

IS EPZ EMPLOYMENT A STEPPING STONE OR STUMBLING BLOCK FOR THE
EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN? EVIDENCE FROM MAURITIUS

by

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DECLARATION

I declare that this study entitled “Is EPZ employment a stepping stone or stumbling block for the empowerment of women? Evidence from Mauritius” is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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ABSTRACT

This study critically assesses how far the Mauritian EPZ, which consists of a predominantly female workforce, is conducive to women's empowerment, particularly in a context of rife global competition. Focus Group Discussions with actual female workers and semi-directive interviews of those who have been laid off reveal that there have effectively been some benefits which may be construed as empowerment. However, low wages and harsh treatment of workers at the workplace, compounded with rising costs of living and pervasive patriarchal values impede the extent of empowerment. Yet, when contrasted with the experiences of laid off women, the centrality of employment becomes more palpable. The experiences of job loss are in many cases destructive of not only the laid-off worker's self-image and aspirations, but also on their ability to juggle with poverty and its associated outcomes. Despite being a relatively difficult sector to work in, its benefits outweigh its limitations.

Key Terms :

Empowerment, gender, employment, Export Processing Zones, globalisation, qualitative methods, Focus Group Discussions, semi-directive interviews

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACP	AFRICAN CARRIBEAN PACIFIC
AGOA	AFRICA GROWTH AND OPPORTUNITY ACT
ATC	AGREEMENT ON TEXTILES AND CLOTHING
BOM	BANK OF MAURITIUS
BOI	BOARD OF INVESTMENT
CASR	CENTRE FOR APPLIED SOCIAL RESEARCH
COMESA	COMMON MARKET FOR EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA
CSO	CENTRAL STATISTICAL OFFICE
EPZ	EXPORT-PROCESSING ZONE
EPZDA	EXPORT PROCESSING ZONE DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY
FGD	FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION
FPU	FEDERATION OF PROGRESSIVE UNIONS
HDI	HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX
HPC	HIGH POWERED COMMITTEE
ILO	INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE
IVTB	INDUSTRIAL AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING BOARD
LDC	LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES
MCCI	MAURITIUS CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY
MEF	MAURITIUS EMPLOYERS FEDERATION
MEPZA	MAURITIUS EXPORT PROCESSING ZONE ASSOCIATION
MFA	MULTI-FIBRE AGREEMENT
MIDA	MAURITIUS INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY
MRC	MAURITIUS RESEARCH COUNCIL
NIDL	NEW INTERNATIONAL DIVISION OF LABOUR
SADC	SOUTHERN AFRICA DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY
SAPS	STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT POLICIES
SIDS	SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATE

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

'The last ten years have seen a blossoming of critical research on gender and macro-economic processes, theories and policies; the next ten years present us with the challenge of building on this to try to start transforming practice and move towards the use of macro-economic policy as an instrument for empowering rather than burdening women.'
Elson (1998: 155)

1. Aims and Objectives

It is widely acknowledged that export-oriented industrialization in developing countries has been relying heavily on the employment of women for the generally cheap, docile and flexible labour which they offer (Standing, 1989; Razavi and Pearson, 2004; Munck, 2004; Hale and Wills, 2005). While this feminization of export-oriented employment has given rise to an on-going debate in much of the feminist literature on development as to whether such a development strategy has an empowering potential for the female workforce (see e.g. Joekes, 1995; Elson and Pearson, 1997; Lim, 1997), this debate is all the more warranted given the present context of trade liberalisation and rife global competition which directly impact upon this sector and labour within.

This study seeks to make an original contribution to this issue by investigating the link between the employment of women in the Export Processing Zone (hereafter referred to as the EPZ) and empowerment, in the specific context of Mauritius. More particularly, this thesis seeks to critically assess the extent to which employment in the Mauritian EPZ leads to an improvement in the gender roles and status as well as in material conditions of female EPZ employees.

Analytical priority is given to women themselves, focusing on their own experiences of paid employment and the extent to which they feel empowered as a result of working in the EPZ. As this study will show, these first-hand accounts provide important insights in the gender dynamics associated with paid employment and unveil a more complex picture than the often taken-for-granted assumption that paid employment translates readily into empowerment.

At its essence, the bulk of the study consists of an attempt to answer the following related research questions:

1. To what extent has paid employment in the EPZ, seen by female EPZ workers, as having empowered them, particularly within the domestic setting? In other words, how far has this led to their economic independence, enabled them to exercise choice and participate in decision-making and enjoy more favourable status and distribution of domestic roles, in their households?
2. Is export-oriented employment compatible with empowerment of female labour in a context of globalization? In other words, what impact is the intensification of globalisation processes, particularly the liberalization of trade and ever-increasing global competition, having on working conditions, labor standards and employment itself within this sector and how are these affecting its predominantly female workforce?
3. What happens to women who lose their jobs in the EPZ as a result of the negative implications of globalization on the sector? What are the social and economic implications of being hired and fired? Are any gender benefits of employment retained or eroded with job loss?

These three sets of questions which are all intricately linked help to scrutinise the extent to which paid employment in the EPZ can be conducive to empowerment while at the same time highlighting the drawbacks which can be associated with this form of employment.

1.1 Significance of the Study

The above research questions are important to ask for a number of reasons. At the broader theoretical level, they highlight the role and contribution of women in the

globalisation of production, particularly in garment manufacturing while at the same time interrogating and contributing to debates about the extent to which globalisation and this export-oriented development strategy in developing countries are positively related to an improvement of the condition of women in society.

Moreover, albeit at a more empirical level, these questions are highly topical. The on-going liberalization of trade and the phase-out of the Multi-Fibre Agreement¹ (MFA) in the recent past, compounded by the current global financial crisis are known to be having deleterious effects upon not only working conditions but employment itself. In fact, the motivation for this study stems mainly from the general observation that the EPZ sector, as one of the most important pillars of the Mauritian economy is being adversely affected by the effects of globalisation. In Mauritius, academic research on gender and the EPZ is relatively scarce apart from the works of Hein (1989), Kothari and Nababsing (1996), Bunwaree (2004) which are useful but nonetheless dated as the challenges facing this sector and their implications for women have evolved. In fact, as pointed out by Kothari and Nababsing (1996), the impact of export-oriented industrialization on women's empowerment requires further research as it is a matter of on-going debate as to its linkages with empowerment. This research will therefore be timely to fill up this gap.

In terms of the methodological approach which is explained in more detail later, the micro-sociological bearing of the study provides useful data about processes through which women's entry into paid employment can affect their gender identity and gender roles particularly within the family. As will be elaborated later, the benefits of a qualitative approach to study such a phenomenon as empowerment is that it offers a subjectively given and valid picture of how women themselves perceive the extent of their gains. This stands in contrast to quantitative approaches which measure empowerment in an objective but aggregated and impersonal way and which may not be an accurate reflection of reality.

¹ Refer to Appendix 1 for brief description of the role and contribution of the MFA in the global trade for textile and clothing.

1.2 Preliminary Literature Review

Third world women's opportunities to undertake paid employment has been considerably boosted by a process called the New International Division of Labour (NIDL) (Frobel et al, 1980). Becoming more and more visible as from the 1970s, the NIDL reflected the relocation of low paid and allegedly low-skilled processes of production in low wage economies through the setting up of Export-Processing Zones whilst industrialised countries would provide the capital and technical expertise (Frobel et al, 1980).

NIDL has more recently been subsumed under the catch-all term globalisation (Munck, 2004). Globalization has become a central term in academia over the last two decades, yet it still remains an elusive one given the various ways in which it has been conceptualized. As Scholte (2005: 15) succinctly puts it, 'many debates about globalization never get past disputes over starting premises regarding definition, scale, chronology and explanatory framework'. A general sweep of the literature on globalization for instance reveals the variety of ways in which it has been defined. Giddens (1990: 21) for instance defines globalization in terms of 'the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.' Scholte (2000: 46) defines it in terms of 'Deterritorialisation – or... the growth of supraterritorial relations between people.'

Given my focus on the globalisation of trade and production and its impact upon labour, my scope in this thesis is more concerned with *economic globalisation*. To some scholars, economic globalisation, which as Wade (2005: 292) notes "has been one of the central vectors of change in the world economy", defines "a new era in which people everywhere are increasingly subject to the disciplines of the global marketplace" [Held et al (1999: 2)]. It is characterised by what Grieco and Ikenberry (2002: 207) refer as "the emergence and operation of a single worldwide economy". Wade (2005: 292) argues that economic globalisation "(...) has come to emphasise deregulation, open capital accounts,

privatisation, cuts in some welfare state services, flexible labour markets, restrictions on labour unions (...)"

In this research my use of the concept of globalisation is focused specifically on its economic processes and I refer to its main manifestations i.e. in terms of the world-wide wave of economic liberalisation, a rapid growth in international trade, foreign direct investment and cross border financial flows and the emergence of transnational networks of production in low-wage countries which have been accompanied by an intensification of global competition particularly in manufactured commodities. However my scope will be limited to one aspect of these transformations ie the setting up of EPZs (particularly in global garment manufacturing) and in turn what their implications are for female labour who are over-representative of this sector.

EPZs have been a key element of economic globalisation in developing economies. In sum, according to the ILO, EPZs are industrial zones with special incentives set up to attract foreign investors in which imported materials undergo some degree of processing before being exported again. The success of developmental states of South East Asia which have promoted an export-oriented development strategy have led to the advocacy of this model of development as one of the conditionalities associated with Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs). This partly accounts for the establishment of export-oriented manufacturing as one of the most globally extensive industries (Held et al, 1999).

According to some estimates, the female composition of the global EPZ workforce ranges from 60% to 80% (ILO, 2004; David, 1996; UNIDO, 1994) and is even more pronounced in garment manufacturing. The link between the globalisation of trade and the predominance of women in manufacturing employment is so strong that writers such as Joeke (1995) speak of a 'female-led' just as well as an export-led industrialization process.

Frobel et al (1980) were among the first to consider the important role of gender in the selection of locations and workers by transnational enterprises in EPZs. More particularly, they noted a strong preference for young, single and docile women from the 'periphery' who were generally desperate for income. Those women were generally believed to have special attributes, such as passivity, docility, obedience and dexterity which allegedly predisposed them to such jobs.

Feminist theories highlight and question the often taken-for-granted assumptions that women are 'naturally' better suited than men for this type of work, and have natural abilities and predispositions that make them more cost-efficient than men to undertake such work (e.g. Elson and Pearson, 1997; Lim, 1997). Rather than nature, it is the deep-rooted ideology of patriarchy and the sexual division of labour in the home as well as stereotypical notions of gender roles which according to this perspective create the demand for and supply of female labour in this sector (Lim, 1997).

When considering this predominance of women in this sector, one issue which requires academic attention and which as mentioned earlier is the central objective of this study, is whether there is a positive link between paid employment in this sector and the empowerment of women. What empowerment means and the specificities of women's empowerment are treated in more detail in the next chapter. Suffice it to say here that women's empowerment has been high on the agenda of mainstream development discourse gradually permeating to states and NGOs around the world since the mid-1990s together with other terms such as participation and partnership (Elson and Kerlik, 2002). Emphasis on empowerment of women at least in part is a result of many inter-related factors including feminist scholarship and activism which highlighted gender inequalities in society dominated by capitalism and patriarchy and also reflects an underlying process of democratisation which is part of the wider process of the globalisation (see e.g. Scholte, 2005). Given the role and importance of women as mothers and carers, their empowerment, particularly in contexts of poverty, is considered vital in sustaining the household (UNIFEM, 2000).

The significance of employment for the individual is well established. Many interventions targeting women operate under the assumption that engagement in economic activity will translate into economic empowerment (Safilios-Rothschild, 1990; Goetz and Sen Gupta, 1996). Others such as Sen (1997) while acknowledging the obvious material benefits of earning an income, also emphasise the importance of work as a fundamental entitlement to the individual which in turn meets the fundamental goals of dignity, well-being, freedom and quality of life. Rather similarly, Stiglitz (2001) argues that no welfare provision can amount to the security of having access to a means of livelihood.

Likewise, EPZ employment is argued to bring remuneration and recognition to women while at the same time improving their own self-worth and their relative status and bargaining power within the domestic setting thereby leading to their empowerment. Such positive effects are well documented (e.g. Heyzer, 1988; Lim, 1990; Kabeer, 1995; Joekes, 1995). In addition, as Kabeer (2003) opines, empowering women through access to paid employment has the greatest multiplier effect trickling to other members of the household, particularly children.

On the other hand, the linkages between economic empowerment and gender equality, particularly when discussed in relation to employment and income, are not straightforward (Joekes 1995; Kabeer, 2000). In other words, increased access to employment and income for women does not readily translate into an improved status or bargaining power for women. These points will be further elaborated in the next chapter.

In addition, some argue that the extent of empowerment also depends on the nature of the activity (Beneria and Roldan, 1987). Regular, remunerated and what the ILO terms as decent work is more empowering for women while irregular, low or non-paid work with poor or no contractual conditions is deemed as less empowering, if at all.

In general, EPZ employment has traditionally evoked images of poor working conditions, worker exploitation and trade union repression and there is an abundant literature on what this form of employment entails (Mitter, 1995; ICFTU, 1996; ILO, 2004) Many such studies highlight the exploitation women face within this sector as they are employed in generally inferior conditions (in terms of pay, job security, health and safety) and with little likelihood of unionization (Mies, 1986; Wills and Hale, 2005). To Horgan (2001), for some women, joining the global workforce is synonymous to a ‘double burden’ faced by them because their role in the family means that the lives of women workers are everywhere extremely difficult as they try to reconcile work and family life. Again according to Horgan (2001), working also threatens the right of some ever to have children or for others, it ironically means neglecting the children they are working to feed.

Locating this sector in the current context of globalisation magnifies and opens to question the empowering effects of employment in this sector, as is examined in this study. EPZs are regarded as one of the main sites where the opportunities and challenges associated with globalisation, particularly from a labour perspective, are most visible (Munck, 2004; Wills and Hale, 2006).

1.3 The Mauritian Context

In Mauritius, the need for cheap, low-skilled and docile labour provided unprecedented opportunities for young women to join the newly-emerging EPZ as from the 1980s (Hein, 1989; Durbarry, 2001; Bunwaree, 2004). Between 1980 and 2000, the EPZ expanded from 4% to 12% of GDP before falling to about 7% of GDP in 2009. An analysis of employment in the EPZ by gender from mid 1970s towards the mid 1990s reveals an exponential rise in total employment in this sector with an even faster rise in the employment of women². In effect, female employment shot from about 18 000 in the early 1980s to above 60 000 in the early 2000s, corresponding to above 70% of the

² See Chapter Three for more details.

workforce in this sector over that time period. In recent years however, as is explained later, the adverse impact of global competition on the EPZ sector, textile and clothing manufacturing in particular, has brought about massive dismissals – nearly 33% of the EPZ workforce lost their jobs. Yet women still make up nearly 60% of the workforce in this sector.

Nonetheless despite having changed the labour force so significantly there has been very little research of a sociological nature on the impact of EPZ employment on the condition of women in Mauritian society. Little systematic data is available on the extent to which women have benefitted from paid employment in the EPZ factories.

Arguably, the process of feminisation of work ensues social and political changes which to some extent improve the bargaining position of women not only within their own households, but also within society and the economy in general (Razavi and Pearson, 2004). As more and more women get drawn into the paid workforce, there is greater public and social pressure generally for improvement in their conditions of work and security of contract, for greater health and safety regulation in the workplace and for improvement in relative wages. Although in Mauritius it cannot be denied that there have been major developments along such lines, nevertheless it is widely acknowledged that harsh conditions of work in the factories and the rigid inequalities in the distribution of domestic roles are still predominant. To what extent has paid employment improved authority patterns and women's status and role in the Mauritian household remains understudied and this research is an attempt to address this gap.

