

5 Industrial workers in transition

Women's experiences of factory work in Tangerang

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Tangerang, approximately 35 kilometres to the west of Jakarta, is one of Indonesia's foremost manufacturing centres. However, local residents rarely work as factory workers in the industrial establishments surrounding their neighbourhoods. Instead, migrants – many of them women – comprise the majority of the labour force in the factories across the region. Unlike rural 'factory daughters', who are able to commute daily to work (Wolf 1992), these urban migrant workers establish a relatively permanent urban existence far away from Indonesia's rural hinterland. Factory work exposes these urban migrant workers to very different conditions and experiences from those of the rural settings in which they grew up.

A factory shares characteristics of a 'total institution' in Erving Goffman's (1971) sense. Individuals are detached from the larger society, and from their previous existence, and are placed in circumstances designed to sustain industrial production. Women workers' incorporation into the industrial institution is marked by symbolic rituals imposed by corporate agencies, which strip away their identity and individuality. For Foucault, this enables authorities to create subordinate individuals as the object of power, as 'docile bodies' whose initiative has been taken away and replaced by 'new forms of knowledge' – just as rural children are introduced to the 'new mechanisms of power' that regulate their minds and bodies so they conform to the corporate project of commodity production (1991: 155). The internalization of these mechanisms is accomplished through the habituation of the self to capitalist production (Braverman 1974). The significance of habituation is not merely related to the technological transformation, but also to the conditioning of workers so that they become an extension of the machinery they operate.

Habituation is achieved by training the workers to appreciate the precision of task execution measured by the clock in order to ensure a product's progression through the assembly line (Thompson 1967). The conception of time in industrial production trains and transforms the agrarian body into a capitalist instrument, whose movements are synchronized with the rhythm of the shop-floor. In pre-capitalist Southeast Asian societies, a 'sense of time and rhythm' is expressed in different ways, ranging from a time division based on Islamic prayer times to time measurement based on the smoking of a cigarette (Ong 1987; Wolf 1992). The transition to capitalist production forces rural subjects to reorganize their everyday

lives in accordance with clock-based time partitions. A factory also imposes industrial disciplines that meticulously define individuals' every single movement in order to maximize their utility to production. The implementation of these disciplines requires surveillance machinery, which, along with time-based organization and habituation to routine operations, make up what Foucault terms 'the calculated technology of subjection', which replaces 'traditional ... violent forms of power' (1991: 221). In labour-intensive industries, the deployment of these surveillance mechanisms is imperative to ensure that control remains intact at every level of the hierarchy.

This chapter explores young women's experiences of the processes that integrate them into the logic of commodity production. It begins by describing the set of rules that compels female workers to adjust to industrial discipline and the work rhythm of the factory. Their incorporation takes the form of industrializing rituals, marking the transition from a rural, agricultural existence into working subjects. During this process, workers are expected to embrace the new capitalist arrangement, leaving their past behind. Particular rituals mark the stage of transition, which Turner (1967) describes as 'liminality'. The chapter then turns to the experiences of women on the shop-floor as they adjust to the industrial realm in which the surveillance apparatus continually disciplines them. The chapter argues that although factory work provides urban migrants with the sense of 'uplift' from their rural (agricultural) existence, they do not feel attached to their jobs, and have no intention of becoming fully integrated into their factory employment. The women whose stories form the basis of this chapter consider factory work as transitional, and not an endpoint in itself. This perception signifies women's covert resistance to industrial capitalism, expressed when they refuse to fully incorporate their selves into the industrial regime of 'knowledge' and 'power' (cf. Foucault 1991).

Young women's reluctance to fully engage in the industrial system also relates to their exposure to global culture, which they have experienced since childhood as a consequence of 'the urbanisation of the rural' (Young 1994). As a result of this exposure, many urban factory women perceive migration to the urban centres as a lifestyle choice rather than as a journey simply to pursue economic gain. On the one hand, this reproduces the experience of Wolf's rural Javanese factory daughters, who saw their work as a way to increase their 'buying power' so they could conform to 'modern style' (Wolf 1992: 193). At the same time, however, this agenda of modernity provides workers with a defence mechanism in the face of the pressures of industrial work. For these women, the 'urban' represents both an aspiration and a future (Hadiz 1997: 124; Hull 1994: 5), and factory work is a way to mediate their connection with modernity. This view reflects women's liberty to make own interpretations about their mobility, and their capacity to bring about change into their lives.

