conditions in those locations.⁵

Parallel to the rapid growth in production and exports, official statistics show that between 1985 and 2000 registered employment in the clothing industry increased by about 50 percent, reaching 7 percent of total manufacturing employment in 1990 and 9.6 percent in 2000. Women make up almost 60 percent of these workers. If undocumented and temporary employees are considered, these figures about the clothing industry and the share of women in total employment are likely to account for a substantially higher percentage of the total (DİSK/Labor Union of Textile Workers, 2002). Women thus form the laboring “backbone” of the textile industry and fueled its expansion during the boom years.

These working conditions changed dramatically after the years of rapid expansion (1990–5) due to successive crises in the second half of 1990s. Unsurprisingly, vicious economic cycles and losses in a significant number of Turkish clothing firms generated difficult conditions for workers, especially female labor employed in the small informal firms that suffered the most during the downturns.⁶ Workers we interviewed in 1995 felt they could choose among different available jobs, both formal and informal, whereas by 2002 workers felt compelled to hold on tightly to jobs previously considered undesirable (see also Bora, 2002; Erdoğan, 2002; Işık and Pınarcıoğlu, 2001). The ways in which these economic cycles impacted women’s work strategies, identities, and family survival strategies are explored in the next two sections.

Women, work and the expansion of Istanbul’s clothing industry during the period 1990–5

The Turkish experience indicates that competitive conditions in the manufacture of clothing depend upon flexibility in gendered labor supplies as well as flexible structures of production. Labor flexibility is achieved in turbulent market conditions through high rates of labor turnover and the use of temporary employment to meet increased labor demand during short-term economic cycles (Braverman, 1974; Jenson, 1994). Studies of the extensive subcontracting arrangements indicate that the subcontracting of sewing to small firms has created intricate networks among firms, through which costs are minimized and swift response to changing demand is enabled (Cinar et al., 1988; Eraydin and Erendil, 1999). This system has become prevalent particularly in labor-intensive stages of textile production (Eraydin, 1994) in which mainly women are employed, including homeworkers (Lordoglu, 1990; White, 1994; Kumbetoglu, 1996).

In order to understand the role of female labor in the restructuring of Istanbul clothing industry, we set out to interview 500 women working in the industry. Sampling proceeded as follows. First, we selected at random 240 clothing firms from the 2397 listed by the Union of the Chambers of Industry and Trade in May 1995. In August and September 1995, we conducted interviews with the managers or owners of these firms and gathered information about the organization of production, labor processes, and employees.

Following these interviews, we selected 150 of the firms for the second stage of data collection, ensuring that we included firms involved in all the main stages of production.⁷ In February 1996, we interviewed 428 women working for these firms, together with 24 female entrepreneurs. The sample included 35 family workers and 48 homeworkers and the rest were wage-earners in workplaces. These proportions were based on the data collected in the first stage. A standard schedule was used, with additional sections included for particular groups. As a third stage, in order to identify the new trends and the effects of the crises in 1998 and 2001, a short survey was conducted in Istanbul in July 2002. This survey included interviews with the key actors in the clothing sector and women in different segments of production.

The data collected in 1995–6 reveal that the main source of female labor in Istanbul's textile industry is drawn from migrant families. In Turkey, a high rate of natural population increase has combined with considerable rural-to-urban migration to produce very large increases in urban population. Metropolitan areas have received the largest migratory flows: between 1960 and 1990, the population of Istanbul increased by almost 5 million, with migrants accounting for 50 per cent of this increase.

Our surveys and interviews indicate that the first-generation migrant women were often reluctant to work outside the home, except to do paid housework, because neither they nor the family members were ready to change their traditional gender roles. Attitudes often began to change among second-generation migrants. Daughters of rural migrants, either born in metropolitan areas or having migrated at early ages, did not usually secure educational or vocational qualifications, a situation also related to gender roles and expectations. Instead, second generation women migrants became incorporated into the labor market mainly via the informal sector and, during the 1980s and 1990s, they became the main source of labor for the clothing industry.

According to the 1995–6 survey, on average, women employed in the Istanbul clothing industry were young (54 percent were below the age of 25) and poorly educated (64 percent did not proceed beyond primary school). Just over half were unmarried. The survey shows that women came from relatively large families and many had other family members also working in clothing production.⁸ For many immigrant families it became common in the early 1990s for female children to immediately begin working in the clothing industry once they reached working age. This situation indicates the importance of the clothing industry as a means of survival within the city. Wages, however, were low: 11 percent of the paid workers and 75 percent of the homeworkers earned less than the official minimum wage. The average figure was reported to be US\$196 per month, which was considerably lower than the average wages of registered employees in either private manufacturing

industries (US\$278 per month) or the state-owned manufacturing industries (US\$384 per month). Four major groups involved in the clothing industry were identified through the research, namely paid workers (77 percent of those interviewed), factory owners (5 percent of those interviewed), homeworkers (10 percent of those interviewed), and family workers (8 percent of those interviewed). We consider each of these groups in turn.