This debate itself needs to be contextualized within the challenges facing the EPZ industry itself as a result of globalization processes. In fact, this sector which was already facing a number of challenges since the early 1990s both internally – for example, rising costs and declining productivity of local labour, lack of specialized skills and excessive reliance on the four clothing items ie. T-shirts, shirts, pullovers and trousers - and externally – with the emergence of low-cost textile producers such as China, India, Turkey and Viet Nam among others - suffered from an even more important

downturn with the dismantling of the Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA) since January 2005 (MEPZA, 2006). Furthermore the global financial crisis has also affected exports of garments and forced already struggling employers to lay off workers.

The EPZ sector which has for many years been a major employment sector is gradually being unable to live up to its expectations. The toll on EPZ workers in general and women in particular, being over-representative in the factories, is exceptionally high. In fact they are increasingly faced with the threats of being laid off and attempts to improve their working conditions in the factories are easily dismissed in order to remain cost-competitive.

In brief, the whole notion of whether the EPZ as a model of development can be said to be a tool for empowerment of women is open to question. This research study therefore seeks to critically analyse whether paid employment in the EPZ has been leading to the empowerment of female workers or indeed to a further deterioration of their condition. I also attempt to address the ramifications of the restructuring of the industry on women who are laid off. The resulting impact on their gender identity and gender relations within the household, as well as related issues such as the ensuing feminization of poverty are also touched upon.

1.4 Methodological approach

The empirical research conducted involved a small-scale fieldwork which relied on qualitative research techniques including unstructured interviews, Focus-Group Discussions, semi-directive interviews and case studies. The theoretical and practical justifications for this approach are examined in more detail in Chapter Four.

The focus of this study on women's own perceptions of the extent to which they have been empowered as a result of their employment in the EPZ meant that working women in the EPZ were selected as the main participants in the study. An innovative feature

which I have used is the administering of a semi-directive interview to women who have lost their jobs in the EPZ. This retrospective study was designed to compare and contrast the differences in self-accounts of empowerment between those who have lost their jobs and those who are still in employment. These points are made clearer later.

This study also relies heavily on a desk research which involved a survey of secondary sources of information from a variety of sources including official reports, media articles and available statistics. Academic research about this subject in the specific context of Mauritius is, as mentioned before rather limited.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

After this introductory chapter, Chapter Two attempts to provide a theoretical grounding to the issues which I address in this study. It starts with a brief analysis of theoretical approaches to understand gender inequalities in society and more particularly the reasons for the feminisation of export-oriented employment. It then briefly explains the empowerment concept and how it is used in the context of this study. The third part critically assesses available literature about the implications which this form of employment has for the empowerment of women, particularly in a context of global competition and trade liberalisation which adversely affects labour standards and employment within this sector.

Chapter Three will set the empirical background to the study by focusing on the Mauritian context. In a nutshell, it will address the historical development of the EPZ in Mauritius with a focus on gender and employment. It also locates the growing structural difficulties facing this sector in the broader context of global competition on the market for textiles and clothing and outlines its implications upon female labour. The final part of this chapter provides a review of existing local evidence on the extent to which employment in the Mauritian EPZ can be interpreted as conducive to empowerment.

Chapter Four will explain and justify the methodology and research design adopted in this study and discuss the benefits and shortcomings of this form of enquiry. It will also discuss the research techniques used, the selection of sites and participants, and the issues raised with respect to ethics in data collection as well as the validity and reliability of the findings.

Chapters Five to Seven are based on the findings of the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Chapter Five critically analyses the set of data obtained from the Focus Group Discussions about the working conditions of women in EPZ factories. The views of officials from trade unions such as the Federation of Progressive Unions (FPU) on the one hand and the Mauritius Employers Federation (MEF) which is the umbrella organisation for private sector organisations, on the other hand have also been incorporated in the analysis in order to achieve a holistic picture.

Chapter Six provides a critical analysis of the participants' experiences of how the gender distribution of roles and authority within conjugal relations and in the household as a whole, have changed as a result of their access to paid employment. Although the evidence collected on such a small-scale cannot be regarded as definitive, most of the participants argue that there has been some albeit limited amelioration in the distribution of roles particularly concerning household chores. In terms of participation in decision-taking there seems to be a clear demarcation between the nature of the decision and gender authority with only a minority of women claiming that they participate in major decisions affecting themselves and their households. In addition most of the caring duties such as childcare and care of the elderly are still primarily the responsibilities of women. What is equally worth noting is that there is no genuine will, particularly among Hindu women, to change this pattern as they take it for granted that these roles are traditionally theirs and changing that would be unfair to their husbands.

In chapter Seven, the extent to which paid employment translates into economic empowerment for women is analysed. The picture that emerges is again quite complex. Although women do feel a sense of economic independence, this is mitigated by a

consensual argument that the costs of living are so high that they tend to spend all of their income in meeting the financial demands of the household and as such complementing their husbands' or other earners of the household. It is interesting to note that there are marked gender differences in the distribution of household budget responsibilities between husband and wife.

Chapter Eight is based on the analysis of findings from semi-structured interviewing which captured retrospectively the experience of being laid off and the resulting impact on such issues as gender distribution of roles and power within the household, on self-identity as well as on the lifestyle changes that operate as a result of employment. The main finding is that as opposed to the general picture that emerges from the study of women who are still working in the EPZ, the laid-off workers consider the harsh conditions of factory life as better than the experience of unemployment, poverty (both at the individual and the household levels) and a feeling of being socially excluded.

Finally Chapter Nine provides a summary and interpretation of the main findings of this research and raises the policy implications of those findings before drawing relevant conclusions. In particular attention is drawn to the difficulties of combining women's empowerment with the nature of export-oriented employment particularly in a context where the sector is in a process of restructuration. The study also points to gaps in existing policies to empower women and the difficulties of achieving gender equality in a society where patriarchal values pervade.

CHAPTER TWO
EMPLOYMENT IN EXPORT-PROCESSING ZONES, WOMEN AND
EMPOWERMENT: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2. Introduction

This chapter provides a theoretical grounding of the linkages between women, export-oriented employment and empowerment. It is made up of three main parts. The first part briefly explores the intricate link between export-oriented manufacturing employment and the feminization of such employment. It examines some of the main theoretical approaches on the feminization of export-oriented industrialization and locates this sector and employment within the wider context of globalisation. The second part begins with a critical review of some of the main ways in which the empowerment concept has been used in the literature on gender and indicates how it will be used in the context of this study. The third part examines some of the main theories as well as some empirical evidence from across the world on the extent to which the dramatic rise in female export-oriented manufacturing employment is empowering for women.

2.1 Theoretical explanations for the feminization of export-oriented employment

Inequalities on the grounds of sex and gender at all levels of society have been identified and criticised by feminist theories. With particular reference to the labour market, feminist theories argue that women's disadvantaged position is caused by and is a reflection of patriarchy and women's subordinate position within the family and wider society (see e.g. Elson, 1995). It is widely acknowledged that the sexual division of labour at home with a model whereby domestic responsibilities such as household chores and childcare being generally seen as female responsibilities while males are traditionally perceived as the main breadwinners, is argued to have important implications for the types of roles which women then take in the labour market. Overall, there is a consensus among feminist perspectives that the patriarchal set up of society is used as the underlying explanation for the generally lower

human capital as well as the discrimination and inferior status which women in general have in the labour market.

Those feminists who are influenced by Marxism stress that the primary source of women's oppression derives from the logic of capital accumulation and profit (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Moser, 1994; Sen and Grown, 1987). Capital exploits the reality of women's domestic responsibilities by using this as an excuse to pay women lower wages. For similar reasons, they can conveniently use women as a reserve army of labour (Beechey, 1977) slotting women workers into part-time and temporary employment as and when the market demands, without the necessity to pay social benefits or provide job security.

These theoretical perspectives are helpful in explaining the feminization of women in export-oriented employment and the continued disadvantage that they face not only within the workplace but also within the domestic sphere. In relation to the feminization of work in the EPZ, feminist theories question the often taken-for-granted assumptions that women are 'naturally' better suited than men for this type of work, and have natural abilities and predispositions that make them more cost-efficient than men to undertake such work (see e.g. Elson and Pearson, 1997; Lim, 1997). Rather than nature, it is the deep-rooted ideology of patriarchy and the sexual division of labour in the home as well as stereotypical notions of gender roles which according to this perspective create the demand for and supply of female labour in this sector (Lim, 1997).

Women are thus perceived to have distinctive innate abilities such as 'nimble fingers' which predispose them to such activities but in reality, these are not natural but acquired through gendered socialization processes (Elson and Pearson, 1997). Such assumptions of female dexterity have often been vehicled by the state in many developing countries, particularly in South East Asia, in order to attract inward investment from multinational corporations in manufactures. Quoting a Malaysian investment brochure designed for northern investors (Elson and Pearson 1981: 149) demonstrate how capital, the state and patriarchal interests work in a synergistic way towards the efficient exploitation of women in these factories under the new

international division of labour: ‘The manual dexterity of the oriental female is famous the world over. Her hands are small and she works fast with extreme care. Who, therefore, could be better qualified by nature and inheritance to contribute to the efficiency of a bench-assembly production line than the Oriental girl?’

In addition to their perceived dexterity, other stereotypical notions of female ‘natural’ attributes are pervasive and have contributed to the demand for female labour. Elson and Pearson (1997) add that women also fit taken-for-granted stereotypical notions such as being docile, willing to accept tough working conditions, discipline and being naturally more suited to tedious, repetitious and monotonous work.

Likewise, the relatively lower wage rates which women receive are explained in terms of deep-rooted gender biases. Elson and Pearson (1997) are for instance critical of the often held but largely incorrect assumption that women’s jobs in the EPZ are unskilled and therefore worthy only of low wages. They highlight the construction of men’s tasks as skilled (ie learned in public apprenticeships on the job) as opposed to women’s tasks which are viewed as unskilled. The fact that tasks such as sewing are acquired in a domestic/informal context usually from their mothers or other women is held as a justification for women’s wage exploitation.

Furthermore, their low wages are attributed to being perceived as secondary earners as well as their inability to have a linear career due to their likely predispositions for motherhood. Elson and Pearson (1997) argue that these taken-for-granted assumptions are in reality social constructs which emanate from the patriarchal system. Accordingly, from the determination of their skill level to their secondary status in the labour market through their socialization into subservience vis-à-vis male authority both within the household and at the workplace, it is essentially gendered social constructs rather than natural predispositions which lead to the disadvantaged position of women in such jobs.

Rather similarly, Lim (1990, 1997) argues that because of the patriarchal construction of gender roles, women's inferior status in society is carried on to the workplace as 'secondary status' workers in what she calls the 'world-market' factories which EPZ work symbolises. In fact, paradoxically, it is women's disadvantaged position which becomes an advantage for them in securing jobs in world-market factories. According to Lim (1997) both the demand for and supply of female labour are determined by the culture of patriarchy, which assumes women's role in the family as natural and consigns her to a secondary and inferior position in the wage-labour market. Thus, women's comparative disadvantage in the capitalist wage-labour market as reflected in low wages, enhances the comparative advantage of firms that employ them in labour-intensive industries producing for the world market.

According to writers such as Standing (1989), the feminization of work in this sector represents a concerted effort by employers to replace male workers by more flexible, docile and cheap labour as global competition increases. Standing (1989) argues that labour deregulation in the 1980s accompanying Structural Adjustment Policies and export-led industrialization in many countries of the South led not only to an increase in the proportion of women in the paid labour force but also to the feminization of what had hitherto been considered male occupations. According to Standing (1989) the growing incorporation of women into the paid labour force has more to do with a desire to have a more disposable or flexible labour force with lower fixed costs than with improvements in for instance legislation or women's educational levels.

Whichever the reasons for the feminization of the EPZ workforce, this massive entry of women into paid employment in the export-oriented manufacturing sector of developing countries as a whole and the global garment sector in particular has received much attention as to what impact it has had upon those women. The extent to which they have benefited from such employment is by no means a new debate (see e.g. Nisonoff, 1997). However, this debate is justified as a result of the intensification of global competition in this sector. Before moving on to assess the linkages between women working in this sector and empowerment, it is important to explain what this concept refers to in general and how it will be used in the context of this study. These points are examined in the next section.

2.2 Use of the concept of empowerment in this thesis

Empowerment as a concept became popular in the 1990s in the field of social development (DFID, 2000; Oakley, 2001) and is now widely accepted as a development goal. As most concepts in the social sciences, there is no single, unified definition for this complex concept (Young, 1993; Oakley, 2001). For example it has been defined in terms of control over community resources (Korten, 1990) or related to the means required to escape poverty (Schneider, 1999).

It is worthwhile to note that, while it has been closely linked with the conditions of women in society (Rowlands, 1997) it is by no means limited to this social group. Rather, it is a mechanism through which all social groups which have some vulnerability aspire to an improvement of their conditions. A review of some of the literature on empowerment shows that it has instead cut across or been applied to all groups who face some (often interrelated) form of social/cultural, economic or political discrimination or inequality in society – from whole communities in famine or poverty related situations (see e.g. Strachan and Peters, 1997) to more specific groups, for instance the landless (Whiteside, 1999). It is also clear that it is a multidimensional concept. For example, Oakley (2001) notes 6 dimensions (psychological, social, organizational, cultural, economic and political) as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: THE DIMENSIONS OF EMPOWERMENT

PSYCHOLOGICAL

- Self image and identity
- Creating space
- Acquiring knowledge

SOCIAL

- Leadership in Community Action
- Action for Rights
- Social Inclusion
- Literacy

CULTURAL

- Redefining Gender Rules and Norms
- Recreating Cultural Practices

ECONOMIC

- Attaining Income Security
- Ownership of Productive Assets
- Entrepreneurial Skills

POLITICAL

- Participation in Local Institutions
- Negotiating Political Power
- Accessing Political Power

ORGANISATIONAL

- Collective Identity
- Establishing Representative
- Organisation
- Organisational Leadership

Source: Oakley (2001: 23)

The most basic element underlying the concept of empowerment is the notion of an unequal distribution of power (See Oakley 2001). However, as Oakley (2001) notes, there are contrasting interpretations of the meaning of power itself. In particular, with reference to a development context, he highlights two interpretations of power:

1. 'Power in the sense of bringing about **radical change** and the confrontation between the powerful and the powerless as the crucial dynamic of social change. This interpretation argues that it is only a focus on change to existing patterns of power and its use that any meaningful change can be brought about' *and*

2. 'Power in the sense of increased awareness and the development of 'critical faculty' among the marginalized and the oppressed. This is power **'to do', 'to be able'** and of feeling **more capable** and **in control** of situations. It concerns recognizing the capacities of such groups to take action and to play an active role in development initiatives. It also implies the breaking down of decades of passive acceptance and of strengthening the abilities of marginalized groups to engage as legitimate development actors.' (Oakley, 2001: 14, emphasis in original).

While both interpretations of power by Oakley (2001) have important elements of truth, the less radical, more realistic and pragmatic dimensions of the latter interpretation are more applicable to the condition of women in society.

With specific reference to gender, the issue of women's empowerment has partly emerged as a critique of the inherent bias in 'Women in Development' (WID) and 'Gender and Development' (GAD) approaches which favour top-down imposition of development schemes rather than encouraging a more participatory bottom-up development (see e.g. Batliwala, 1994). These development models were seen as having failed to contribute to an improvement in the status of women because they did not address the underlying structural factors that perpetuate women's exploitation and oppression (Sen and Grown, 1987). For instance, in the pioneering works of scholars such as Sen and Grown (1987) or Moser (1994), empowerment was used to reflect a concern (particularly among feminists of the South) that women would never develop unless they they could become sufficiently empowered to challenge patriarchy and global inequality.

The aim of women's empowerment then becomes the elimination of gender based practices and norms that are discriminatory and oppressive to women and to change the structures and institutions that perpetuate and reinforce women's subordination (Moser, 1993; Batliwala, 1994). Moser (1993: 74-5) argues that empowerment is best defined as 'the ability to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change through the ability to gain control over crucial material and non-material resources'. Rowlands (1997) argues that empowerment goes beyond participation in decision-making and suggests that '... (empowerment) must also include the

processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions’(Rowlands 1997: 14).