This chapter, set in the context of the post-1997 Asian financial crisis, is based on nearly eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2000 and 2001. During that time I engaged in the activities that define the everyday lives of workers: queuing at the wells; walking to the workplace; eating at the food stalls; shopping at the malls or the market; watching TV, video compact discs and

karaoke; gossiping; and waking up at dawn to dine during the fasting month. It was not merely these activities that have informed my understanding of woman subjects; it was the verbal exchanges that occurred amidst this bustle that created an entrance for me to 'the conceptual world' (Geertz 1973: 24) in which migrant factory workers are situated. The majority of women whose stories and experiences follow worked in the textile, garment and leather industries. Most had arrived in Tangerang as fresh migrants from rural areas and had only worked in factories for one or two years – or even less – when I first met them. These women came from rural areas in Java and the outer islands. They varied in age between their late teens to their mid-20s, and most had completed their secondary education. The majority were unmarried, although married couples with infants were not uncommon. These complexities represent the heterogeneous community of migrant workers in the area, and are indicative to the different reasons women have chosen to move to Tangerang, and their expectations of work.¹

Learning to work

It was nearly seven o'clock in the morning when thousands of factory workers streamed into a badly maintained street on their way to an industrial cluster in the south of Gambir neighbourhood in Tangerang. A Korean-owned shoe factory; a subcontracting factory producing Nike shoes; a Chinese under-licence motorbike factory; a factory producing oil-drilling components for a transnational oil company; and a Korean-owned leather golf glove factory – among others – are located in this cluster. The complex also includes the giant industrial compound of the locally-owned PT GHTG Group, whose products range from tyres to sanitary pads. The noise of machines, the sight of factory smokestacks issuing forth thick, dark smoke, and the heavy container trucks and recent-model cars (owned by the companies' top executives) all symbolize the grandeur of industrialization.

The factory gate where the workers sign up for one domain, and leave the other, is located here. Lining up in front of the gate – often in long queues that spill into the street causing traffic jams – is a morning ritual that all workers must undertake before they are allowed to enter the factory premises. When they enter, workers wear an identity badge, normally attached to their uniform pocket, which is checked by the company's security officials. The identity badge, although small in size, can determine the fate of an individual since failure to wear it affects a worker's personnel record, which is considered when the 'season of dismissals' comes, particularly if the employer is facing economic difficulties. For a newly recruited worker, who has worked for less than two years and only has temporary status (*buruh harian*), such a mistake will delay promotion to a permanent position (*buruh tetap*). Even those with no intention of pursuing a career in the factory have to comply with the policy since salaries are paid on presentation of the badge to the company's cashier. Lengthy preparations for work in substandard accommodation and the limited availability of public transport make it difficult for workers to arrive at work on time. Under this pressure, failure to carry their badge seems excusable, but such an excuse carries no weight.

Goffman introduced the term 'total institutions' to describe the totality of mental hospitals and penitentiaries in detaching subjects from social interaction with the larger world outside. He added that the particularity of such institutions is highlighted in the centralizing of activities under one 'single authority'; the uniformity of treatment of all subjects under their influence; and the organization of activities under a supervisory apparatus executing strict rules (1971: 16–17). In order to effect this detachment, symbolic procedures are required. These rituals are called 'trimming' or 'programming', in which the body is adjusted and habituated to 'the administrative machinery' and internal rules of the institution immediately upon admission (1971: 26). In the context of the industrial factory, which has attributes of the total institution, the badge represents the programming of workers' behaviour to conform to the industrial mindset and the 'trimming' of their bodies to fit its industrial obligations. It is a 'summary' of the employment contract between the workers and the employer. While a contract is usually referred to when a dispute occurs, the badge – which has to be worn at all times in the workplace – represents the employee's commitment to abide by workplace regulations within the factory domain. If a worker does not wear her badge, she becomes exposed to the threat that her basic rights as an employee will be ignored.

The presentation of a worker's identity badge to the security guard is not the only ritual that occurs at the factory's front gate. The process of programming is also accomplished through management's efforts to undermine the subject's identity and their 'usual image to others' (Goffman 1971: 30). Within the institution, the principle of uniformity applies to every subordinate individual, and personal image is determined by the definition generated by the authority. This necessitates the stripping of attributes that have an association with subjects' prior existence since those personal attributes are the representation of 'self-identification', which may be in contradiction with the purpose of the institution (Goffman 1971: 26). This is illustrated in the case of Ery, a female migrant worker employed at PT Matra, a South Korean-owned footwear factory, which has a policy of body-searching workers before they enter the plant. The ritual scrutiny of the security guard is repeated at the end of each shift in order to secure the property of the enterprise against those trying to illegally remove it. The workers have to line up again, awaiting their turn to be searched, before they can pass through the gate.