Among paid workers there were significant variations among those in different occupations. Large numbers were employed directly in production processes. They were usually drawn from the poorest families and have the most limited education (65 percent had only primary schooling and 5 percent did not even finish primary school). At the opposite extreme, some women (4 percent of those interviewed) worked as intermediaries between local and foreign firms. These women were university graduates from middle-income families. Women involved in design stages (designing, pattern making, and grading), marketing, public relations, and management occupy an intermediate position in terms of their educational and social backgrounds.

In 1995–6, only half of the paid workers were registered employees protected by employment laws, and half of them worked in unregistered firms. The majority of those who worked in unregistered firms were employed in small workshops located in squatter housing areas. In fact the primary reason these small workshops arose in squatter settlements was to facilitate their access to young girls as employees. These firms did not have a long life: some of them closed down after a production season, while others that were more successful went on to register officially despite continuing to use informal labor. Employers generally deduct social security costs directly from wages; therefore, many workers readily accepted informal conditions in order to secure the higher take-home pay offered in the informal sector. For employers this is advantageous since they avoid the employment regulations for working conditions and also additional costs associated with legal rights related to marriage, birth, and children. For this reason, employers in this sector were not concerned about the marital status of their workers.

The second group of women included in the study was homeworkers. Under the pressure of highly competitive market conditions, employers often use homeworkers for several reasons: to save on labor costs, to achieve flexibility in the volume of production, and/or as strategy aimed at deunionization (see also Peck, 1992). According to many scholars, homeworking is also attractive to some women in that it provides an income-earning opportunity without creating a conflict within the family (Ozbay, 1993; Kumbetoglu, 1996; Eşim, 2002; Dedeoglu, 2002). It conforms to dominant gender ideologies that limit women to “domestic” work, which means that the demands of flexible production and the conditions of the female labor supply come to support each other to result in the continuation of this system (Turkun-Erendil, 2002). Some other researchers claim that this is not always a necessary situation but depends on various contingent factors, such as the preference of some women to organize their time more freely and creatively according to the needs of their families (Hattatoglu, 2000, 2001).

Evidence from several countries indicates that growth in export-oriented garment production often coincides with a rise in the number of homeworkers (Beneria and Roldan, 1987; Pineda-Ofreneo, 1988; Singh, 1990). The same pattern had been

expected in Istanbul. However, data made available by firms in this study, together with anecdotal evidence from several participants, led us to believe that home-working in 1995–6 was decreasing in the Istanbul clothing industry. There are two broad reasons for this trend. The first concerns the labor process. Young girls provided an alternative to homeworkers: they too could be employed on a very flexible and low-wage basis. Further, various costs associated with the employment of homeworkers did not apply: materials did not need to be transported; workers could be shifted to different stages of production very quickly; and quality control could be undertaken more easily. Second, as we elaborate further in due course, significant changes were detected in women's attitudes to work: more and more women wanted to work on the shopfloor instead of at home.

Interviews and surveys point to the complex transformation of gender identity and gendered distinctions of public and private domains due to the increasing number of migrant women who started to become involved in the clothing industry. In traditional Turkish families, women are usually *permitted* to work outside only if there is no other way that the family can survive. In other words, it does not affect the dominant view that the main role of women is at home (White, 1994). The families and social groups to which these women belong may provide assistance to “enable” women to work outside the home, but they do not want women to become dedicated to such work. Married women carry very substantial domestic responsibilities, which are even greater for those with children.⁹ Among married women working in the Istanbul clothing industry, 89 percent have children, although there are signs that family size is decreasing. While women are able to draw upon local networks to organize child care, these are generally family-based and serve to strengthen women's obligations to their families (for a comparison see Chant and McIlwaine, 1995).