Batliwala defines empowerment as the ‘process of challenging relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power’ (1994: 130) requiring political action and collective assault on cultural as well as national and community power structures that oppress women. Somewhat similarly, in the works of Kabeer (1994; 1999) much emphasis is laid on the centrality of empowerment for achieving gender equality. While in her initial writings, Kabeer (1994: 229) emphasizes collective, grass-root participatory action – the power to work with others ‘to control resources, determine agendas and to make decisions’, she subsequently adds further stress on ‘enhancing the ability to exercise choice (associated with access and claims on resources, agency and achievements)’ (Kabeer 1999: 437).

Mosedale (2005) builds on these debates to suggest that the issue of empowerment should not be seen simply as enhancing choice but it is the need to go beyond choice and instead extend the limits of the possible for women. For her, women’s empowerment involves both ‘the process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do in situations where they have been restricted to men’ and ‘the process in which women redefine gender roles in ways which extend their possibilities for being and doing.’ (Mosedale 2005: 252)

It is important to note that the aims of this thesis are to look at a more humble subset of the above issues raised. Rather than looking at all the dimensions of empowerment and the different ways to achieve it, as indicated earlier, the focus of this thesis concerns how access to income, as one possible route to empowerment actually affects the ‘*power ‘to do’, ‘to be able’ and of feeling more capable and in control of situations*’ of women **within their households** as a result of EPZ employment. I draw from the interpretations of empowerment as offered by scholars such as Batliwala (1994), Kabeer (1994, 1999) and Mosedale (2005) outlined above to analyse how far work in the EPZ has enabled women to challenge gender relations, control resources, set their agendas and also redefine their gender roles in terms of extending their possibilities.

The scope will be limited to perceived or actual changes in gender dynamics *in the household* as a result of employment in the EPZ. Therefore, indicative of empowerment are subjective experiences of improved material conditions, as well as gender benefits such as more autonomy more active and equal say in decision making; improved distribution of domestic roles in the household as well as subjective feeling of having a better status as well as their ability to do things which were hitherto male domains (or make males do things which were hitherto their domains).

2.3 Assessing the linkages between female employment in EPZs and empowerment

A review of the literature on the benefits and drawbacks of paid employment in this sector bears some striking parallels to discussions of changes in women's conditions when women were first drawn into paid employment in the Industrial Revolution. The impacts are mixed. One side of this debate has tended to lay emphasis on the 'liberating' forces of paid employment for women and mark an improvement in the reduction of gender inequalities. Access to income is argued to offer women some degree of economic independence and carry a number of beneficial effects including for instance improvement in their social status, a certain degree of autonomy and authority in decision-making within the household, among others. On the other hand, critiques have questioned the extent of this liberation. In particular, paid employment is seen as an additional burden to existing domestic responsibilities and the extent to which it translates into financial independence has been contested.

With respect to EPZ employment, certain accounts of women's interface with paid employment have acknowledged its potential in contributing substantially to improved overall gender equity by improving their economic standing and levels of independence within and outside their households thereby contributing to empowerment (see for instance Kabeer, 2003; Zohir and Yanus, 2000). Conversely, there are also many empirical findings which question and even discard the empowering effects of paid employment for women (see Elson and Pearson, 1997). The exploitative nature, conditions of work and declining labour standards performed by women in the context of globalisation and labour flexibilisation are used as counterclaims to the positive

impact of paid employment upon women. As neatly summed up by the ILO (2004), the improved representation of women in total employment globally has yet to result in real socio-economic empowerment of women, an equitable distribution of household responsibilities, equal pay for work of equal value and gender balance across all occupations.

The situation of women in export-oriented employment is often defended with the argument that they would not be better off anywhere else. The EPZ sector is argued to represent a vital source of income and livelihoods in a number of developing countries. For instance, in certain studies conducted in countries such as Bangladesh, South Africa and Vietnam, the average earnings in the garment and textile industries were found to be well above the poverty line (see Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004; Nguyen et al, 2003). For many women workers, this sector represents an attractive alternative to engaging in other activities such as agricultural work, although as many writers have suggested this could equally be indicative of the poor conditions of employment in those traditional areas rather than of the better working conditions in EPZs (See for instance, Razavi 1999).

One supporter of the thesis, often cited in the literature, that such employment carries benefits for *third world* women (albeit in a limited way), is Lim (1985, 1990). Lim (1985) examines data from 30 developing countries regarding the terms of employment of women in multinationals and argues that women's employment in multinationals is generally an improvement on local employment opportunities and provides a limited escape from domestic exploitation. According to Lim (1985) employment in MNEs has tended to improve women's working and living conditions and has expanded their opportunities and horizons. It also gives their family more opportunities for upward mobility. A broadly similar point is raised by Wolf (1992) who argues that factory work in Java was giving young women the tools with which to “hack and whittle away at parental and patriarchal controls over their lives, at least for a certain period, with longer-term implications such as deciding when and whom to marry” (1992: 254). However, Lim (1985) also argues that employment in MNEs for women may weaken but does not succeed in destroying patriarchal structures. While it increases women's independence, power and status with the family and society, it does not liberate them from their reproductive role which remains fundamentally tied to women.

In a follow-up work, Lim (1990) also contests a stereotypical view of female workers in third world export factories as promulgated by advocates of NIDL thesis and in the feminist literature (e.g. Elson and Pearson, 1981), that the women employed in EPZs are mainly young, single, female rural-urban migrants who are exploited in harsh factory environments or that they face constant discrimination or harassment from employers and supervisors at work and that they face the multiple oppression from patriarchal, capitalist and imperialist interests. While Lim (1990) does not deny that this may hold true in some cases, she is nonetheless critical of these stereotypical notions by looking at the varied and complex reality of women's employment in EPZs across countries, time and industrial activity. According to Lim (1990), the vision of multinational greed and exploited young women served ideological stances of Marxists, feminists, and trade unionists. Lim (1990) concludes that beyond the obvious economic benefits of employment in export factories, especially those owned by multinationals where wages and working conditions are allegedly better, women in such countries often reap other benefits which justify why they work and appreciate whilst not necessarily enjoying their work in these factories. These include the ability to earn independent income and spend it on desired consumer purchases or save for marriage or further education; the ability to help support their families and 'repay' their debts to parents; the opportunity to delay marriage and childbearing and to exercise personal choice of a marriage partner; the opportunity to enjoy some personal freedom and the companionship of other women and to experience more of what life has to offer, such as a widening of horizons.

Likewise Rosa's (1994) overview of women workers in free trade zones shows how in spite of the precarious, exploitive and patriarchal nature of this form of employment, it could be empowering for women workers. Cooperation and different forms of solidarity – of gender, class and community – are often generated in the workplace which then becomes a site of contestation rather than merely a site of exploitation.

However, as mentioned earlier, the linkages between economic empowerment and gender equality in the household as a result of employment and earning income are by no means straightforward (Masika and Joeke, 1995). As such, increased access to employment and income for women does not readily translate into an improved status or bargaining power for

women. For instance, in her study of garment factory workers in Bangladesh, Kabeer (1995) argued that the availability of factory work had not altered some of the striking features of gender subordination in this context, such as women's dependence on male protection (even though it may have reduced their dependence on male *provision*). Nevertheless, women's ability to earn a wage (whether their wages disappeared into a common pool, were retained under their own management or handed over to or appropriated by household heads or other senior members) had made a difference in how women were perceived and treated, as well as in their feelings of self-worth.

To some writers, the extent of empowerment is dependent on the type of activity (Beneria and Roldan, 1987). Arguably, contractual, steady, regular well-paid work or occupations are most empowering for women while irregular, low or non-paid work is less empowering as tends to be the case for EPZ employment especially in a context of rife global competition. The allegedly exploitative nature, conditions of work and declining labour standards in EPZs in the context of globalisation and labour flexibilisation are used as counterclaims to the positive impact of paid employment upon women.

Elson and Pearson's (1981) classic work on women's incorporation into export-oriented manufacturing employment remain useful in explaining the continued gender inequalities which pervade this form of employment. Elson and Pearson (1981) distinguished three tendencies which characterize the link between factory work and the subordination of women. Factory work was here seen as either intensifying the existing forms of gender subordination, decomposing them or recomposing new forms of gender subordination. These perspectives, in spite of being fairly dated, may still be relevant in understanding the pervasive disadvantage which women face in the context of global factories.

In fact many criticisms of the potential export-oriented employment for women revolve around the very nature of this form of employment and more particularly the downward spiral in labour standards in this sector as a result of global competition. The quality of women's work in EPZs is well documented in empirical studies across the world (e.g. Asia Monitor Resource Centre, 1998). Perhaps with the exceptions of certain large Multinational groups which are allegedly

image-conscious and impose or demand certain labour standards from their suppliers and exercise more corporate social responsibility and which therefore may have better conditions of employment, EPZs have acquired much notoriety for the generally harsh working conditions often referred in the globalisation literature as ‘sweatshop’ conditions which typify a purely profit-motivated business. After all, as explained earlier, they have generally been characterized as an essentially exploitive form of employment with minimal concern for employee welfare (Hale and Wills, 2005). As Mayo (2005) notes women have been identified among the most exploited labour of the sweatshops of the global factories, prime victims of the processes of capitalist globalisation and they are also the least protected against its ill-effects.

Several studies have described the suppression of rights to collective bargaining and bad labour-management relations which exist therein. In fact to encourage investors in local EPZs, many governments provide exemptions from normal labour legislations which meant that even countries with relatively good labour legislation did not have to implement this within the zones. In many countries, employers in EPZs are favoured by legislations which tend towards a flexibilisation of the workforce which for labour means little security of employment, no minimum wage insurance, limited protection against long working hours, not to mention anti-strike laws and pressures for a non-unionised labour force, although it needs to be pointed out that there are variations across countries (see Report of Clean Clothes Campaign, 2002).

Dicken (2007) describes similar processes as a ‘locational tournament’ where TNCs who are in a position of power vis-à-vis states, play off one state against another and go for countries where the conditions are most favourable to them while not necessarily so for labour. The repression of labour rights has often been part of the strategy to attract Multinational corporations. Mies (1986) has used the analogy between the state in developing countries as a ‘pimp’ in trying to prostitute their (female) labour force to attract foreign investors in EPZs and minimal labour standards have figured strongly as part of the incentives. The abundant supply of labour in zone-operating countries has the effect of keeping the wages low. Also given that EPZs compete largely on production costs and since labour costs are a significant element of those costs, employers tend to see labour as a cost to be contained rather than a resource to be developed.

The literature on the interface between gender and export-led industrialization abounds with cases pointing to its negative impact upon women within their households. Razavi (1999: 657) for instance cites in-depth anthropological studies such as carried out in the 1970s and 1980s by Greenhalgh (1985), Kung (1983) and Salaff (1990) in East Asian societies which suggest that “family and kinship systems marked by strong gender and age hierarchies and emphasis on intergenerational obligations were producing a perverse “dutiful daughters” syndrome, whereby parents took their daughters out of school early and pushed them into the labour market, while they channeled their daughters’ earnings into the education of their sons”. However Razavi (1999) also asserts that more recent studies have questioned the rigid and static patriarchal set-up of East Asian society and the notion of filial piety arguing that with time this is changing. Razavi (1999) for instance cites the work of Lee (1995) who argues that young migrant factory women workers take the initiative to enter factories often with individualistic objectives in mind.

The intensification of globalisation processes described earlier have further accentuated the difficulties of working in this sector and led to what is referred commonly in the globalisation literature as ‘a race to the bottom’ in labour standards (George, 1999). As noted by Cagatay (2001), the disproportionate presence of women in export-oriented manufacturing implies that policies such as trade liberalisation can have gender-specific effects. Besides the already poor pay and working conditions, employment in export production in a context of trade liberalization and rife global competition among low-cost producers, is characterized by high job insecurity following high capital mobility and easy relocation of labour intensive segments of production by foreign enterprises. Through the relocation of production, labour costs are kept low and poor women in one country end up competing against poor women in other developing countries in a ‘race to the bottom’ in wages. Examples of this happening abound across the world.

Razavi et al (2004) have also raised and studied the interesting question of whether the feminization of this employment sector has been accompanied with social policies designed to improve the conditions of women in society. However, in a nutshell their conclusions indicate that as a result of pressures for labour market flexibility and fiscal restraint in order to face pressures of globalization, women’s strong presence in the economy has not translated into a meaningful access to welfare. Building on a range of zone operating countries, they find that ‘a

combination of factors – the powerful ways in which gender inequalities is constantly embedded in labour markets as well as the global and local pressures for welfare retrenchment – have denied women industrial workers the opportunity to obtain welfare entitlements through the labour route.’ (Razavi et al, 2004: 25)

The burden on women is even worse in a context where women are known to suffer disproportionately from austerity measures associated with Structural Adjustment Policies as public services are cut and they are forced to care for sick, disabled and older relatives [see e.g. Afshar and Dennis, 1992; Beneria and Feldman, 1992) while having to work.

2.4 Summary

Briefly, this chapter has reviewed some of the main theoretical explanations for the predominance of women in export-oriented employment, introduced and explained the usage of the empowerment concept in this study and discussed the linkages between EPZ employment and empowerment. Among other things, a survey of available literature reveals that in the main, this is a controversial issue with country specific evidence providing arguments both for and against the beneficial impact of paid export-oriented employment for women. The next chapter will set the empirical background to the study by introducing the specific case of Mauritius.

**CHAPTER THREE:
THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MAURITIAN EPZ
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR FEMALE WORKERS**

3.0 Introduction

This chapter sets the empirical background to the study. It is made up of three main parts. It begins by providing a brief historical overview of the Island of Mauritius. It then outlines the development and significance of the EPZ therein, focusing more specifically on one of the main transformations which this sector led to: the mass entry of women into paid employment. The third part then unfolds to critically examine through a review of available evidence the extent to which this form of employment can be said to be empowering for local women, given the conditions of work in this sector and more particularly the impact of globalisation on employment and labour standards in this sector.

3.1 The Island of Mauritius³: a brief historical overview

The Island of Mauritius is a small island economy⁴ of 1865 sq km located in the South West of the Indian Ocean, 800 km east of Madagascar, with a population of about 1.2 million inhabitants. The strategic location of Mauritius on the common trade routes to India and South East Asia led to an attempt at settlement by the Dutch in 1710, although there is some evidence that the first Europeans to have found the island were the Portuguese (Toussaint, 1977). The Dutch were unsuccessful in settling in the island but their legacies were significant. Not only did they introduce sugarcane - from Java - which was to become a pillar of the economy, but they had also named it 'Mauritius' after Dutch Prince Maurice Van Nassau.

³ The Island of Mauritius is part of the Republic of Mauritius which also comprises the semi-autonomous Island of Rodrigues and other small island dependencies, Agalega and St Brandon. The focus on the Island of Mauritius is because the EPZ sector is located there.

⁴ A basic factsheet of the country is provided in the appendix.

In 1715, the French took possession of the island and kick-started its development. Some of the salient features of French occupation were the introduction of slaves to work the sugar cane fields and around this monocrop economy followed the infrastructural and social development of the country. During the Napoleonic wars, the island was also being used as a base by French corsairs to attack British vessels and this led the British to launch an attack and take over the island in 1810 (Moutou, 1996).

The British rule was for strategic purposes and was limited to administration. Although English language became the official administrative language, the French influence remained strong particularly because of the fact that the economy based on cane production was controlled by the Franco-Mauritian planters. However the British administration also brought about several important changes. One such change which had important ramifications for the social, cultural, political, economic and demographic configuration of the island was the abolition of slavery in 1835. The refusal of the newly franchised slaves to work the sugar cane fields for wages led to the mass introduction of indentured labourers from India which to writers such as Tinker (1974) was not much different to slavery. Between 1835 and 1900, the population tripled from about 100 000 to 300 000 (Addison and Hazareesingh, 1993).

Mauritius achieved its independence from British rule in 1968. By that time, several serious causes of concern were identified. It presented the characteristic traits of underdevelopment – rising population, high levels of poverty and unemployment and over-reliance on a single crop. In addition the multiethnic composition of the island was leading to racial strife.