PT Matra exports its products to the United States, Japan and South America. Domestically, its products are only marketed in only a few select outlets, such as in Mal Taman Anggrek, an upper-middle-class shopping mall in West Jakarta, with a retail price of at least Rp. 900,000 (US\$100), or nearly twice the government-regulated minimum monthly wage in 2002. The company forbids workers to bring food or drink into the factory compound: only food and drink provided by the company can be consumed in the designated canteen area during the set time for meals. A number of other articles are also subject to exclusion, including *mukena*, the white cloaks covering the body and head for Islamic prayer, which are not permitted on the shop-floor. Ery explained:

We are watched by the security guard from the front gate. The guard checks whether or not we are carrying a *mukena*. It is not allowed to be brought in. It

has to be left at the security post. When the call for prayer [from the mosque nearby] is heard, we come back to the post to get the *mukena*, take it to the *musholla* [prayer room], and leave it there afterwards for the next prayer. It takes time to walk such a distance, whereas we have to work out the limited time allocated for prayer. Plenty of running around!

When interviewed, Ery and her colleague, Lely, told me that they had become accustomed to such restrictions and could understand why the company imposes them. Having access to food and drink during work, they said, might prove a distraction from the production process. However, at the same time, they maintained that it was difficult to perform a job that demanded concentration and physical labour with only one meal break in an eight-hour shift.

The normal work hours in this shoe factory end at 3.30 in the afternoon. However, workers from the hand-sewing division often do not return home until 10.30 or 11.00 in the evening. Ery explained that when demand for the company's products was high shop-floor employees were forced to undertake compulsory overtime in order to meet production deadlines. The length of compulsory overtime varied from one division to another. During the peak season, divisions other than hand-sewing would still complete their work as early as 6.00 or 9.00 pm. According to Ery, the use of machines made the work in other divisions more efficient. In addition, those divisions mainly dealt with the production of components that required no correction because of the accuracy of the machines. In the cutting division, for example, once the cutting instrument was set to incise a certain pattern, it would perform the task repetitively at constant intervals with relatively high precision. The same applied to the moulding division, where the leather would take shape following the desired contour once workers put a sheet of patterned leather into a pre-installed mould. In contrast, the tasks required of workers in the hand-sewing division are more complicated than in other stages of production, not least because of their manual nature. Workers are required to finalize two pairs per hour for a simple design with one pattern on each side of the shoe, or one pair per hour for a more complex design involving more patterns. Precision is not assured in the hand-sewing division, especially when the workers become tired and their concentration drops off, creating piles of rejected items to be re-done. This added to the employees' levels of stress and the feeling of being 'chased' (*keteter*) when they already had to meet the target of one or more pairs of shoes an hour.

Most workers acknowledged that adjustment to corporate discipline was difficult given the pressure to meet production deadlines. But they accepted the company's policy of compulsory overtime because it helped boost their earnings so that they could buy items other than daily basic necessities. However, Ery and her colleague, Lely, are reluctant to work until 10.30 pm, spending 15 uninterrupted hours on the production floor, with only short breaks for meal-times and prayers. They argue that prolonged work hours gave the workers little chance to do other things, including their domestic tasks at their lodgings. Ery said:

I do not mind doing overtime, as long as it does not go until 10.30 in the evening. If I work until 10.30, I get fed up [*suntutuk*], I get sick of working

[*jenuh*], my body gets tired [*capek*]. Working until that late means we don't have enough time to have a good night's rest, because on the following day we have to be in the factory again at 7.30 in the morning. Working until 8.30 in the evening would be quite enough [*pas-pasan*]. When we get home, there would still be time to wash our clothes, do something else and get enough rest.

For most workers, having to stay in the plant until late evening brought a feeling of discomfort. This was not only because the evening was supposed to be a time of respite. Many said that it felt strange to have to work hard after dark. This appeared to be related to the experience migrants brought from their villages, where most activities (particularly economic activities) ceased at dusk or when the air resounded with the early evening call for Islamic prayer (*maghrib*).

Mills (1999: 187) and Roseberry (1994) have described the significance of rural values such as these in shaping marginalized urban subjects' perspective on their existence in the city. In the factories of Tangerang, rural values and images become the source of tension in workers' adaptation to capitalist disciplines, and their encounter with the factory regime becomes a medium through which workers connect with the rural community, using their romanticized pictures of the village to judge the appropriateness (or otherwise) of urban reality. They also become a strategy with which to manage their alienation. Workers imagine the countryside – their place of origin – as a place of natural purity; of rice fields (*sawah*), clean rivers and peace of mind. These images are often invoked when urban migrant workers complain about urban hardship and industrial pressure. The idea of a virgin countryside is essential in the construction of the identity of these urban migrants: amidst their active search for modern advancement in the city, they need a local connection to revisit. These images become what Helsinger terms, speaking of early nineteenth-century Britain, 'portable icons' that allow workers to escape from urban anomalies (cited in Maclean *et al.* 1999:14). The practice of *mudik*, or returning to one's place of origin to mark the end of Islamic fasting month (Antlov 1999: 204; Pemberton 1994: 237), helps keep this idea of rural nature and peace alive, despite the fact that in the countryside itself rural development has diminished people's experience of nature and replaced it with urban-centred themes of modernization.