Although women began to be incorporated into the labor market for the purposes of increasing family income, the boom period led to important changes in their attitudes to work. Two key changes were demonstrated by our research, and demonstrate the changing identities and family structures among rural–urban migrants over time. First, women no longer defined their participation in waged work exclusively in terms of their family roles. One consequence of this is that they rarely left work for reasons such as marriage or motherhood. Moreover, although marriage was still a major means of achieving social status and respectability, women seemed to be less willing to get married as they started to earn their own wages. Second, there was unambiguous evidence that women now made their own decisions about whether or not to work outside the home themselves: 80 percent stated that it was solely their decision to take on such work; only 16 percent reported making the decisions with their husbands or with other family members. The great majority spoke of waged work as a way of life and did not contemplate quitting.

According to the findings of our research in 1995–6, the female labor force of the clothing industry clearly did not fit the image of being passive and dependent. Moreover, while some resistance to women working outside the home persisted, the majority of families participated in this transformation in attitudes (Ecevit, 1991; Senyapili, 1992). That is why the decreasing employment opportunities in the crisis years of the 1990s are very important. Once they have become a part of the labor

market, it is now more difficult to accept the earlier role restricted by being a housewife with lower family incomes.

While the great majority of women wanted to work outside the home (81 percent of those interviewed), this did not mean that they were satisfied with their work or the conditions at work and at home. During the rapid growth period, when job opportunities were increasing, they followed several strategies in order to enhance their situation. Three such strategies could be identified. The first strategy was related to searching for better working conditions through job mobility. Women tried to find easier types of work with better conditions when they had alternatives. Second, female employees tried to increase their wages. Women took advantage of the intense demand for their labor associated with the rapid expansion of clothing production in the 1980s. For subcontractors in the informal sector in particular, experienced female workers acquired significant bargaining power. These women were needed by new firms keen to establish themselves very swiftly within production networks. In these conditions workers could move from one firm to another in pursuit of higher wages. This mobility and the employment in the informal sector did not create a problem in the access to healthcare services, since in the Turkish system it is possible to use these services if one person in the family is registered.

The third strategy entailed attempting to escape from patriarchal relations, both at home and in the workplace. Patriarchal workplace norms and practices, such as demanding extra “domestic service work” and controlling their relationships with other workers, remained prevalent despite some changes over the years. In the context of a rapidly expanding textile industry, women could challenge patriarchal workplace relationships by leaving and finding work in a different firm. In addition, a substantial number of paid workers (40 percent) indicated that they wanted to work a considerable distance from home for similar reasons. Most of these women were single and they clearly wanted to escape from the control exerted by their immediate families, other relatives, and neighbors. They said that “if we work in a place far from the house we can be able to go out for a walk and meet with our [boy]friends at the lunch breaks and have free time of our own, which is not possible in our neighborhood.”

As for female factory owners, the interviews showed that almost half of them had entered the clothing industry as paid workers, subsequently establishing firms with friends or relatives. During the rapid growth of industry, many small female-headed subcontracting workshops were established by raising the necessary capital via family circles. Their family origins were broadly similar to those of other women in the study. A second group of female factory owners came from a very different social background. They were the daughters or wives of men who owned large businesses and who wished to invest in this sector. While some of these firms were essentially subcontractors, others were firms specialized in finished fashion products.

In this study very few typical family enterprises were encountered. Only newly established small firms fit the profile of family enterprises. In most such businesses, the owners' sons ran the workshops while their fathers organized outwork. But as workshops grew and the number of paid workers increased, capitalist labor relations became dominant even in family enterprises. Thus, most of the young girls working in family businesses received weekly wages in the same way as the other workers. Nevertheless, female members of these families, especially daughters and

sisters, tended to express dissatisfaction about work because of the extension of patriarchal familial relations into the workplaces. A young girl working in a family workplace complained about the extra work she did for days and nights during the busy production seasons. "I really do not want to work in this place, since being a worker and the sister of the owner is disadvantageous. I am getting some amount of wage which will be used as my trousseau, but the extra work I do is not paid at all."

This brief review of the four different categories of workers and entrepreneurs in the clothing industry provides some general understanding of the characteristics of women and their working conditions in Istanbul's garment industry. Although women in all the categories are more willing to earn their own money and work outside home, their access to different niches of the labor market differentiates according to their education, skills, and family income and background. Our analytical findings show that crude, structural analyses of labor markets and economic restructuring ignore the high degree of variability among women in this sector, their work experiences and different survival strategies. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the variable positions and conditions of women in the labor market is necessary to define their efforts and abilities to stay in the labor market even during periods of contraction.