However, over the next 3 decades, Mauritius underwent a spectacular transformation which has been lauded as an economic miracle (see e.g. Lamusse, 1985; Bowman, 1991; Anker et al, 2001). It has in effect evolved from a low-income, heavily agricultural economy mainly based on sugar cane cultivation with a per-capita income of about US \$ 700 to a diversified middle-income economy with a per capita income of about US \$ 7500 in 2009. There is a broad consensus that the export-oriented strategy which was promoted by the Mauritian Government as from the 1970s was a key element behind the success which has in many ways singled out Mauritius from the rest of Africa (Lall and Wignaraja, 1998; Durbarry, 2001).

3.2 The development of the EPZ sector

The promotion of an export-led development strategy was a rational response by the Mauritian Government to the findings of the Meade Report in 1961 who established that the only significant industry at the time ie the sugar industry could not provide enough jobs for a rapidly increasing population (Lamusse, 1995; Kothari and Nababsing, 1996). The outward-looking export-oriented and truly employment generating strategy started with the passing of the EPZ Act in 1970 by the Mauritian Government, followed by a number of policies to facilitate the expansion of exports, liberalise trade and prices and reduce exchange controls.

Right from the outset ie in the early 70s, the Mauritian EPZ sector has been dominated by the Textile and Clothing (TC) sector since over 80% of exports and 90% of employment in the EPZ were concentrated in this sector (Durbarry 2001). Over the course of 3 decades, the Mauritian TC has established itself as the most developed TC industry in Sub-Saharan Africa (EPZDA, 2002) and has arguably ‘compacted in this time period what the industry in Western Europe achieved over almost 200 years and the ‘tigers’ in Asia in almost 50 years’ (Gherzi Report 2000: 2). At the turn of the 21st century, Mauritius was the world’s second largest fully fashioned knitwear producer, the third largest exporter of new wool products and Europe’s fourth largest supplier of T-shirts (Tait, 2002). Table 2 below provides an indication of the evolution of the sector over the last 30 years.

This progress has been all the more remarkable given a number of inherent disadvantages which had the potential to sink the economy before it even took off. In addition to being a tiny island with no indigenous raw materials and relatively remote from major markets⁵, Mauritius was in fact, as mentioned earlier, being tipped as having all the ingredients for failure⁶ at the time of its independence from British colonial rule (See Mukonoweshuro, 1991; Subramanian, 2001;

⁵ Subramanian (2001) estimates that Mauritius is at least 25-30% more distant from world markets than the average African country.

⁶ In the early 70s, Mauritius displayed all the characteristics of underdevelopment and one of the findings of the Meade Report (1961) was that the country was heading straight into a classic Malthusian Trap. At the time, it was a monocrop economy with all the risks this entails (adverse climatic conditions, currency fluctuations, market access among others); poverty was widespread and was being further fuelled by a soaring populations and rocketing unemployment levels and a latent ethnic tension was prevailing.

Kearney, 1991). A whole gamut of internal and external factors and opportunities has worked in conjunction to attract Foreign Direct Investment in the Mauritian EPZ.

Table 2: Main Economic Indicators for the EPZ sector for selected years

	1970	1982	1991	1995	1997	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009
No of enterprises	10	92	586	481	480	512	522	506	501	441	412
New	-	-	52	25	26	37	24	23	24	18	43
Closures	-	-	34	38	27	20	20	23	19	55	35
Of which Total garment firms	-	-	-	-	-	-	286	272	263	170	160
Employment as at December	644	20742	90861	80466	83391	91374	87607	77623	66931	58066	58833
Of which garment Employment	-	-	80498	70141	77921	80118	77003	67251	54807	45032	41584
(Including expatriate labour)			-1150				-15688	-15392	-14419	-14979	-14705
Exports (fob Rs Mn)	-	966	12136	18267	23049	29131	33695	32059	29187	37840	35080
Valueadded (RsMn)	-	-	4406	7096	9086	11697	13681	13447	12103	15584	15945
Share in GDP (%)	-	-	12.2	11.7	12.1	12.3	11.6	9.8	7.4	7.5	6.8
Investment (Rs Mn)	-	-	648	815	1245	1755	1694	1614	2355	4301	2164
Machinery			-610	-805	-1200	-1635	-1380	-1506	-1680	2577	1088

Source: Central Statistics Office, Digest of Labour Statistics.

At the local level, the ready availability of a large pool of cheap and docile labour, and the favourable macroeconomic and policy environment have been major pull factors of foreign inward investment (Gibbon, 2000; Durbarry, 2001; Joomun, 2006). Equally important pull factors include the political stability provided by a democratic political system – particularly in comparison with mainland Africa - and the existence of a strong welfare state which promoted cohesion in a pluricultural society (Dommen and Dommen, 1999). Furthermore, the existence of historical and cultural ties with UK and France as well as with China are also widely acknowledged to have successfully worked in synergy both to attract investment as well as obtain preferential market access in Europe (Lim Fat, 1985). In conjunction with the above pull factors there has been a host of favourable external factors which have facilitated the development of the sector. These include in particular the preferential market access to the European Union under the Lome Convention (later the Cotonou Agreement) for African ACP countries and the Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA). These have played a major role in attracting investment in this sector mainly from South East Asian TC enterprises from Hong-Kong and Taiwan and which have gradually led to significant market penetration in European and US markets.

A defining phase in its development has been the period 1983 till the early 1990s which has in fact been referred to as *the EPZ crusade* (Durbarry, 2001) or the *clothing boom years* (Burn, 1996) for which Mauritius has been seen as a success story of export-oriented industrialization. Employment for the garment sub-sector alone first grew to a significant size within this period increasing from around 20 000 in 1981 to over 80 000 by 1991. Effectively, after a relatively modest start in the 1970s, the sector was rejuvenated in that time period with the implementation of structural adjustment policies as well as the setting up of a broad range of incentives offered by the Government to foreign investors (Kothari and Nababsing, 1996; Hureeram and Little, 2002). While as indicated in Table 2 above, the export-oriented garment sector in the 1990s were characterized by adaptation, resilience and growth both in terms of exports and employment in spite of the gradual liberalization of trade and the increasing competition from low-cost producers, at the turn of the century the sector was hard hit by major changes in the global garment sector, associated with the dismantling of the Multi-Fibre Agreement. These points will be explained in more detail later but before going any further, it is important to note that, similar to export-oriented garment manufacturing elsewhere, one of the most significant outcomes of this employment explosion has been that the labour market scenario was significantly altered as the emerging factories over this time period were absorbing a large pool of hitherto underutilized female labour (Kothari and Nababsing, 1996).

3.2.1 The feminization of EPZ employment

The country has experienced an increased percentage of women in its overall labour force from 25% in 1972 to 35.6% in 2009, with the representation in the EPZ sector hovering around the 70% mark until the 2006. By 2009, however this representation has decreased significantly to about 57% (CSO, 2010). This trend is reflected in Table 3 below which shows the evolution of EPZ employment by gender for selected years. The significant fall in the employment of women in the period post-2000 which I argue is mainly due to the dismantling of the MFA, will be examined in more detail later.

Table 3 : EPZ Sector employment by gender for selected years

	1983	1986	1988	1994	2000	2006	2009
Male	4360	18900	32150	23750	29697	26065	24759
Female	18900	44020	58430	59600	60985	40866	34124
Total	23260	62920	90580	83350	90682	66931	58883

Source: Central Statistics Office, Digest of Labour Statistics

Sociological research on the interface between Mauritian women and industrialization is relatively scarce. Kothari and Nababsing (1996: 152) observe that ‘an area of research which is obviously absent from the literature is the ways in which the process of industrialisation which utilizes almost exclusively female labour, has an impact on gender identities’ and that ‘there is also a need for further research into the impact of industrialization on women’s empowerment’. However, these gaps have remained largely unattended thus far except some general observations made by Bunwaree (2004; 2007). We will come to these points later.

Even the attempts at explaining the feminisation of this form of paid employment have mainly been in the form of broad interpretations rather than systematic research and have tended to pay attention to structural factors in driving women to the factories and have largely ignored the role of agency or women’s own motivations for seeking employment. For instance, the ‘Social Fabric Phase I’ Report argues that a combination of factors including poverty as well as increasing demand for women for the stereotypical notions attached to their gender (as explained in the previous chapter) explain the predominance of women in garment manufacturing (MRC, 1998).

Another factor which may have facilitated the entry of women in the EPZ is that it is not localized in one particular region but instead scattered around towns and villages reflecting a conscious policy of taking ‘work to the worker’, a deliberate strategy of dispersal and rural industrialization which started in 1983 (Burn, 1996; Bunwaree, 2004). In addition, except for foreign workers, in Mauritius, unlike many countries where women sleep in dormitories close to the factory, women in Mauritius commute to work on a daily basis and can therefore juggle their reproductive and productive roles.

It is also worth mentioning that the existing literature on gender and the EPZ in Mauritius has not adequately addressed the highly heterogeneous group which female employees in this sector consist of. There is a clear gap in fine-grained analysis of the implications which access to employment has for women, according to for instance their ethnicity, region, type of employer and management style (large, small, local, foreign – European, Asian) and even with respect to generation cohorts. On this latter point it is perhaps worth pointing out that there is evidence that the age profile of EPZ working women has been going up (Heeralall and Lau Thi Keng, 1993; Bunwaree, 2004) such that a significant number of female employees in the sector are the ‘young girls’ who initially joined the ranks of EPZ workforce (Hein, 1984). It is also worthwhile to note that although with time, the ethnic profile of the female workforce in the garment sector became somewhat representative of the ethnic distribution of Mauritian society, in its early days it was overrepresented by the Creoles (Bunwaree, 2004).

3.3 The intensification of Globalisation and EPZ employment

Before proceeding with looking at what social transformations employment in the EPZ has brought about for women, it is important to contextualize the EPZ particularly from the 1990s onwards where the impacts of globalization on the sector have been increasingly felt. As argued earlier, a discussion of the extent to which EPZ employment is empowering cannot ignore the impacts of processes of economic globalization on this sector.

Effectively, from the 1990s onwards, although exports of Mauritian garments kept a rising trend (as shown in Table 2 above), the rate of growth was declining due to both internal and external factors. In fact some of the past comparative advantages which had brought about its success mainly low wages and preferential market access were beginning to dwindle as a result of rising labour costs, ever-growing competition from low-cost and high volume producing countries in a context characterized by the gradual liberalization of trade.

As a review of literature on the Mauritian garment sector as from the mid 1990s reveals, a number of weaknesses had already been identified within the sector and it was already being

feared that with the gradual erosion of trade preferences, the country would be unable to compete with newly emerging low-cost producers. The heavy concentration of clothing and textiles in total EPZ exports, mainly T-shirts, shirts, pullovers and trousers, and the lack of product and market diversification have been increasing the vulnerability of export firms to external shocks. In addition, increasing labour costs coupled with low productivity levels and a lack of skilled workers are other factors which have affected the competitiveness of garment enterprises unfavourably (Lall and Wignaraja, 1998; Gibbon, 2000; Durbarry, 2001; EPZDA, 2002).

In fact, with a situation of full employment reached in the early 1990s, wages began to rise sharply and were higher than those of many emerging low-cost garment producers particularly in Asian countries (DPRU, 2001). At the same time, new low cost garment producers were emerging in countries such as Turkey, Tunisia, China, Vietnam, Taiwan and Bangladesh where the cost of production is significantly lower than in Mauritius. Moreover, suppliers have been increasingly looking for more flexible lead time, faster deliveries and more competitive products and prices.

The 'Common Country Assessment for Mauritius' report commissioned by the Office of the United Nations Country Representative in 2000, reports several developments which were also threatening the very basis of FDI arrivals in Mauritius. Increasing inflation and higher interest rates due to gradual financial liberalization were escalating the cost of capital and dampening the investment prospects in EPZ firms. Competition from low cost Asian, African and transition economies, which have liberalized their FDI regulations have also impeded FDI arrivals. Heavy bureaucratic procedures in issuing FDI permits as well as work and residence permits for expatriates were also reported to act as a disincentive. Furthermore, the threat of elimination of preferential access to EU and US markets with the expiry of Multi-Fibre Agreement in 2005 was already being felt to work as a deterrent for both forthcoming FDI and domestic investors.

An important strategy has been the resort to foreign labour in order to respond to the problems of low productivity and the shortage of skilled and flexible labour locally. From 1150 in 1991, the number of expatriate workers in the garment sector has gone up to 16 918 in 2002 before recording a slow decrease lately i.e. 14 000 in 2008 (CSO, 2009). The bulk of these workers

come mainly from China estimated at 63% followed by India 22% whilst recruitment agents are now increasingly operating in other countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (NESC, 2008).

Foreign workers are considered more productive, have no family or social ties at least locally and keener to work additional shifts as opposed to local employees generally (CASR, 2001). Also fixed contracts allow employers more flexibility to adjust staff levels to available market opportunities (Sacerdoti et al, 2005).

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to address the dimension of foreign workers in our debate on EPZ employment and empowerment. However it is interesting to note that according to some observers, the working conditions that foreign labour is subjected to, are oppressive. Although there is need for more research, an existing body of evidence seems to suggest that foreign workers are employed in appalling conditions in violation of their rights as workers and even of their basic human rights. Criticisms of the recruitment of foreign labour has tended to focus on the terms of employment, overexploitation and adverse conditions of work which the latter are subject to by unscrupulous agents in the recruitment process and some employers in the sector. For instance, the Report on Foreign Workers (2001) cited a number of problems which have been denounced by expatriate workers, namely illegal deductions made by employer for air ticket, payment of wages after three months, payment of wages through agent in China while workers being paid only food allowance and overtime in Mauritius, poor housing conditions without adequate amenities and security; workers losing everything in the event of closure, no adjustment as a result of fluctuations in the dollar rate, non-payment of the end of year bonus, the minimum guaranteed pay in the contract not being complied with; no freedom of movement; illtreatment and molesting, threats of repatriation, and the unwillingness of employers to provide air-tickets to workers wishing to return to their country of origin before the end of their contract among others.

Similarly the Clean Clothes Campaign Study (2002) elicited the lack of social protection of foreign workers in Mauritius. For instance cases where the wages stipulated in the contracts as well as other terms and conditions such as the number of overtime hours possible or living arrangements were actually not met have been condemned. Moreover the problems of foreign

workers are further exacerbated in the event of closures. As most workers took out loan to be able to come and work in Mauritius, they are dejected to have to return home with an additional financial burden. They had to wait to be transported home without earning anything in the meantime. The Clean Clothes Campaign study researchers even saw Chinese workers selling their personal belongings in order to get money to buy food. Foreign workers also do not take part in any union activities for fear of being deported and repatriated. Their conditions of work are stipulated in their contracts and their approval and signature of this contract de facto prevents them from renegotiating.

3.3.1 The dismantling of the MFA⁷ and its effects on employment

The phase-out of the MFA can be seen as the most significant addition to an understanding of the trajectory of the local garment sector given its considerable impact on employment in this sector. The most daunting effect of the dismantling of the MFA has been in terms of arbitrary dismissals on a massive scale. Looking at Table 2 above provides an overview of the evolution of the number of firms and employment in the TC sector over the last few years and is indicative of the significant decline in employment recorded in the sector. From 2000-2006 alone, over 26 000 local workers have lost their jobs in that sector. This is equivalent to the destruction of jobs corresponding to as high as one third of local jobs in the sector. However, with the on-going global financial crisis employment in this sector has been continuously on a downward trend as shown in Table 3 above.

While not limited to the closure and relocation of only the Hong-Kong employers since the number of closures also include smaller local firms which have difficulties in adapting to the requirements of the changing global context, it is widely acknowledged that the majority of the workers who have lost their jobs were from the former firms which were large employers (above 1000 workers).

⁷ Refer to Appendix for brief overview of the MFA and its significance.

3.3.1.1 The predominance of female workers among the retrenched workers

Gender disaggregated data specifically for the garment sector is not available but instead it is available for the EPZ as a whole. However as explained earlier, women's work in the EPZ, is predominantly in the garment sector as compared to men who are also employed in the non-garment manufacturing sector. Table 4 below, which captures the evolution of employment by gender in the EPZ sector as a whole over the period (2000-2009) reveals that women workers in the EPZ have tended to suffer disproportionately from job loss. While men's share of employment has fallen by about 12% from 2000-2005, women's share of employment has on its part fallen by 33%, nearly threefold that of men over the same period owing to their over-representativeness in manufacturing as a whole. In the aftermath of the MFA, from 2005 till presently including the recent worldwide recession which has adversely affected demand for garments in European markets, there have been further loss of employment, with some 10 000 male jobs lost as compared to some 15 000 for females.