Women working on the shop-floor

Ery is one worker among a 1,000-strong workforce employed in the PT Matra plant. At 7.30 am sharp, the beginning of the shift, she must be already sitting on her line in the hand-sewing area. There are ten lines in the division, each operated by 24 workers. Here, shoes are finished by manually stitching a design on the unornamented product. The production floor consists of seven divisions. Production begins in the cutting division where plain leather is incised with a particular pattern by a machine-activated sharp instrument. The leather is then shaped in a mould in the moulding division after first being soaked in a chemical solution to soften it. Once it has been contoured, the leather is forwarded to the sewing division, where a plain shoe is constructed by sewing the patterned pieces of moulded leather

together. This task, which is mainly performed by female workers, is carried out with specially designed sewing machines. From here, the shoe is passed to Ery's hand-sewing division where it is decorated. The level of complexity of tasks completed in the hand-sewing division depends on the particular design ordered. The more intricate the design, the more time it takes to put the final touches on a pair of shoes. As soon as the hand-sewing is completed, the sole-bottoming division glues the decorated shoe upper and the rubber sole together. The finished shoes are now ready to be packed in the packing division before they are transported out for local market or export. In addition to the principal divisions described above, there is a general division (*bagian umum*), whose task it is to forward the results from one division to the next processing section within the assembly line.

It is no coincidence that the sewing division and the hand-sewing division, to which Ery and her friend Lely are assigned, have a high proportion of female workers. A number of studies have discussed the high level of involvement of females compared to their male counterparts in manufacturing, particularly light industries (Caraway 2007; Mather 1985; Saptari, 1994; Wolf 1992). Indrasari Tjandraningsih's late 1980s study of textile, garment and footwear industries in Majalaya found that female workers were especially dominant in the large-scale export-oriented footwear industries, where women were responsible for two-thirds of the entire production process (2000: 260). In Tangerang, this is true in the textile, garment, and leather industries where women outnumber men by a ratio of more than two to one.

Most female workers from PT Matra factory I spoke to explained that the detailed and intricate character of the work makes this occupation a preserve of women. Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson have been critical of this explanation for the feminization of factory work because it relies on the stereotyping of 'innate capacities and personality traits' of women (1981: 92). Elson and Pearson argue that the prevalence of women in these industries is explained by the assumption that sewing is typically part of a daughter's 'training' within the family and that this training enables girls to develop the 'manual dexterity and capacity for spatial assessment' that is required on the shop-floor. Because it is interwoven with everyday domestic work, sewing is categorized as unskilled labour. From the industrial employer's point of view, this assumption leads to the employment of women for the sake of efficiency or 'profitability', because women become more productive more quickly and do not require training before they are ready to perform the task. Therefore, according to Elson and Pearson, it is not the women who make themselves 'bearers of inferior labour' in the industry, but, the industry that makes 'inferior bearers of labour' of the female recruits (1981: 93–94). However, the declining participation of daughters in domestic work means that sewing no longer an 'innate' attribute. The presence of a private sewing course in Tangerang, whose participants were all young females, indicates that formal training is now required by job-seeking daughters to prepare them to participate in the industry. Moreover, growing exposure to discourses of modernity through cultural flows brought by education and rural modernization provides the basis, and promise, of a modern existence to the move to an urban centre. The increasing proportion of women who manage to complete their secondary education are, in fact, capable of undertaking up-skilled employment

such as accounting and typing, and their higher level of education has an impact on their receptiveness to modern discourse, which, in turn, shapes their 'increasing realisation of their role in the urban and urbane world' (Hull 1994: 5).

Susan Joekes, writing on the condition of workers in the Moroccan clothing industry, suggests that another argument employers make for the increasing presence of women in industrial workplaces is their 'docility' (1985: 189). The notion of women's 'subordinate role in domestic and public situations' underscores females' presumed inability to disrupt industrial operations; their 'meekness, passivity, and obedience', combined with 'their youth and lack of experience' in the sector, thus ensuring a less-troubled working environment (Joekes 1985: 189-90). However, she asserts, such a stereotypical view of the subordination of women does not always match reality, since Moroccan women workers have long been involved in labour activism. Experience of worker movements in Tangerang in the mid 1990s indicates that female workers' superior skills of persuasion and communication, as well as their patience in labour organizing work, often placed them in leadership positions in industrial actions. Ironically, the stereotyping of women as being docile provided them with some level of protection - shielding them from arrest, physical threats and intimidation since authorities were unlikely to identify them as ringleaders. This suggests that claims about women's docility and passivity are merely a fiction believed by the company or corporate agencies.