The impact of crisis conditions on female workers

Obviously, the new conditions faced since the second half of the 1990s affected all these groups negatively. According to the findings of the Labor Union of Textile Workers, in 2002 the average wage in the clothing sector declined from US\$144 to \$132 in formal establishments, from \$110 to \$97 in informal workshops (60 percent of the total number of establishments), and from \$83 to \$69 in workshops where foreign and child labor is used. The fear of unemployment, especially after the crisis of 2001, has put a higher burden on the shoulders of women, limiting their options of changing their position at work and home, and leaving many without hope of preparing a better future for their children.

The impact of crisis conditions on wage earners is different according to their place of work. Many of the firms with stable export relations have passed through the crises with substantial gains and almost no job losses. Labor in those firms accepted a reduction or stagnation in wages due to the threat of unemployment. This threat has become a widespread discourse, which employers use to pull down wages. On the other hand, quite a large number of firms have difficulties during these cyclical crises and slide into bankruptcy, leaving many workers unemployed. Therefore, there has been a general loss of money on the part of wage-earners even if they do not lose their jobs completely.

Severe unemployment conditions for both male and female labor in the formal sector since 2001 seem to have been reversing the decline in homeworking apparent in our 1995–6 surveys. After the crises of 2001, many homeworkers acknowledge, in ways few did in 1995, that homeworking is an important family survival strategy (Hattatoğlu, 2000; Ozbay, 1993; Kumbetoglu, 1996). As formal sector job losses increase for both men and women, the female homemaker has become the breadwinner in a large number of families.

Government officials and civil organizations are also beginning to recognize the importance of homework, bringing new attention to working conditions inside the home. For instance, some local governments organize bazaar areas for women who want to sell their homemade products. In addition, in one of the districts of Istanbul, a cooperative has been established by a group of women homeworkers in order to negotiate with employers and intermediaries who try to decrease the payments. This organization, the Home-Based Workers Cooperative, is supported by the Working Group for Women Home-Based Workers, and represents an unprecedented political act on the part of homeworkers. Nevertheless, these organizational efforts have coincided with a very difficult time. In the context of the economic crisis, most women workers are afraid of losing their very modest incomes and shun taking part in such organizations because textile firms and intermediaries have many options for finding cheaper labor elsewhere in the city. In addition, in these low-wage conditions, many women choose to leave textile production entirely, searching for other work options such as cleaning houses and offices. One of the women stated that “many women in our neighborhood stopped doing homework because it brings very little income and they prefer doing cleaning jobs for two or three hours after the closing time of offices or shops.” Therefore, we can claim that for some women who cannot find work in the textile industry, there is a shift from production to services and housework, but it is difficult to estimate the extent of this shift.

Obviously, the mobility strategies women used during the years of expansion to escape oppression do not work during crisis periods. While the negotiation power of this segment of the labor market is very limited, they now face the threat of losing their jobs completely; that is why they are eager to accept almost all the conditions of the employers. There are many workers who have accepted half of their wages for a certain time (from six months to a year) in order to help the workplace stay in production, since the ones who have lost their jobs have limited alternatives. Surveys conducted in 2002 indicate similar crisis conditions for female factory owners. At all levels, they have been prone to the difficulties faced by many firms in the sector. Many have slid into bankruptcy or have tried to survive by decreasing production costs and by accepting lower profit levels. Clearly, crisis economic conditions have negative effects on women entrepreneurship.

As expressed in the interviews with various family enterprises, hard times are usually endured by firing workers and drawing family members into work without any payment. In order to survive, family enterprises draw on female family members, who are expected to stay at home, or invite some relatives living in other cities or home-villages to help the family business on a temporary basis. Therefore, especially in small enterprises, during expansionary periods capitalist labor relations become established, but these relationship break down during crisis and contraction conditions. During downturns, family enterprises draw on family labor (especially female labor) and extended kin networks.

Concluding Remarks

As the findings indicate, the flexible production system within the Istanbul clothing industry, which realized a high growth rate until the late 1990s, depended upon a pool of second generation female migrants in order to compete within global markets. During this period of growth, women, more than 80 percent of whom

came from families migrating to Istanbul from rural areas, became an integral part of the labor market. In doing so, their own attitudes to work and behavior as workers changed. During an era of rapid industrial expansion they became active agents in the labor market and used their bargaining power to earn more under better working conditions, a situation that undermines the label of “marginal” or “reserve labor” common in structural analysis. However, under current conditions, they are more unprotected and more open to exploitation. Still, many women do not want to be drawn in and out of the labor market according to demand conditions: they want to incorporate work into their lives permanently, in one way or another adapting to new situations and finding creative solutions.