Table 4: Employment in export-oriented garment sector 2000-2009 by gender

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2007	2009
Garment sector employment	90682	87607	87204	77623	68022	66931	45032	41584
Male	29,697	29,445	28,955	26,660	24,893	26,065	17,422	16,135
Female	60,985	58,162	58,249	50,963	43,129	40,866	26,610	25,449

Source: CSO

These massive lay-offs are also reflected in the unemployment rate which shows an upward trend. A slight improvement has been noted since 2005, with jobs being created in other booming sectors of the economy such as tourism and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO). It is also worth noting that according to official statistics from the CSO, as at June 2007, there were 51500 unemployed people comprised of 41% males and 59% females. Over the last 15 years female unemployment rates rose from 4.9% in 1990 to 16.5% in 2005, compared to 5.5% in 1990 and 5.8% in 2005 for their male counterparts (CSO, 2007).

In brief therefore, the combined effects of the dismantling of the MFA as well as the global economic slowdown of the last few years have had for effect to drastically reduce the labour force in this sector and women owing to their predominance in this sector have borne the brunt

of the dismissals. Against this background, in the next section we proceed by looking at the existing evidence on the debate as to whether EPZ employment can be said to be a tool of empowerment for women

3.4 Implications of EPZ work for Mauritian female workers

How has export-oriented employment improved their conditions and status at the level of the household is a central issue which this thesis attempts to address. Interpretations of women's encounter with capital in the Mauritian context are by no means clear-cut. The arguments for and against the empowering potential of this sector of employment for female labour can be said to mirror the arguments we saw in the previous chapter whereby the encounter of women with capital are mixed.

As explained earlier, one of the main criticisms against export-oriented employment concerns its exploitive nature and its relatively harsh environment and conditions of work whereby the extent to which they are conducive to empowerment has been open to question. The conditions of work in the Mauritian EPZ are arguably not an exception in this sense. For example, a survey on the 'Attitudes of the Unemployed towards accepting employment in the EPZ in Mauritius' with the objectives to establish the paradoxical preference for foreign labour in a context where local unemployment was on the increase, reported that the prevailing employment conditions in the EPZ, such as the lack of job security, low wages, monotonous and exhausting work often involving odd working hours and compulsory overtime of 10 hours weekly, as well as the limited opportunities for advancement all acted as deterrents for unemployed people to join this sector (CASR 2001).

A report by the Clean Clothes Campaign (2002) on working conditions in the Mauritian EPZ draws attention to complaints by workers about health problems due to dust, heat and the lack of appropriate ventilation. It is also reported that workers in some factories mentioned that they do not get time off for medical check-ups and at times medical certificates produced for sickness are not accepted by employers (Clean Clothes Campaign Report, 2002).

The emphasis on competitiveness, productivity and efficiency and the need to fulfill orders on tight schedules makes the EPZ a harsh and uncaring working environment where the employee, her family and social obligations are not of much concern to the employers and in terms of working-time arrangements and facilities at the workplace, the EPZ rates among the least ‘employee and family friendly’ employment sectors (CASR, 2002). The EPZ is one of the sectors where the reconciliation of work and domestic responsibilities are most problematic given the inflexibility of the employers (CASR, 2002).

Bunwaree’s (2004) case study of the Mauritian EPZ, which was part of a wider cross-country study looking at whether women’s presence in EPZs has been accompanied by improvements in social policy to support them, shows that although Mauritian women have access to certain welfare entitlements as a result of a relatively generous and inclusive welfare state, this has been ‘almost by default rather than design’ (Razavi and Pearson, 2004 : 25). The construction of the Mauritian welfare state which provides free and universal access to free healthcare, education and pensions has been designed for all citizens – and from which women certainly benefit – in order to ‘provide the country’s ‘social scaffolding’ which in turn underpinned its economic success’ (Bunwaree, 2004 : 18) rather than tailored for specific women’s concerns.

The terms of employment in the local EPZ are also heavily criticized and as we saw in the previous chapter, they are most often than not deliberately set at lower standards than in other economic sectors, in order to be attractive to investors in terms of costs as well as for giving them greater flexibility. For instance, in comparison to other sectors, the EPZ is the only industrial sector where workers are required to work compulsory overtime of 10 hours per week, in addition to the standard working week of 45 hours (CASR, 2005). Trade union officials interviewed in the context of a study on working time in Mauritius (CASR, 2005) allege that although EPZ workers should be informed of their need to work overtime at least 24 hours in advance, in practice very often they get to know about it on the same day.

In addition, although according to the National Pensions Act 1976, employers have to contribute 6% and employees 3% to a national pension scheme which is accumulated and earned by the

employees in the event of retirement - voluntary or forced - it is reported that in practice the contributions are not always made particularly in smaller firms (Bunwaree, 2004). This is particularly problematic when workers are laid off and have no financial safety net to fall back to.

It is also argued that with the increasing global competition in this sector, employers are not making any concessions to workers and this is leading to a situation whereby this sector is lagging behind other economic sectors in terms of workers' rights and conditions of work. Employers and their representatives are fundamentally against the demands of employees for improved wages and more social responsibility as they have a cost which would directly impinge on their competitiveness with the risk of driving them out of business. This point is encapsulated in the point of view of the Joint Economic Council which is a major tripartite forum where industrial issues are discussed in Mauritius, *'although it may be tempting to encourage social responsibility, one should not do anything to endanger the enterprise: We should not overburden the costs of the EPZ'* (quoted in L'express daily newspaper, March 19 2003)

Trade unionism although permitted in the EPZ is acknowledged to be far from effective and is indicative of the transcendent power of capital over labour. In Mauritius, the Industrial Relations Act of 1973 which regulates unionization and collective bargaining in all economic sectors makes it, as Burn (1996, p.65) states, 'virtually impossible to have a legal strike and difficult for unions to get recognition.' Furthermore, as Burn (1996) argues, although unions are permitted, the extent of unionization is low at about 10% which represents half of the national unionization rate.

It is widely acknowledged that women are less likely than men to engage in union activities for gender-related reasons. For instance, as Burn (1996, p 65) argues some of these reasons are because of 'their inability to come to meetings, reluctance to take leadership roles are ascribed to gender roles at home after paid working hours, deference to men's control over their movements outside the work and family setting and their socialization which favours docility and submission

to male authority and leadership.’ To these we can add intimidation from management and the fear of being harrassed or laid off.⁸

However, it is equally worth noting that the garment sector in the country is far from being a homogeneous sector and generalizations about working conditions may be misleading. This point is neatly captured in the following quote by Burn (1996: 64): ‘The workers in the EPZ face heterogeneous conditions given that factories vary in terms of size, age, location, nationality of owner/manager, product sectors, technology, organization of work, mode of payment and membership of industry associations. Surveys which are conducted at the workplace require the consent of the manager and it can be surmised that the factories with the poorest working conditions may refuse to accept being part of a survey. Case studies, press reports of particular factories and industrial incidents have coloured perceptions of the EPZ. They tend to present a more negative image of working conditions in the EPZ (...)’

Even claims that with increasing global competition, conditions of work are spiraling down may not stand up to scrutiny in the case of Mauritius, although this calls for an extensive research. My own factory visits and interviews with managers or human resource personnel of some factories (albeit again limited to those who have accepted to host me on their premises which can be a source of bias), as part of a preliminary stock-taking exercise (further details are provided in the next chapter) have made me revise my initially negative assumptions about prevailing conditions of work. Air-conditioned and colorful working spaces, music, plants, relative cleanliness in rest-rooms and eating-areas as well as allegedly sound management practices and effective communication and listening between management and shop-floor workers, all show that the workplace was nowhere close to sweatshop factories. As one factory manager argues, most of the leading firms are bound to maintain high standards as they seek ‘WRAP’ certification. WRAP (Worldwide Response for Apparel Production) lays emphasis on the respect for core labour standards which have become a key strategic element of buyers policy. Furthermore, European clients make regular site visits in order to ensure that the conditions of work and the standard of the products ordered conform to their high international standards. However, it needs to be borne in mind that these are by themselves not enough grounds to

⁸ Element of information obtained from interview with official from the Federation of Progressive Unions

challenge the notion of oppressive employers and working conditions, and that the firms visited may have as Burn (1996) argued, allowed visits just because they had nothing to hide.

Where it seems much clearer that women are disadvantaged is in terms of their double burden of having to combine their productive roles in the EPZ with their reproductive responsibilities within the household. As Burn (1996) argues, while men have assumed a productive role, men have generally not taken on reproductive roles. Empirical evidence of continued gender inequalities in the distribution of domestic roles in a way which is unfavourable to women has been found across the world, as explained in the previous chapter. In Mauritius, this issue has been backed by evidence from various surveys and is indicative of the resistance of the patriarchal set-up towards gender equality in the distribution of gender roles in the household. For example, the study on Work and the Family (CASR, 2002) illustrated the asymmetrical distribution of household chores and care responsibilities to the disadvantage of women even when they are full-time employees. Likewise an official report on the 'situational analysis of women and children in the Republic of Mauritius (MWRCDFW, 2003) states that women in full time employment have not reduced their housewife responsibilities but rather adapted and increased the range of tasks expected of them to encompass the roles of workers, housewives and mothers. According to the Time Use Survey (MWRCDFWCP/UNDP, 2005), mothers generally spend 4 to 5 times more time than fathers on household work and the average working mother spends 61 minutes while the average working father spends 27 minutes on care of household members.

There have been attempts at facilitating women's care responsibilities by having on-site nurseries or day-care facilities for infants as well as social and recreational facilities for employees of the sector (Bunwaree, 2004). Soft loans for labour saving devices such as hoovers and washing machines are also allegedly made available through the EPZ Labour Welfare Fund (EPZLWF). Nonetheless, the inequalities in the distribution of gender roles within the family remain largely unaffected. Some concerns have also been raised about the consequences for women's health and well-being that handling those multiple responsibilities have upon them (Burn, 1996). Also, while there has been a clear trend towards the nuclearisation of the family structure, it is widely

acknowledged that support networks mainly among female kin help at least partly in shouldering some caring responsibilities while women are at work (CASR, 2002).

Another issue associated with industrialization and gender which has not received adequate attention is the extent to which power relations between men and women in the domestic arena have been affected as a result of women entering employment. Some general observations have been made that traditional and conservative gender ideologies concerning the distribution of power and authority within the household have been challenged by the massive entry of women into the labour market although these have not been backed by adequate research. According to the 'Report on Social Fabric Phase 1' (MRC 1998) paid employment has arguably influenced social roles for women enabling working women to enjoy more financial autonomy and participate in decision making.

For married women, it can be safely assumed that it forms at least an important supplement to their husbands' salaries and help with meeting the needs of the family in a society which has espoused a culture of consumerism in a relatively short time period. However due to a lack of data, a number of issues pertaining to whether paid employment has led to their empowerment at the level of the household are yet to be answered in a satisfactory manner. Little is known for example of the ways in which the income is disposed of and what is the amount of say which women have in this disposal.

Likewise little is known about the extent to which working women can actually claim equality in agenda setting and decision making, not to mention which types of decisions. These questions are all the more complex in a multi-ethnic set-up like Mauritius where it can be argued that women from different ethnic backgrounds may as a result of differential norms and values experience paid employment in differential ways. For instance, although not studied, it would be interesting to see how paid employment has transformed if at all the gender relations between Muslim women and their husbands, as compared for instance with creole women and their husbands or women of other ethnic backgrounds for that matter.

Burn (1996) argues that there is some indication that young women's employment has weakened the influence of the family on attitudes and behaviour regarding dating and sexuality but she also asserts that this may well be a feature of the new generation and education than being a consequence of paid employment. Again looking at any such changes from the added dimension of ethnic background may bring different perspectives as to whether this weakening influence of the family cuts across all ethnic groups or is more predominant in some than others.

Whereas all these questions remain largely unanswered, it can nevertheless be assumed that access to employment has brought about at least some benefits for women. Irrespective of the 'glass ceiling, sticky floor' nature of EPZ employment; or of its working conditions which are far from being ideal, the centrality of the income earned in uplifting material living standards, its significance in the household economy and especially in children's welfare or at a more individual level in bringing about a touch of economic independence, personal freedom, recognition and self-worth, can simply not be neglected. Two small-scale studies which have attempted to examine the impacts of job loss on former EPZ workers as a result of the dismantling of the MFA have for instance noted the following. According to the AMFCE (2004: 8) (translated from French):

"...The majority (of female EPZ workers) came from families where men were working in the sugar industry or had precarious occupations. While adapting to relatively harsh working conditions typical of EPZs and contributing to the household income, they have been able to uplift their household out of poverty. This new lower middle class which was emerging towards the end of the 1980s became capable, along with the satisfaction of its basic needs, to conform increasingly with a western-style consumer society. These households, once poor, were able to purchase durable goods such as refrigerators, Hi-Fi systems and television sets. Many of them could also build a house in concrete." While the above study was not designed to look at the gender implications within the household or in wider society of women's predominant role in the economy, it is helpful in attracting our attention at least to the material contribution which access to income conferred to these female workers and their households".

In a somewhat similar way, Bunwaree (2007) argues that access to EPZ employment provided Mauritian women with wider opportunity structures and choices and an enhancement of their

capabilities and supports the thesis that women were empowered as a result of this form of employment. She also asserts that with the significant loss of jobs in this sector, laid off women were confronted with 'disempowering processes' (Bunwaree 2007: p175).

Taking the above arguments further, in a context where the costs of living are ever-increasing, and where even working women (in the EPZ as in other low-wage occupations) have been associated with observations of 'a feminization of poverty' (DCDM 2001; MWRCDFW 2003; Bunwaree 2004; Bunwaree, 2007) and where dual-earner families are a norm even among the middle-class in order to make both ends meet, one can argue that income is quintessential in protecting against poverty and enabling participation in normal social life for the individual as well as for her household. It becomes clear from this discussion that the loss of income can be accompanied by severe consequences for the individual and her household.

3.5 Summary

This chapter has briefly introduced Mauritius and outlined the development of the EPZ sector therein. In particular it has focused on the role and contribution of women in this sector. The issue of whether female employment in this specific sector has led to their empowerment is an area which has not been adequately explored. Available evidence seems to show that there have been some progress made in terms of some degree of financial independence, emancipation and more active participation in decision-making processes at the level of the household. However, there are also a number of factors at play including the nature of the sector and the conditions of work within as well as the impact of globalisation on this sector which seem to be at loggerheads with the empowering potential of this form of employment. The contribution of this thesis will be to delve into this debate by collecting primary data from women workers in this sector in order to identify first hand their experiences of this form of employment and how it has affected and is affecting their gender status, roles and authority within the domestic setting. The next chapter explains in more detail 'how' the research objectives which have been set are tackled.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

4. Introduction

In this chapter, the main methodological issues involved in this research are presented and discussed. The main aim of the enquiry was to assess the extent to which paid employment in the EPZ is conducive to the empowerment of women by bringing about improvements in terms of their economic situation as well as in terms of their gender role, gender identity and social status particularly within the household. As explained earlier, to assess the impact of EPZ employment on female workers and the extent to which it has led to their empowerment, I have attempted to find out about their first-hand experiences of such employment at the level of the workplace as well as at the level of household and at their individual level. Specific areas of research which have been the focus of the empirical study are (1) the conditions attached to their employment in the factories; (2) the extent to which they have achieved a better status and they experience an equitable distribution of power within the household and (3) the extent to which they have achieved economic independence and have control over their own earnings. An equally significant issue which I have investigated is the extent to which any gains made by women are maintained upon job loss, given the important shedding of female labour as the sector restructures to face the impact of globalization. This aspect of the research has focused on women who have already lost their jobs from the factories.