In another South Korean-owned factory, PT PCA, workers are not permitted to take more than one day of sick leave at a time. One of the female workers from the company, Dewi, commented that even in the case of serious illness a letter from the doctor is not sufficient to obtain an extension of sick leave, forcing many to take annual leave when sick. However, annual leave is only granted to workers who had worked a minimum of one year. Dewi, who had joined the company eight months earlier, was not yet eligible for this entitlement. She frequently suffers gastric problems that often last a few days, and finds it difficult to return to work after her single day's sick leave has been used. 'I always feel extremely weak and dizzy,' she said. However, after a few times, she figured out how to deceive the system that she claimed was 'inhuman' (*enggak berperikemanusiaan*). Dewi noticed that the head of division was the only authority on the work floor who recommended sick leave for an ailing worker to the rubber-stamping administration office. Therefore, according to her, once the head of division, a male, could be 'taken in hand' (*kepegang*), things could be 'negotiated' (*bisa diatur*). 'I flirted with him, and attracted his attention,' Dewi explained. After quite some time, the head of division believed that he was intimate enough with Dewi to teasingly ask her to be his girlfriend. Dewi told me:

I never responded to it. How dare he! But I kept being nice to him. I don't care if he holds my hand, caresses my back or shoulder in the workplace. I'll kick him if he does more than that.

Luckily Dewi never experienced more serious sexual harassment. But more importantly she managed to take her foreman 'in hand', encouraging him to do favours

for her, particularly in relation to obtaining sick leave. After that, Dewi could get enough bed rest when she felt unwell. Indeed she could get sick leave even when she just did not feel like going to work. Moreover, when Dewi eventually resigned from the job in order to take a break, the head of division ensured that she could rejoin the company when she was ready to return – a privilege that, under normal circumstances, would be denied a worker who had resigned.

Dewi's case reveals that the stereotype of women's obedience to their employers is a false perception based on the social construction of women's inferiority to men. As Dewi's actions show, the power relations established between the employer – in this case represented by the foreman – and the employee prove to be open to manipulation. By exploiting her sexual attractiveness Dewi elevated her bargaining power in the face of the harsh regime of the industrial workplace. With these kinds of manoeuvres, the subordinate subject is able to turn the domain of others of superior agency into a 'playable' arena in which she stages a tug-of-war in order to drag the playing field, the regulations, down to her level. From the workers' perspective, strict corporate discipline can be a negotiable domain that allows for compromise without the company's knowledge. Other female workers might not be as skilful as Dewi in this regard, and as Tjandraningsih asserts, this relation of power remains susceptible to 'misuse' by the male superior (2000: 264). However, many female workers commented that, when confronted by the stereotyped image of a vulnerable female, male foremen or managers felt obliged to demonstrate their 'gentlemanliness' in order to 'ease' the circumstances of their female subordinate.²

In general, company regulations on both sick leave and annual leave are enforced on the shop-floor, without regard for the sex of the worker, the type of task or length of employment. However, these rules particularly affect married female workers, who also have the domestic role of caring for their offspring. Rusilah is an ethnic Javanese who had been employed in the PT Matra factory for about two years. Her husband, whom she met in Tangerang, is a shop-floor worker at a chemical factory in a neighbouring sub-district. One time, the couple's 7-month-old only son, Reza, had diarrhoea and had been admitted to hospital. On normal days, her 18-year-old younger sister, whom Rusilah had brought from the village, looked after the baby. However, Rusilah decided to stay home after the son was discharged from hospital because she was concerned about his condition. Despite a letter from a doctor stating the circumstance of her son's health, the company did not grant her sick leave, which is given only when a worker is herself ill. Accordingly, she was forced to use four days from her annual leave entitlement, which the couple usually used to visit relatives in their home villages.

Unlike Dewi, Rusilah is not good at flirting with her superior to negotiate sick leave; even if she was, she did not think an area manager/supervisor would be attracted to a married woman like herself. She softly told me, while cuddling her baby, and with a bitter expression on her face:

The remainder of my annual leave won't be enough to return to the countryside. I could [still go], but it's too much hassle to travel with my kid for such a short time. This year I will just have to stay in Tangerang.

She actually could have split the four days' leave she took with her husband, but she felt that it was her responsibility, as a mother, to look after her sick baby. 'Besides, I do not want my husband to sacrifice his work [by taking leave],' she explained, although he only earned as much as she did. It was she who had to take their son to the hospital and take care of him during the recovery process. Her double responsibility as a worker and a mother allowed her little leisure even after her work in the factory was complete (see also Kim 1997; Lee 1998).