Women want to earn more and work in more advantageous positions. However, the severe competition in international markets and fluctuations in domestic demand bring about difficulties in retaining their existing employment. We know that in order to sustain their competitive position in difficult times, factory owners try to decrease labor costs. Some of the factory owners interviewed in 1995–6 indicated their intention to expand production in new areas outside Istanbul to search for lower wages and realized this during the late 1990s. As discussed earlier, some of them relocated in Eastern European countries, where wages are lower and subsidies are higher. Only a small portion of these firms could sustain their competitive positions by changing their product combinations into high value-added products. In 1999, we claimed that due to the risks associated with retaining competitive advantage based on low wages in the clothing industry, the possibility of retaining the enhanced bargaining power for women workers may be limited and temporary (Eraydın and Erendil, 1999a, b). While the rapid rise in export-oriented clothing production brought advantages for women on the margins of the metropolitan area, it is difficult to achieve sustained growth in this type of production where external competition is very high and the domestic market is very volatile.

In this chapter we have incorporated a feminist perspective to the transformation of the division of labor under the pressure of increasing exports during one period and economic crisis a few years later. We hope our analysis contributes to feminist approaches to gender and work in the context of globalization, emphasizing the importance of treating gender and global assembly lines as a dynamic phenomenon, not a static one. The repeated invocation of women as “subordinated” in global manufacturing processes elides the complex changes in women’s lives generated in part by their participation in global production systems. It also obscures the effects of the expansion and contraction of global markets. In the case of Turkey, we demonstrate that the transformation of divisions of labor in the past few decades cannot be understood fully if the gender differences are not taken into account. It is certain that transformation in production systems causes radical changes for all working people, but a disproportionate burden falls on female workers.

NOTES

- 1 This chapter is based on two research projects (1995–6 and 2001–2), each consisting of extensive surveys and interviews with workers and employers in Istanbul’s clothing industry. The second stage of the project is based on selective interviews with prominent actors in the sector, such as labor unions, exporters’ associations, exporting firms, and women

in different categories. The information on homeworkers flows from workshops prepared by the Working Group for Women Home-Based Workers (member of HomeNet organization), of which Asuman Turkun-Erendil is a member. More detailed methodological procedures are provided in the following sections of the chapter.

- 2 For example, in 1998, labor costs (US\$/hour) in the clothing sector were 18.04 in Germany, 13.60 in Italy, 13.03 in France, 3.70 in Portugal, and 2.69 in S. Korea, compared to 1.33 in Turkey. However, there are countries with lower labor costs in this sector, such as Thailand, 0.78, China, 0.43, India, 0.39, and Pakistan, 0.24 (Werner International, DİSK/Labor Union of Textile Workers, Research Department, 2002).
- 3 Although the government had invited foreign capital into Turkey since the beginning of 1960s, this bottleneck in the textile industry remained acute because the state continued to limit the amount of foreign direct investment relative to total private investment.
- 4 In the first and second quarters of 2000, wages decreased by 5.5 and 3.5 percent (Yeldan, 2001).
- 5 These include high tax exemptions, lower labor costs, lower energy prices, and the opportunity of using the unused quotas (Kaya, 2001; DİSK/Labor Union of Textile Workers, Research Department, 2002).
- 6 The economic problems experienced since the early 1990s not only reflected low rates of national economic growth and even a decline in GDP per capita, but also shaped an entirely new era of vulnerability for a variety of income groups. For example, economic crisis negatively impacted higher income groups engaged in formal sector employment and ownership. This situation is well presented by the figures on the declining income inequalities between the years 1994 and 2001. The share of the highest quintile declined from 54.9 to 43.8 percent, while the share of poorest quintile rose from 4.90 to 6.3 percent. The decreasing income inequalities do not mean, however, that the lower income groups are in a better situation. The poverty threshold decreased in Turkey during that same period: people defined as poor in 2001 subsisted on a smaller income than the poor of 1994. Ironically, the Marmara region (where Istanbul is located) has the highest per capita income in Turkey, but it is the region that experienced the most drastic increase in poverty (Özcan, 2002).
- 7 The production stages are grouped into three: (a) those involving pattern making, grading, cutting, and public relations, which tend to involve the most highly skilled tasks; (b) sewing; and (c) quality control and packaging.
- 8 The average number of people in the families of the women in our sample was 4.6 and the average number of people working in those families was 2.5.
- 9 According to the research in Istanbul, 51 percent of the married women took on full responsibility for all housework within their own homes, and 24 percent got help from other female members of their families. Only 13 percent reported sharing the housework with their husbands, while 12 percent reported paying others to work in their homes.

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