The primary research work, upon which the findings of this study are based, has therefore been actor-oriented and warranted the use of a qualitative approach. A range of in-depth techniques of data collection namely unstructured interviews (employers, Ministry of Labour Officials, Trade Union Officials); focus group discussions (actual shopfloor workers in EPZ factories) ; and semi-directive interviews (with laid-off workers). However, it is equally worth pointing out that in addition to the empirical collection of information, I have made extensive use of secondary data from a wide number of sources including academic publications, official statistics, reports from the Government as well as press articles.

The following sections present and discuss the methodological approach in more detail. The empirical research process including the specific research instruments used for data collection and the choice of research participants are explained in detail and justified. Considerations relating to the reliability and validity of findings and interpretations as well as ethical issues which emerged are also brought up.

4.1 Justification for the adoption of a qualitative approach to data collection

There are several reasons which justify the adoption of a qualitative approach for this study. At the practical level, in terms of the costs involved (finance, time and logistics involved) this approach, particularly at a small-scale level was undoubtedly more within my reach as a student than the adoption of a quantitative approach using a survey instrument. Moreover, as I subsequently found out, it would have been virtually impossible to convince the majority of factory managers to provide lists of their female employees for sampling procedures, let alone answer their questionnaires within their working hours. In fact, my mere presence as a researcher on the factory premises to find out about the attitudes and perceptions of employees of their conditions of work was categorically refused by several factory managers.

Most importantly, an interpretive approach translates my own theoretical assumptions about the nature of social reality. It is widely accepted that philosophical views of human behaviour and social reality influence both the type of data that social researchers collect and the methods they employ to collect the data. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to address what is perhaps the most important debate of the discipline of sociology, it is nonetheless worthwhile to briefly point out that social reality cannot be explained solely in terms of structural factors or forces which are external to the individual. Neither can it be explained solely in terms of social action arising from small-scale interactions or the internal meanings and motives of individuals.

In order to avoid these shortcomings, I favour a theoretical perspective whose ontological position while still essentially structural allows much more causal status to actors' meanings and definitions of situations. I draw on a Marxist-Feminist framework given the latter's

characteristic focus on the dual impact of capitalist and patriarchal relations in explaining gender inequalities. However, taking into account some of the criticisms which are often aimed at structural approaches in general and Marxist theories in particular, including their inclination for determinism and limited role for human agency as well as economic reductionism, I adopt a more nuanced approach which is somewhat close to the broad line of reasoning of the classic work of Willis⁹ (1977).

To understand attitudes, perceptions and behaviour of the female EPZ workers as well as the ‘process’ of empowerment, one cannot impose one’s own understanding of empowerment on individual workers but instead look at the way that *they* perceive their own situation. These perceptions are themselves not fixed but entangled in a process within which they are constantly changing and being redefined. By giving those women a voice, I thus attempt to move away from predefined and imposed categories of ‘empowerment’ to arrive at a more comprehensive and above all first-hand understanding of the encounter of women with both capital and patriarchy. In other words, rather than taking for granted the relationship between paid employment and women’s empowerment, I seek to understand the experience of paid employment and more particularly whether and to what extent it leads to empowerment, from the perspectives of women workers themselves.

At the same time, I also, somewhat simultaneously examine the way that the variety of meanings held by those women are moulded, influenced and constrained by wider structural factors. The whole gamut of factors associated with the liberalization of trade and global competition compounded with the prevailing patriarchal set-up of Mauritian society are the main structural forces which influence and affect any possible benefits to women who are involved in export-oriented employment.

Qualitative research offers a distinctive opportunity to develop analytical perspectives that speak directly to the practical circumstances and processes of everyday life while assessing the

⁹ Willis (1977) drew upon Marxist sociology and research techniques associated with symbolic interactionism in order to understand the processes and experiences of schooling from the perspective of the pupils rather than simply relying upon an abstract analysis of the linkages between the economic structure and the educational system. He thus developed a more holistic understanding of the relationship between the economy and education.

macroscopic perspectives within which they are located. The strategies used in this inquiry include these aspects. Data pertaining to the macro-sociological level was obtained from secondary sources by making extensive use of secondary data from a wide number of sources including academic publications, official statistics, reports from the Government as well as press articles. The empirical research used qualitative research instruments in order to collect rich and descriptive information in order to substantiate and complement available quantitative data. The information thus obtained can therefore purport to present both elements of reliability and validity for a more holistic picture of the realities facing the women in this study.

The enquiry itself was eclectic in the sense that there were a variety of research methods and a variety of research participants from a multiplicity of perspectives in order to achieve as holistic a picture of EPZ employment and its impact on the empowerment of women as possible. Guba and Lincoln's (1989) notions of 'maximum variation' and 'intensity' have a significant importance here. 'Maximum variation' aims to include a variety of research participants so as to provide the broadest base to achieve an understanding of the linkages between EPZ employment and the empowerment of its female employees. 'Intensity' aims to include participants who can exemplify and provide 'information-rich' cases. These points will be made clearer in the following description of the primary research process.

4.2 The Primary Data Collection Process

The empirical data collection was based on a range of research techniques which were implemented in three different phases : (a) a preliminary stage of unstructured interviews for stock-taking and designed to familiarise myself with the issues pertaining to working conditions within the sector as seen from key informants ; (b) a series of 5 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) of women currently employed in the EPZ to enquire about their experiences of empowerment as a result of employment in the sector ; (c) a semi directive interviews of 24 women who have lost their jobs in the EPZ, including 3 case studies. I personally administered all the interviews and moderated the FGDs.

4.2.1 Preliminary Research

As a first exercise from September 2004 to June 2006, I carried out a series of unstructured interviews with selected stakeholders including four trade union officials, three Labour inspectors from the Ministry of Labour, one Chinese interpreter and three officials who are in upper management positions in 3 EPZ firms. (Refer to Table 5 below)

Research Technique Employed	Composition/ Profile of Participants	Rationale for selection	Benefits
Unstructured Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 4 trade union officials ▪ 3 Labour inspectors from the Ministry of Labour. ▪ 1 chinese interpreter ▪ 1 representative of the Mauritius Employers Federation (MEF) ▪ 3 officials who are in upper management positions in 3 EPZ firms 	Diverse types of individuals representing the Government, the private sector and the employees, selected to obtain a broad range of experiences and view-points from within the EPZ sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consultative ▪ Up to date exposure to the variety of issues which concern the sector ▪ Formulation of new hypotheses that were used in the later aspects of the fieldwork ▪ Facilitation for the fieldwork

These key informants were selected on the basis of their professions by virtue of which they had a close familiarity with the issues facing the sector as a whole and its employees in particular. They were not only useful in terms of the experience that they shared but it was through some of them – trade union officials and the labour inspectors - that I was able to obtain some contact details of potential participants in the subsequent parts of the study.

In addition based on those contacts I had the opportunity to make on-site visits of some textile and garment factories for direct observation of the conditions of work in the factories. In fact, in

Mauritius, it is widely acknowledged that employers in the private sector in general and the manufacturing sector in particular, are quite uncooperative when it comes to participating in surveys and sharing data (See CASR, 2005).

One important benefit of this first stage was that it helped in taking stock of the main issues relating to female employment in this sector. The distinctive experience of female *foreign* labour in the textile and garment factories for instance was an area which I had previously not conceived of while initially planning this study. However with more insights from this preliminary stage, I found out that this element brought a useful dimension to the debate. In addition, given that those participants were representatives of the Government, the employers and the employees, this enabled me to take stock of the issues facing this sector in the context of globalisation from a holistic perspective.

This stage equally helped in formulating hypotheses and research questions which were then empirically used in the later aspects of the research work. The design of the various questions for the main fieldwork of the study was made possible and relevant with the background information and insights which this preliminary stage generated.

4.2.2 Focus Group Discussions with current female EPZ workers

The FGDs involved current female shop-floor employees in garment factories and were aimed to ascertain their experience of working in the factories and whether it is conducive to their empowerment. Krueger (1994: 6) defines a FGD as ‘a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment.’ Likewise, Litoselliti (2003: 2) explains that ‘Groups are focused in the sense that they involve some kind of collective activity around a small number of issues and are interactive in that the group forces and dynamics are of utmost significance.’

The practical and theoretical benefits of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) as an effective qualitative research instrument are well documented (Catterall and MacLaren 1997; Litoselliti

2003). In brief, FGDs capitalize on group dynamics and allow a small group of respondents to be guided by a skilled moderator into increasing levels of focus and depth on the key issues of the research topic. The interaction among the participants generally stimulates richer responses and allows new and valuable thoughts to emerge. The researcher can observe the discussion and gain first hand insights into the respondents' experiences, behaviour, attitudes, and meanings.

This research technique has equally had the benefit to allow me to immerse myself in the experiences of the factory working women and gain insights into a lengthy process whereby across their working lives they have been able to counterbalance both the progress that they have made and the disadvantages that they face as a result of having taken up paid employment in the EPZ.

The use of FGDs was also preferred as it provided a relatively inexpensive option which provided fairly dependable data within a short time frame and with minimal logistic support. FGDs can be completed more quickly and are generally less expensive than a series of in-depth interviews.

4.2.2.1 Themes for the FGDs

The themes/issues/questions which framed the Focus Group Discussions were informed from the initial research questions which this study addresses. Given the focus on the linkages between factory employment and empowerment, the main aim of the FGDs with women employed in the EPZ at the time of the study was to understand how the latter view their own working conditions; how far earning an income brings about economic independence; how their job impacts upon their gender roles and status more specifically within the private sphere. The following box provides an indication of the main themes and questions which guided the FGDs. It is important to note that in order to provide an environment conducive to open exchanges of opinions and experiences, all the questions and discussions were set in Creole/French, the local mothertongue.

Box 1: List of Themes and Questions for FGDs

Theme 1: Conditions of work at the factory

Q1. How do you perceive the following conditions of work in the EPZ sector relative to other employment sectors?

- Salary
- Work Environment
- Employee-Friendliness of the workplace (e.g. facilities, amenities, employer's social responsibility...)
- The right to resort to Collective Bargaining and its Effectiveness

Q2. Are conditions of work improving or deteriorating in the factories? What is the morale at work?

Theme 2: Work/Family Balance

Q3. How easy or difficult is it for you to reconcile work and family responsibilities?

(E.g. working hours, flexibility from employers in case of emergencies concerning close relatives)

Theme 3: Changes brought about by employment within the household

Q4. To what extent would you say that your job has entitled you to the following:

- Equality in household tasks
- Equality in childcare
- Equality in decision-making (Elaborate on which types of decisions)
- A sense of Personal Freedom
- Self-Development (Improvement in terms of self-confidence/self-respect/identity assertion)
- Friendship Networks
- An overall better quality of life

Theme 4: Disposal of Earning

Q5. Do you have an absolute control over your earnings?

Q6. In general how and on what do you spend the money that you earn? How does your husband spend his money?

Q7. How important is your income to the household economy?

Q8. Are your earnings adequate for what you would consider a satisfactory standard of living? (if relevant how else do you manage?)

Theme 5: Importance of the job

Q9. How important is this job to you? To what extent would it affect you if you were to lose your job?

4.2.2.2 Selection of FGD participants

Let us now turn to the selection of participants for the FGDs. As mentioned earlier the selection of participants for a study on the conditions of work in the EPZ is problematic given the tendency of employers to be generally reticent to cooperate.

The technique through which the critical mass for the FGD was obtained was akin to 'snowballing'. With the help of two trade union officials, contact details of 1 or 2 female workers from some 12 factories in the Port-Louis and Plaines Wilhems districts were obtained. I then personally contacted those workers from each of those factories, explained to them the nature and requirements of the study and asked them to contact other female co-workers who would be willing to participate.

Upon reaching a list of 60 potential participants in order to carry out 5 FGDs with an average target of 12 participants per FGD, I asked them for some basic details (age-group, ethnic background and average household income background of the participants) and the firm from which they are from. I did some research on the profile of each firm represented, pertaining to readily available information regarding its size (by employment) and length in operation.

Using this list as a departure point, I made up 5 groups of 12 participants. In order to have a nuanced picture, I attempted to capitalize on the principle of maximum variation to seek multiple viewpoints. As such, I grouped together participants coming from different household income backgrounds, in order to see whether responses vary according to income backgrounds. Likewise, I also grouped together respondents according to different ethnic groups, age-group as well as respondents from different firm sizes, and length of time in which the firm has been operating, respectively.

Certainly it would be oversimplistic to assume (and there is no pretention) that this arbitrary configuration will control for these variables in a scientific manner. This is not the purpose of qualitative research. Another admitted weakness of this approach is that there is considerable overlapping across the FGDs even when arbitrarily organized as for instance respondents from different household backgrounds can be from different ethnic groups and work at firms of different sizes.

Nonetheless, the intention has been to attempt to dig for any divergences of opinion which might arise as a result of those different profiles. If the FGDs were held without taking into account those differences, there would be a strong possibility of theoretical saturation after the first 2-3

FGDs. Ultimately however and as Chapters 5-7 show, the findings and analysis emanating from the various FGDs have been organized thematically to answer the research questions of this aspect of research and divergences according to the various variables mentioned above have been highlighted only where applicable.

It is equally important to note that out of the targeted 12 participants per FGD, there were some who did not turn up. In all, 5 different FGDs were effectively conducted with each FGD having between 6 and 9 participants excluding myself as the moderator/researcher.

4.2.2.3 Brief profile of FGD participants

The participants were shopfloor workers from 12 different garment factories of different sizes (by both employment and annual financial turnover) and which were all in the Port-Louis and Plaines Wilhems districts. They cooperated under condition that the name of their factory of work would not be mentioned nor their surnames used.

In terms of age, the majority of the participants were in the age group of 35-48 with a couple exceptions who were in their early twenties. The preponderance of those women in this comparatively upper age group arguably tallies with earlier research work on women in the factories. In fact, it is widely acknowledged that those women are a significant fraction of the mass of young women whose introduction to paid employment was being studied (see e.g. Hein, 1988; Burn, 1996) back in the early 80s when the EPZ industry was booming. By marital status which is a variable highly dependent on the age factor, the majority were married and with children. There were a few exceptions who were unmarried, divorced or widowed.

Moreover, the majority came from relatively modest income backgrounds with total monthly household income hardly above Rs 10 000¹⁰ – ZAR 2500 – of which their own wages was a substantial contribution. Also while the nuclear family is the norm in Mauritian society, there was a considerable number of respondents, almost half who stated that they also had at least one of their elderly in-laws to look after, both in terms of providing care and material support. To a

¹⁰ One Mauritian Rupee (Rs) is approximately equal to 0.25 South African Rand

certain extent this observation justifies the adherence of those women to their jobs even though they consider it very difficult.

There were a few exceptions however whereby a few women had their husbands or their children working in better-remunerated jobs either in the civil service or in the private sector. In the latter case, those women admittedly consider themselves as secondary earners and were working to top up the salary of their husbands at the end of the month. This latter minority group in the different FGDs explained that their job is more out of choice than out of necessity as opposed to the majority who were adamant that they needed that job.

In addition, the majority of the participants stated that they had relatively low educational achievement levels with a majority having stopped education by lower secondary level ie. before the 'O'/School Certificate Level. However it is interesting to note that a significant number of those women also had children, both sons and daughters who were completing their secondary and even post-secondary education with possibly better career scope.

4.2.2.4 Profile of the firms from which the participants have been selected

The firms selected all had the manufacture of textiles and garments for exports in common although they were quite heterogeneous in terms of their size, ownership, length of time in operation, management, etc... To a certain extent, this led to roughly similar responses which clearly indicate a pattern in the experiences of women of export-oriented employment. In fact, according to the Labour Laws, the general conditions of work in the EPZ sector are generally regulated by the EPZ Remuneration Order and Ministry of Labour Inspectors visit EPZ factories to verify whether the conditions stipulated are respected.

Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that there were certain disparities in the wages (mainly in terms of bonuses), the working environment and facilities available such as canteens, transport, leisure activities according to size and length in operation of some of those firms. There were also certain differences in terms of the approach of the supervisory and management staff of the

various firms especially in terms of employee-friendliness and the extent to which they were rigid in the events of lateness and unforeseen circumstances such as sickness of employees' close relatives which require sudden and unexpected absences.