In addition, as her medical allowance does not apply to family members, Rusilah had to dig deep to cover the cost of Reza's medical treatment and medicines. This was difficult since the cost of raising a child in the city, which included bringing her younger sister to help with the domestic work, is crippling. Although both husband and wife worked, their situation is exacerbated by the regime of the minimum wage, which remains insensitive to the expenditure associated with child rearing and family maintenance. Furthermore, differentiation between male and female workers still occurs with regard to entitlements. Women are eligible for menstruation leave, maternal leave, miscarriage leave as well as a menstruation allowance under Indonesia's labour legislation, but a married female worker does not receive all the entitlements male workers enjoy. For example, Rusilah was not entitled to receive an accommodation allowance. PT Matra factory provides lodgings for its single employees, but married workers with a family have to find private dwellings for themselves, for which an accommodation allowance is available. However, based on the assumption that the male is the head of the family (*kepala rumah tangga*) and the principal breadwinner, that allowance is only paid to men. Similarly, a maternity allowance is paid to male employees' wives, while a female worker such as Rusilah is not eligible.

Wolf (1992: 118) argues that, in addition to providing a rationalization for the differentiation in benefits, the notion that men's economic duty is more onerous than women's reinforces the practice of 'male superiority' within society at large (see also Elson and Pearson 1981: 92). Rusilah's self-sacrifice in taking full responsibility for her child and using up her annual leave while letting her spouse work and save his leave is a clear illustration of how men are positioned as the main wage earner and superior within the family. Despite her own view of her secondary role, her experience suggests that being female does not make her less dependent on income from her own paid work and, hence, less important in the family economy. The fact that she resumed her factory employment after giving birth suggests that her contribution to the couple's urban survival is as vital as that of her husband. Indeed, all the married female workers I spoke to had been employed in industrial work before their marriage. They met their spouses in Tangerang and returned to the city to recommence their factory work after having a wedding ceremony in the village. 'I had already got used to work,' was a common explanation I heard from these married women workers. In contrast, wives who were brought from the village by their working husbands generally stayed at home and considered themselves housewives whose primary task was to support their spouses and children.

Encountering the system

The direct superior of most shop-floor workers in PT Matra is the head of the group (*ketua regu*) who supervises a line. In the hand-sewing division, there are ten lines whose group heads are predominantly women; these lines rotate at least once every two months. Above the group heads is the line head (*ketua line*), who supervises several lines. There were two line heads in Ery's division, each of whom supervised five lines. The heads of line are accountable to a division head (*ketua bagian*), whose task is to organize the workers in his/her area in order to meet the daily quota of the division based on the instructions of the production manager. The production manager, a South Korean national, oversees the division heads on the production floor. Unlike the newly recruited factory women who are the focus of this study, supervisory roles are usually reserved for those who have been working in the factory for over five years. These women had maintained their positions in the company despite the financial crisis. Only a small proportion of women could enjoy such mobility, which was only available to workers who have demonstrated their loyalty and obedience, and have no record of wrongdoing. Ordinary factory women are usually happy enough to be upgraded from the status of provisional or temporary workers to that of permanent worker, which is only possible after serving the company for at least two years without serious violation of company rules. With more established or permanent status, workers might expect a better leave allowance and a redundancy benefit according to their length of service.

The workers often complain about being reproached by the fretful (*cerewet*) and fault-finding (*bawel*) group heads, their immediate supervisor, when they work too slowly. The hierarchy is also designed to control the physical mobility of the employees with regard to non-production-related activities within the factory premises. When a worker is ill and wants to see a doctor at the health clinic, she has to obtain a referral letter (*surat berobat*) from her group head. Only with the written approval of this supervisor is the ill employee able to leave the line. If a referral letter is issued, the worker takes it to the head of line to have it signed. The head can accept or reject the request, depending on their personal disposition and the reasons provided by the employee. From there, the letter is to be taken by the worker to the administrative officer, who approves it and makes a record for administrative purposes. The worker is permitted to visit the health clinic, located outside the company complex, only after these clearances are obtained and inspected by the security officer at the front gate. The clinic serves a number of manufacturing industries in the sub-district, but it only provides services to workers at the company's expense on production of proof of their identity and a letter of reference from their company. Lely complained that several times when she was dreadfully ill the head of group would not give her permission to leave work to see the doctor or simply to rest at home. She added that, based on her experience, female group heads in particular are often reluctant to give approval; that they are always less ready to believe female workers. Lely stated that, based on her experience with different group heads, she preferred a male supervisor, as they are usually more understanding (*pengertian*).

Contact with the production manager, a South Korean expatriate, occurs on an almost daily basis at PT Matra factory. According to the workers, the production manager is a joint owner of the company. He monitors almost every aspect of production at the plant, checking and controlling the performance of workers on the lines throughout the working day. Many women said that the presence of the manager at the line distresses them, although he never comments on individuals' performance. Commenting on how she feels when the *mister* – the term used to refer to the expatriate manager – is standing behind her and watching her working, one worker observed, 'I feel like I have just committed a wrongdoing (*serba salah*) and I get so nervous (*groggi*).' The production manager has to be consulted if workers wish to leave the production building during their lunch break. First, the worker has to obtain the relevant letter (*surat pengantar istirahat*) from the group head, and then take it to the line head, the head of division, the *mister* and, last of all, to the administration office. Without this letter, the presence of a worker outside the production building, even if still in the factory premises, is against the company rules. Workers' access to restrooms is also heavily controlled. Workers have to carry a card when leaving the line for the lavatory. Each line is allotted one card so that no more than one employee can leave at any one time. According to the workers, the policy was introduced because the company felt that productivity would be affected by the absence of more than one worker from a line.

The strict control over their movements and behaviour of workers during working hours leaves women with little opportunity to take a break outside the officially designated meal and prayer times. A walk to the lavatory is considered an opportunity to meet the need for a short break in the middle of a distressing work session. Waiting outside the toilets, which are inadequate in number, is the only way employees can enjoy a little freedom in the workplace, chatting with others, smoking or eating snacks. Some even try to take a nap or simply close their eyes a little while in the lavatory. However, even that opportunity is limited since company security officers regularly check the lavatory area, sending the crowd back to the line, or knocking on the toilet doors to warn the occupant to hurry.

In addition to the strict, elaborate disciplinary and bureaucratic procedures imposed by manufacturing corporations on their shop-floors, a 'carrot' approach is adopted by companies in order to ensure workers' loyalty. These measures range from the provision of sport facilities and a space for praying to the provision of entertainment facilities. These are intended, according to one company's work agreement, to 'accommodate the advancement of talent and creativity of the workers'. A large corporation like PT GHTG Group provides facilities such as a film-viewing and music room, which are available twice a week. Even outdoor recreation is guaranteed in most work agreements. For example, once a year, PT Matra factory helps to organize a one-day trip for its workers to visit places of interest within three to four hours of Tangerang. The company pays for transportation and logistics but the trips are mostly organized by the workplace union.

According to Ery, joy and laughter are certainly features of these short trips, which allow workers to escape the routine of the industrial town. However, once at their destination, no focused activities are organized by the company or the union.

Instead, the participants are free to do things individually or in small groups, except during the lunch break. In her study of urban industrial migrant workers in Bangkok, Mills (1999) found that extra-firm gatherings like these became a way for unions to promote 'solidarity' in order to endorse 'class-based unity' as a stratagem to counter urban structural impediments. This was missing during the leisure trips of workers of PT Matra. The union appears to get involved in technical matters (ordering buses, arranging catering) without using these events as a means to promote the union agenda. Nor are the events used as an opportunity for the company's officials to relax the barrier between the higher-level staff and production workers, since office personnel do not participate. As a result, though delighted with this firm-funded initiative, the workers do not develop a feeling of obligation to the company in the form of loyalty or emotional attachment.

The transience of factory work

Despite its modern connotations and promises of status and a better income, which conform to factory women's expectations of a certain urban lifestyle, for many women, a factory job is merely transitional. Migrant workers' perceptions of their engagement in industrial activities are shaped by their working environments. Many workers said that abusive labour practices are 'unbearable' (*enggak bikin betah*) and that they want to leave factory employment (*kayaknya mau keluar*). The majority of workers with whom I spoke have already made plans for their future, setting a limit to the period of time they will remain in the sweatshop (usually less than eight years) before quitting. In January 2001, Ery predicted that she would no longer be working in the factory in two years' time:

I am tired of working in the factory and I want to go back to my home village to help my parents, help my mother at home. Perhaps by next year I'll already have left this work.

About a year after this conversation, I had an opportunity to return to the area for a short visit. I found that Ery was no longer working in the factory. She and three other colleagues from the same footwear factory had resigned from the job three months earlier and had returned to their villages. 'I just want to take a break from factory [work],' she had told friends who were still living and working in the area. Since Ery had left the job, she had revisited Tangerang once and tried to get a job at another manufacturing factory. Having failed, she left again for her village. But Lely, Ery's friend, who had also resigned, had better luck. She had found another factory job in different sub-district in Tangerang after being at home 'doing nothing' (*nggak ngapain*) except helping her mother with domestic tasks for about two months.