4.2.2.5 Logistics

The FGDs were each held in a classroom over 5 consecutive Saturday afternoons at the New Eton College in Rose-Hill which is not far from the Rose-Hill bus station which operates a regular bus service over the period September to October 2008. I bore the costs of their transport and some light refreshments.

As mentioned earlier, the medium employed throughout was Creole, the national language. Most of the note-taking was done in Creole/French for sake of convenience and later transcribed and analysed in English.

I had a vital role of steering the discussions and keeping them on track. While the first two FGDs which were held lasted nearly 2hours and a half each, the subsequent ones lasted just about 1 hour and a half. The experience of moderating the group and the degree of structure and flexibility allowed led to doing these exercises in less time without compromising the quality of the data obtained.

Table 6
STAGE TWO : FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH FEMALE FACTORY WORKERS

Research Technique		Composition/ Profile of Participants	Rationale for selection	Benefits
Focus Discussions	Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 5 FGDs ▪ 6-9 participants per FGD ▪ Participants were all female shopfloor workers ▪ They shared similar characteristics to the general profile of female workers in this sector in terms of age, educational profile, and income background. 	<p>Use of the snowballing technique for access to names and details of participants</p> <p>Participants were selected from 12 different garment factories which varied in terms of size and financial turnover.</p> <p>Attempt was made to cover workers from different factories in order to avoid bias arising from specific conditions which could prevail in specific factories chosen.</p>	<p>Effective, fast and practical way of gathering information from a relatively large group of people.</p> <p>Given my presence as moderator, I was able to steer the discussions and seek elaboration on areas of particular interest to the study with empirical examples.</p>

4.2.3 Semi-Directive Interviews of laid-off female workers

The final phase of the research which took place over the period 2008-2009 involved conducting semi-directive interviews with women who have lost their jobs in the EPZ. As a significant number of workers are losing their jobs in this sector as a result of the impacts of globalization processes, as described in the previous chapter, it is important to assess what it implies for women of being hired and fired in the EPZ. This phase therefore took the form of a retrospective study of the experience of work in the EPZ and how it affected women's gender status and roles within the household. At the same time, as mentioned above, by looking at how job loss impacts upon them and their households, it enables one, at hindsight, to gauge its importance.

4.2.3.1 The semi-directive interview method

This type of interview places a significant amount of importance on the subject's freedom of expression. Rather than using a rigid questionnaire as in the case of the structured questionnaire interview, I have made use of an interview guide which consists mainly of a series of topics or themes requiring investigation in order to address the broader research questions identified in this study.

The questions were mainly organized to capture the significance of paid employment in garment factories for the women workers retrospectively and in turn to explore the changes which occurred as a result of the job loss. In particular I sought to explore and shed light on the disempowerment processes - in terms of the economic, social, psychological and other impacts - which are set in motion both for the individual herself and her household upon job loss. I also sought to understand whether any possible transformations which employment brought about from a gender perspective are maintained or lost. Furthermore I also sought to study whether any avenues exist to help those women to adapt to this situation or rejoin the workforce and whether they were effective.

As opposed to a completely unstructured interview which is more of a spontaneous conversation rather than a specific set of questions asked in a predetermined order, the semi-structured interview has been particularly helpful in collecting data from this social group. It combines a structured agenda with the option of asking more clarification as the interview progresses. For a social group which is already distressed with problems of unemployment and poverty, I was concerned with the need to collect the required information in a reasonable amount of time without being obtrusive. The questions were therefore already prepared but with ample potential for manoeuvre as the interview progressed.

The interviews were open-ended and assumed a conversational manner but were 'focused' in the sense that I was following a standard set of questions from the interview guide which I adhered to as closely as possible. I carefully worded the questions so that I appeared genuinely naïve about the topic in order to obtain rich and descriptive information. The flexibility and open-

ended nature of the questions asked gives the respondents the freedom to choose how they reply and in addition, as opposed to the directive interview the respondent has the ability to provide further explanations for the information she gives. In such interviews, the interviewer relies particularly on the ‘trigger’ (which is the initial question in order to get the respondent providing information on a specific issue or set of issues) and the ‘track’ (whereby the interviewer has the responsibility to request further explanations or to guide the respondent back to the subject when the latter strays) (see Mwanje 2001).

The respondents often responded in a way which was not relevant to some of the questions and my role was to steer them back to the main issues which were important. Considerable probing was also required in order to obtain further information about new insights which occasionally emerged. By and large, this enabled the collection of open-ended, emerging data from which I was able to feed and further develop the main themes under investigation.

4.2.3.2 Selection of participants

I initially intended to study a random sample of 50 women selected from official data for the years 2000 – 2006 available at the Ministry of Labour. However, this exercise was fraught with difficulties. This set of data was hard to obtain in the first place as it was classified as confidential. However when it was obtained through contacts established at the Ministry of Labour, I found out that it did not reflect accurately the addresses of those women. In fact they did not allow for changes in addresses as a result of marriage or relocation and also the provision of fake addresses in an area which is close to a factory for more scope of getting the job – a practice which is believed to have been quite popular in the past.

However through contacts with a member of a trade union organization who works closely with textile and garment factory workers, I was eventually able to establish contacts with some ex-workers from a few factories which had closed down in the period 2003-2006 and I managed to conduct 24 interviews. 3 of these interviews where the findings obtained were significantly uncommon have been the subject of case studies used for illustrative reasons.

Table 7
STAGE THREE : SEMI-DIRECTIVE INTERVIEWS WITH LAID-OFF EPZ FEMALE WORKERS

Research Technique	Composition/ Profile of Participants	Rationale for selection	Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi-directive interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24 female ex-EPZ workers • All from Factories in the Plaines-Wilhems and Port-Louis Districts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants were all female ex-shopfloor workers who have lost their jobs in the last 3-4 years as a result of the dismantling of the MFA. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rich source of information • Flexible and opportunity to ask for clarifications, cross-check and do further probing on the spot

4.2.3.3 Ethical considerations

A researcher has an obligation to respect the rights, needs, values and desires of the informants. However, in many ways, qualitative research is known to be obtrusive. The fact that this study dealt with women who were going through a difficult phase and who had no incentives to undergo an interview with frequent probing for personal and sensitive information from a male interviewer can be regarded as a clear example of this obtrusiveness.

Some of the informants particularly those whose contact details I obtained through the trade union officials and senior labour inspector were cooperative after I explained where I obtained their contact details from and introduced myself and the objectives of the study. For the others, gaining acceptance required more persuasion. I had to introduce myself as a distance student of the University of South Africa and explain the objectives of my study and left no doubt regarding my purely academic motives. I also explained the strictly confidential nature of the responses. I also wanted to inconvenience them the least and I therefore went to their places at the time and date that suited them.

The interviews took place at the respondents' places in order to minimize their inconveniences. They were conducted in creole which is the national language and lasted on average between 1 ½ to 2 hours. It is worthwhile to note that in the first couple of interviews I made use of a digital tape recorder in order to concentrate solely on the interview process. However, I noticed that the use of a digital voice recorder was intimidating the respondent and was affecting the interview process. Using the recorder without their knowledge was out of question as it would have been unethical. In the interest of the full interest and cooperation of the respondents and the quality of the data captured, I had to abandon the use of the recorder.

The responses were therefore carefully written down in creole in a field diary while the interview was under way. When the answers were too elaborate or when I needed to interrupt and ask for more precise details, the notes were taken in a condensed form and used as prompts for more detailed notes at a later stage during the day. A report/transcript was then translated in English and typewritten while the findings were still fresh in my memory. Careful consideration was given to ensure that the translated version did not distort the original meaning in creole. Given that I am equally conversant in English and Creole, this was a relatively straightforward job.

4.3 Reliability and Validity of Findings and Interpretations

The essentially qualitative methodology for the collection of primary data for this study certainly limits the extent to which this study is reliable. Data is said to be reliable if the same results (or broadly similar) can be gained by other researchers asking the same questions to the same (or broadly similar) people. By emphasising human agency and constantly changing meanings and motives, a topic such as empowerment which takes the form of a process - long and uneven as gathered from some of the accounts received - that depends on a variety of factors both at micro and macro-sociological levels, this study is more concerned with achieving a valid picture of the phenomenon rather than reliability. Nonetheless, this study has been conducted as objectively as possible by disallowing any personal biases to interfere in the data collection and interpretation process

Validity on the other hand, refers to the extent to which the findings and interpretations generated in the study match what occurs in reality. Several strategies have been employed in order to maximize validity in this study. At the outset, in all my interviews, I have built rapport, trust and openness and encouraged the respondents to express themselves in their own words and in the way that they see things.

The questions asked were in order to get a deeper understanding of participants' meanings rather than imposing my own ideas and concepts. As far as possible I have also prompted respondents to illustrate, expand and clarify their initial responses talking in detail as well as about specifics. Moreover, my interpretation of the data was frequently checked with the informant at the interview itself in order to clarify her meaning and ensure that I was interpreting the information in the way that the respondents expressed it.

The data collection and analyses phases were subjected to continuous questioning and reevaluation by myself. The use of multiple methods and multiple sources of information (the FGDs and unstructured interviews) has also helped in improving the validity of the data. Careful consideration has also been given to the translation of these words from Creole to English.

4.4 Summary

In sum, this chapter has explained the methodological approach used in carrying out the primary research work for this study. I have adopted a qualitative approach focusing mainly on female workers' own accounts of their experiences of whether and how paid employment in the factories have empowered them. I have made use of a mix of research techniques in order to get different but complementary sets of data which enable a more complete picture – FGDs with current female workers in the EPZ and semi-directive interviews with women who have recently lost their jobs from the EPZ. I have also made use of FGDs and unstructured interviews of other stakeholders in the sector in order to obtain a more holistic picture of the wider implications of globalization on the sector. The next chapter provides an overview of the preliminary findings which emerge from the application of this research methodology.

**CHAPTER FIVE:
WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE EPZ
AND THE QUESTION OF EMPOWERMENT**

5. Introduction

While the earlier chapters have set the background to the study and the methodology adopted, the forthcoming chapters of the thesis will consist of a critical analysis of the empirical data collected for the study. Chapters 5-7 will focus on the main findings of the FGDs. In this present chapter, I look more closely at the workers experiences and perceptions of working conditions at the workplace and assess the extent to which they consider those working conditions as conducive to their empowerment.

It is safe to assume that the better the conditions of employment, the greater the likelihood of empowerment. In certain ways, as explained in more detail below, the findings of the FGDs tend to corroborate some of the existing data (discussed in chapters two and three) on the demanding and harsh nature of working conditions within the factory premises as well as other conditions attached to their employment. At the same time however, a rather contradictory picture that emerges is that, apart from income and job security which are argued to be lagging behind and even regressing relative to other employment sectors, given the onslaught of globalization processes, a majority of participants have argued that their working conditions have been gradually improving over the years. Nonetheless, they still feel that there is much more which could be done to fully utilise the empowering potential of this form of employment. These points will be made clearer in the following where the key areas which make this form of employment hard are discussed thematically.

5.1 The work environment

As outlined in chapters 2 and 3, the literature and empirical evidence on EPZs has highlighted the notorious conditions within which EPZ employees usually work. When asked to discuss the

work environment within which the participants operated, it was found that they were relatively better than the ‘sweatshop conditions’ which are documented to characterise many EPZs around the world. The participants being mainly machine operators explained that their work was not physically harsh particularly with more sophisticated and computer-aided machinery. However, they argue that it is the repetitive and monotonous nature of the tasks, the treatment of workers at the factory and the terms and conditions of their employment which make the work so harsh. The main occupational hazards that the participants argued that they faced were noise pollution which many participants concurred often led to severe migraines at the end of their shifts. The following quotes from some FGD participants illustrate these points:

‘The work in the factory is hard when you consider things such as doing the same job all over again a thousand times, day in day out, all year long...It can get quite noisy as well...Supervisors can be on your back all the time but physically you can’t complain too much... I remember years ago some jobs we had to stand all day long but now everybody can sit...’ (*Simla*)

‘The environment is not bad but it is noisy and many of us are prone to headaches, everyday I need to use coconut oil in my hair as soon as I reach home to soothe my migraine.’ (*Lalita*)

‘I have been using panadol every day for the last 10—11 years, my husband is worried that I am addicted to that but I can’t help it, if I don’t take this I feel that the right side of my head will explode... I guess it is the noise from the machines.’ (*Malegi*)

‘There are some Bangladeshis who work at the same factory and they explain how in their country, their boss can lock them up and make them work until they can meet their orders, even their salary is miserable and those who dare open their mouths can get beaten up by thugs... even women are molested... some of the factories are more like big warehouses they say, and they have people watching over them...at least here it is not like that.’ (*Annick*)

‘Tell me of a job where people sit and earn money without efforts? If people were so unhappy with their jobs in the EPZ wouldn’t they have quit? Would they have sat there 10-15 years? Look at our brothers and sisters who are losing their jobs when factories are closing down? Why are they so distressed? They should be happy if their jobs were so hard. We Mauritians we tend to complain for the slightest effort. I say this is a job and you need to do it to raise your family’. (*Sangeeta*)

‘In my factory every 3-4 years there are new machines and from the first machines to these ones I have seen only improvements, they are simpler to use and especially they do not exert any pressure on my eyes, my neck and my back, earlier I literally had to bend and focus on where the machine was sewing, now it is so much simpler.’ (*Danwantee*)

Apart from that, there was a general opinion that the work environment had relatively improved over time. A similar argument was made by one trade union official at one of the interviews in the preliminary research conducted. Accordingly, in the late 1980s when the EPZ sector was booming, many factories were being set up very quickly with little attention to building norms and hygiene standards. The aims were to make do with the bare minimum with little consideration for the health and safety implications of the workers in order to minimise costs. This point is made clear in the following excerpt from the above-mentioned interview:

‘In the years 1987 towards the early 1990s, because of many factors, mainly the preferential market access for our textiles and clothing and the availability of cheap labour, setting-up factories was where the real money was for investors who had the capital. Now, you had all types of investors, some who had a longer term vision and those who simply wanted to make as much as possible as long as they could and then pull out when they have enough. Unfortunately, the majority, including both the South-East Asian investors and some big groups locally, were not concerned with their employees. It was all about maximum profits and minimum costs and meeting all the orders on time. They had everything their way. Government needed investment and investors were given fiscal, infrastructural and other incentives to operate... You could see factories mushrooming. Because at the time everything was so new to the country, many things such as building norms, health and safety standards, rights of workers, all these were totally neglected. But then again, investors had the advantage that if their workers did not want to work in these situations and circumstances, they could be easily replaced so workers had to abide and adapt. Thank God that it never happened, at least I am not aware, but do you realise what would have happened if ever, for example a fire had broken at a factory where there is no emergency exit or a protocol in these circumstances ?

It was much later that with the involvement of trade union leaders like myself, the guidance we get from the ILO and the Ministry of Labour that we have been able to put pressure on employers to improve the working environment and conditions of workers. Now, if you go to any factory you will see that there have been major improvements. Have you been to CMT, you could mistake it for a hotel ...’