The decision made by Ery and her colleagues was certainly risky, given the ongoing problems with Indonesia's economy triggered by the 1997 financial crisis. However, the city is a site where fantasies of pleasure can be realized, and the factory is a part of the migrants' urban experience that they may discard when it no longer brings 'pleasure' and contentment. This does not mean that factory work is

a one-off experience: women seem happy to re-enter the sector after a taking short break. The fact that urban employment is not always available under difficult macro-economic conditions was probably not foremost in Ery's mind when she decided to resign. As long as the rural economy remains able, through its 'cushion' mechanism (Wolf 1986: 371), to absorb children temporarily unemployed from the urban sector, the problem of scarcity in urban employment is of secondary concern migrant workers like Ery and Lely.

Future expectations enable young migrants to perceive their factory work as temporary. As a result, their loyalty and emotional attachment to their employer is low, as demonstrated by their everyday resistance in the workplace. Basic skills learned in school contribute to their confidence in their ability to achieve upward mobility in urban areas, as women imagine gaining public sector or office work after leaving the manufacturing sector. Whether or not such expectations are realistic remain to be seen. However, their optimism explains their attitude towards their engagement in the industrial sector as something that is not worth fighting for if their current employment is threatened.

Conclusion

In the manner of a total institution, a manufacturing factory uses fortress-like walls, badges, body-searches and the unrelenting control of workers' activities while in the factory to contain workers in a particular reality. Production conditions on the assembly line and the strict rules that intrude on individual habits are sources of pressure and anxiety for the workers. Values brought from past lives, mostly in the countryside, serve as a benchmark by which rural migrants judge work practices as unjust and treatment by the factory regime as degrading. Despite offering a steady income, then, the factory shop-floor remains an alienating reality. This is evident in female factory workers' detachment from their work, and their belief that their industrial employment is not permanent, which in turn suggests that, despite the discipline imposed by the total institution on the workers, the incorporation of rural women into capitalist production is never complete.

Wolf, speaking of manufacturing workers in rural Java, has noted that rural daughters' 'preference for factory employment' (1992: 136, emphasis in original) as well as their 'limited and constrained options', have contributed to their acceptance of industrial control and discipline. Moreover, she asserts, support from their parents' household economy means that they accept low payment and poor working arrangements without protest. Wolf argues that this degree of compliance is linked to the 'nature of transition' from agriculture to industry experienced by these daughters (1992: 134). Female migrant workers in Tangerang exhibit a similar level of acceptance, albeit for different reasons. As a result of their better education and experience of urban modernity, these workers believe they have the opportunity to work in different kinds of occupations, which in turn contributes to their perception of factory work as transitional. These expectations of post-factory employment serve as a defence mechanism that enables them to respond to the pressure emerging from the regime on the shop-floor.

The processes factory women have to undergo in their integration into the manufacturing regime evoke Turner's notion of liminality to describe a stage in transition between two different realms defined by status, age or place (1967: 93–111). This notion is based on Arnold Van Gennep's 'rite of passage' (cited in Turner 1967: 94; see also Barnard and Spencer 2002: 489), which is divided into three stages: separation, transition and incorporation. Badges and body-searches are examples of rituals that mark the detachment of workers from their pre-factory existence, or separation. Habituation to the factory regime – its work methods, discipline and control – realigns workers' behaviour to the industrial world of work and represents the transition. The everyday, long-term practice of the regimentation of factory work marks the outcome of transition, that is, incorporation. Since workers' integration into the industrial institution is never complete, the stage of transition, or liminality, colours the entirety of their time on the shop-floor. This is because a worker's industrial body, her physical presence in the factory, is constantly overshadowed by her past values and expectations of a post-factory existence. These past shadows and future possibilities make workers' total incorporation problematic. Liminality, therefore, is not merely a stage that marks the arrival of workers at, and adjustment to, the factory. Rather, the difficulties they experience in habituating their selves to the industrial regime – and their lack of attachment to their work – suggest that factory women are continuously in a state of transition; caught between past and future, as imagined in their present factory existence.

Notes

- 1 Despite my deep involvement in ethnographic fieldwork, I failed to gain access to the factories; requests to the management of a number of companies met with no success. Accordingly, portrayals of women's experiences on the shop-floor depend on the narratives and stories told by the workers. In order to protect those workers, pseudonyms are used for interviewees, the companies where they worked and the name of neighbourhood in which the fieldwork was undertaken.
- 2 Likewise, to lighten the strain, humorous stories about female workers challenging power on the shop-floor by showing disrespect toward the supervisor were often told. These types of everyday resistance in James Scott's (1986) sense included saying bad things about the supervisor, breaking the no-chat rule and eating while performing tasks on the assembly line, mostly when the supervisor is not present.

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