Source : Extract from Interview with Leader of Federation of Progressive Unions

From a somewhat similar line of thought, some FGD participants have for instance, recalled that they used to work in one or two floors of a factory building which had only one door and one window on each floor. These openings were allegedly so in order for management to ensure that goods were not stolen. The downside was that workers often found themselves in densely packed factories in noisy and inadequately ventilated working spaces. As admitted by one of the participants, this could even have health implications:

‘It is true that in the past some workers used to sneak some goods out ... Some liked to take it for themselves, some liked to sell those off, some of my own friends have done that in the past, but they were taking the rejects... you know, t-shirts, ladies shirts, jeans, this is why to control hundreds of employees, the management was insisting on keeping only one door from which we could get in and out of the factory...Only a few small openings for air but those too were not enough...The result was that we were like in an oven and feeling very uncomfortable...Worse when one catches an infectious disease, everybody gets it... Once my friend got conjunctivitis and in the space of a week everybody got it... same for influenza.’ *(Bibi)*

However, over time, at least in terms of infrastructure things have allegedly improved. The participants of the FGDs argue that as far as the workplace environment is concerned nowadays, they have access to quite a few facilities which were until the 1990s rare among a majority of factories or at best substandard. Generally participants in the interviews subscribe to the following views articulated by some of the participants describing the improvements in infrastructure, amenities and working environment which have taken place over the years:

‘When I started working in 1986, it was a real misery to come to work in summer-time, as it was so hot and everybody was packed like in a can of sardines; at lunch time there were only 6 tables and benches for more than 80 people; we couldn’t bring food from home as it would turn bad and there was no fridge; there were rats in the canteen; there were only three toilets and they were frankly disgusting... there wasn’t even any arrangements for disposal of sanitary materials...Now, we can’t deny, things have improved; we have a proper canteen and adequate seating arrangements to eat, we can keep our food in a fridge and even warm it in a microwave, we can listen to music while working and it is much cleaner...the work is still tiring and stressful but at least the environment doesn’t wear us out ...’ *(Saheeba)*

‘In my factory, the manager does not mind us listening to the radio or bring music, while working. It does provide a nicer ambiance at work and we feel less stressed.’ *(Sonia)*

‘Earlier, the look of the factory itself was gloomy. Since the last few years, they have been improving the premises, the yard has been tarred properly, some gardeners work all the time and there are some nice flowers and palm-trees, at least for lunch time we can sit under the trees and chat a little bit and we get a proper break.’ *(Premila)*

‘At my factory, every 2-3 years they redo the whole paint, the canteen and eating areas have been made wider, there are more toilets and they are well cleaned and even the floor is mopped and cleaned throughout the day...’ *(Iswaree)*

Although this cannot be generalized without a full-scale study, from what comes out of the FGDs, there seems to be a direct link between factors such as the financial turnover, profit-margin of the factory, the length of operation of the factory and the quality of the working environment. The participants are of the view that the larger and more profitable the firm, the better the work environment tends to be. Corroborating this perception, the FGD participants from the larger firms confirmed that they had better amenities at work than what those participants from smaller firms had. As such, while all participants argued that they had access to basic facilities such as adequate toilet facilities, a canteen and space to have a meal, as well as staff cleaning the premises throughout the day, those from the larger firms stated that they generally had more and better facilities. These generally include several facilities such as public telephones for use during the break, regularly painted and well maintained workplace, efficient ventilation – in two factories certain floors even had air-conditioners, as well as music and storage facilities for food.

When asked what reasons they believe could explain this concern with the working environment, the majority of FGD participants seem to concur that with time, factories evolve into more modern settings and almost naturally improve the facilities which they offer.

Information from the interviews with key informants is useful here as it goes beyond these taken for granted assumptions which the FGD participants seem to hold. For instance, as one of the employers interviewed stated, they have a genuine concern for the employees and at the same time such improvements are associated with a rise in productivity level. In addition it was argued that some large ‘image-conscious’ international brand names which source their commodities from some large local factories demand relatively high standards to be met from the part of employers of which the respect of the rights of the employees. Regular visits are often made from the buyers in order to ensure that norms were being respected.

According to labour inspectors from the Ministry of Labour and Trade Union officials who have been interviewed prior to the FGDs, there are now more and more visits from Health and Safety inspectors at the workplace and this has contributed to a rise in the standard of the workplace environment. Any complaints from workers or their union representatives are allegedly followed

up efficiently. Likewise, the trade union officials interviewed argued that although the level of unionization is much lower in the EPZ sector, workers are nowadays more aware of their rights and this has led to the elimination of conditions of work which were deleterious to health. The EPZ Remuneration order also stipulates that employers have to make certain provisions for the employees. However, some of the participants of the FGDs raised the issue that some loopholes exist. For instance when asked about the provision of on-site nursery and breast-feeding facilities at the workplace which are mandatory according to the labour laws 1991, these services are either unheard of or are not made use of by the participants. In fact, from the discussions, it emerged that childcare is usually done by using a support network based around kinship. As one of the participants argues, *'with the kind of money that we receive at the factory, it is not possible to afford a crèche.'* Another participant argues that even if there were nursery or childcare facilities available on the factory premises, factory workers would not want to take their kids in such a noisy environment.

As the majority of the participants were middle-aged or older, it had been a long time since they gave birth to their children. However, some of the testimonies obtained point to the difficulties which some shopfloor workers have faced when it came to pregnancy and childbirth in a context where the employer is mainly concerned with productivity and profit. One participant for instance recalls that she was pregnant a few months after joining one factory and as soon as it became obvious that she was pregnant, her boss and supervisor became very unfriendly and even hostile towards her until she left. She later found out that it was a common practice among unscrupulous employers to avoid paying the mandatory three-month maternity leave. This issue is captured in the following testimony:

'My first job was at Bonair, they were paying a little bit better than elsewhere but they were very rigid and mean. I had just got married and my husband told me to work and earn some money rather than stay at home idle. I was soon pregnant and over the next 3-4 months I started to get some complications and I needed some treatment and asked for time off. I got it but since I came back I saw that my supervisor and manager had changed, they did not show any pity whatsoever, criticising me for every lateness or absence, I didn't get any further time off for appointments at the hospital...when there is overtime, I was forced to do it and one day when I argued they told me that if I can't work, I better come to the office and collect my salary pro-rata for what I had worked that month and they asked me to resign... I was so fed up that I left...Later I found out that I was not the only one, for many pregnant women this is what they do... Get rid of them so that they don't pay their maternity leave.' (Rizwana)

In another case, a worker who took a break for childbirth stated that she had been replaced and had to look for work in another factory as explained in her testimony below:

‘A few days before I was admitted to hospital for delivery, a manager came to see me and gave me a cheque and told me that they will have to replace me with someone else to do my work...I was on maternity leave since the last 8 weeks. After a month when I had got the baby and settled a little bit, I went to greet my friends at the factory and I was told that this person was working so well that the factory can’t ask her to leave therefore I would have to look for another job... I had already spent 3 years at the factory. I had to start again in another factory.’ (*Kalyani*)

However, at present, similar abuse from employers are allegedly rare, the reason being that Ministry officials do their routine checks and workers are more assertive in terms of their rights. Some workers also argued that if ever employers resort to unlawful means, they would not hesitate to contact the mass media to alert the authorities. Nonetheless, as the following section shows any improvements in the workplace environment are not necessarily accompanied by improvements in the **day-to-day** treatment of workers.

5.2 Day-to-day treatment of workers

5.2.1 Employer-Employee Relations

A point which was strongly made by a majority of participants across the various FGDs was that the treatment of the shopfloor workers was often seen by the latter as degrading. While in terms of the material conditions of work, some improvements have been made, on the other hand when it comes to treatment of workers by the employers, several complaints have been noted as mentioned in the following.

Some participants are for instance critical of the aesthetic improvements in terms of facilities and premises which are put at their disposal mainly to uplift the image of the factory while at the same time they are allegedly treated in ways which are allegedly arbitrary and disrespectful. For example, as noted by Florence below:

‘When labour inspectors come or when important clients come, they are surely impressed with how everything is clean and tidy and everything is working to perfection...but they can’t see what is not visible... How we are treated...The manager does not hesitate to yell at us in front of everyone... If you absent yourself, you are called at the office and you get told off...The supervisor is on your back all day long...’ (*Florence*)

In another factory for instance, the main factory entrance is closed exactly at the starting time of the shift and if a worker comes to work a few minutes late, they are severely scolded and asked to go back home. In turn this affects their presence-related bonus scheme as well as their monthly pay packet which is based on piece-rate. The other workers from this factory argue that it is simpler for them to stay home when they feel that they would not be able to reach work on time. They call the workplace and simply say that they are sick. While this could be interpreted as a legitimate albeit tough measure to ensure punctuality from the part of the employer, at the same time, it becomes a source of concern when the worker explains that the employer shows no flexibility for any problem such as sickness of family members or any emergency which needs to be dealt with by the employee which affects their punctuality.

Some FGD participants, mainly from the smaller firms have also articulated the view that they find it very hard to reconcile their work and family commitments. In many ways they argued that their employers lacked flexibility particularly in the events of occasions (weddings, funerals, sickness of family members or the need to deal with official matters such as payment of bills etc...).

Beyond what they are legally entitled in terms of leave arrangements, there is reportedly very little flexibility at work. For instance, as some participants explained in cases that they are called at their children’s school for formalities or when school closes earlier than expected, or even in cases where children fall sick during the day and they need to be picked up from school, they obtain permissions with difficulties. Some participants across the FGDs also argued that when they have utility bills to pay, although they may require only one hour off within their working hours, they need to take half a day or a full day off to meet their obligations to avoid being told off. The following quotes obtained from the various FGDs illustrate these points laying emphasis on the tension and fear of workers in being late or to be told off.

‘ Working on the morning shift and starting at 0730 am is not easy, I have to prepare the meals for the children, my husband and also for myself... I wake up at 0530 everyday and each minute matters...I need to be at the bus stop at 0710... we get transport from the factory but if you miss it you have to take your own transport...with the traffic, everyone else going to work, children going to school, you miss your transport you get to work after 0800 and when this happens it is simpler for me to report sick than to go and get severely scolded’ (*Saheeba*)

‘When you get told off, they don’t look at your age and that you are a woman, at home you don’t get told off like this... and often tears come to your eyes...’ (*Bibi*)

‘One day when I came late, my supervisor came to me and asked me to accompany him to the manager and he started to yell at me...He kept on and on making me understand that when one of us is late everybody on the section is affected...people who have worked the earlier shift may be called to do extra work...but I couldn’t say a word...I didn’t come late because I was negligent, I came late because it was music day and there was no school for my children and I had to wait for someone (family) to come and stay with them so that I could come to work...’ (*Sunita*)

‘The factory does not get involved in people’s personal problems,... there are people who make an abuse... some don’t turn up on Mondays or they ‘bridge’ when there are public holidays...but there are also genuine cases, like people can be sick, unexpected things can happen, even to pay our bills at the end of every month we need to rely on other people... the factory does not understand we have a household to care after...’ (*Roopmin*)

In another factory, workers were being severely told off when they were caught chatting during work time. In that same factory, the supervision of the workers was so strict that the length of time which an employee spends at the toilet (outside breaktime) is also monitored. These points are captured in the quotes below:

‘ You are in big trouble if you are caught chatting... it is common that we have things to tell our friends, sometimes something funny, sometimes our problems, you know...doing the same thing all over again all day long you need to have some distraction but we need to be wary that noone catches us, we can be called in the office...’(*Annick*)

‘ If you go to the toilet during your normal working hours, you are told why can’t you wait till you have your break ? As if you body works that way...’(*Sonia*)

‘Often you have a supervisor who goes round near the toilet to see if people are making an abuse of time in the toilet... and he doesn’t know who genuinely needs the toilet and who is just time-wasting...everybody gets asked to hurry up and you feel like you are being spied...you are stressed even when you go to the toilet...’ (*Florence*)

5.2.1.1 Size of Firm and treatment of workers

However, it is important to note that upon further probing, a somewhat similar pattern regarding evidence of a link between size of the firm and treatment of the workers could be found. Similar to the earlier argument about working environment and the facilities provided, workers from the smaller firms seem to be more critical of their working conditions and treatment than those from larger firms. It was also found that the larger firms had better recreational facilities and tended to organise frequent outings, sports, cultural and leisure activities which are highly desirable among employees.

This point is reflected in the words of one FGD participant who has had working experience from a smaller firm before moving to a large firm and who stated that:

‘I have listened to my sisters from other factories...I can relate to some of their complaints such as how we employees can hear ‘cozer couyon’ if we are late or if we are caught wasting time...But I must say that at TK - *firm where respondent is currently employed* - they will give you the same message : don’t do this next time ! but at least it will be in a more humane way and you yourself you will make sure that you will not repeat this mistake again...and once that they have made you a remark they won’t get back at you again ! There is also a staff welfare committee and we do events all year round and everyone even the managers come and join us for example outings, indoor games, or sports for the men, end of year festivities... not one event has been organised in the 6 years I worked at Sholay...’
(*Danwantee*)

From prior interviews with Mauritius Employers Federation (MEF)¹¹ officials, it was found that the larger the firm, the more professional and humane their approach towards their employees. For instance, an MEF official stated that the larger and more competitive firms are likely to employ the right people for the right posts at managerial level. Human resource managers and personnel who have the relevant training know how to manage human resources and deal with problems of staff and rigid selection criteria apply in the case of large firms when it comes to the recruitment of such cadres. On the other hand, it was mentioned that more stringent firms tend

¹¹ The MEF is the vital voice of all employers in Mauritius whom it represents officially, vis-à-vis the Government, on the one hand, and the trade union movement, on the other, and in countless forums and statutory boards and committees at the sectoral, national and international levels.

to recruit people with lesser qualifications and experiences for management roles who may not be efficient at managing human resources.

Another reason for this more humane way of treating staff in larger factories was that the larger the firms the more 'image-conscious' they were. In fact it was also argued that they often received the visits of inspectors from their suppliers from Europe or the US which demand high standards of not only manufacturing processes and commodities but also of treatment of workers. This issue was also raised by the trade union officials interviewed who argued that currently large suppliers only want to be associated with companies which subscribe to decent work practices.

5.2.2 Employee-employee relations in the EPZ

Over and above the dynamics between employers and employees, it is worthwhile to note that among employees themselves there are many conflicting interests which interestingly cut across all factories.

5.2.2.1 Malicious supervisors

One issue which cropped up when talking about the ways that workers were treated was the role of supervisors. In fact many participants in the study are highly critical of supervisors at the workplace. However, here it is important to note that this is not to be generalized as some respondents do acknowledge the important role of the supervisor in terms of the instructions and guidance they give, their strict adherence to deadlines and the responsibilities that they shoulder.

Supervisors in the factory are generally males. As their job title implies, they look after the proper and efficient running of specific operations. They are the link persons between management and the shop-floor workers. However, according to a majority of participants in the various FGDs this places them in a position of power which is often abused. The criticisms cast

against supervisors vary from being overzealous and being constantly on the back of workers to more serious cases of personal and even sexual harassment. In fact, the issue of sexual harassment seems quite a serious one noting from the arguments made by some of the respondents coming from at least four factories.

‘Some of the remarks and ways of behaving that supervisors have with us at the factory are very clear that they are flirting or that they have no respect for us. Even those of us who are married do not escape from remarks... Once my supervisor told me that you seem very tired today, what have you been doing all night long? Or things like are you wearing all this to turn me on? They have no manners or respect towards us as if they don’t have wives, mothers or daughters... They don’t care that we are married or not...’ (*Belinda*)

‘My section supervisor is married and has three children from what I hear but he has some vicious habits like staring and talking in an overfriendly manner, he has been very explicit about wanting to go out with at least 2 of my younger friends and has even bought a dress for one of them...the problem is some of the workers encourage this flirtatious behavior...’ (*Malegi*)

‘If you are young and you like to dress up, people think that you are easy and can make all kinds of comments at you... If it were anywhere else, I would have told him off, but I want to hold on to my job and so long as it does not go beyond comments and overfriendliness, I prefer not to take it seriously’ (*Annick*)

When asked why they are not reported, it seems that a culture of silence was predominant. The majority of respondents argue that when they hear remarks which are disrespectful they generally ignore it for fear of reprisals and further harassment from the supervisors. There was a particular fear that the supervisors could make their lives miserable in the factory. This is captured in the following quotes:

‘I personally know of a case of a woman who went to report our supervisor and ultimately it was her word against the latter and guess what... he stayed and she had to leave! He turned the whole case upside down and blamed the woman for not doing her job properly and argued that it is when he was on her case to apply herself more to her job that she used the sexual harassment card to get away and it all backfired at herself...’ (*Premila*)

‘It is better to be in his good books so as not to get any unnecessary trouble like having to work different shifts or moving us around the shopfloor on other duties which we are not keen on...’ (*Sheela*)

Further probing led to the general argument that women were also wary of their own reputation and ‘*what their family members, particularly their spouses would say*’. Comments on their bodies or on what they wear and flirtatious behaviour from male supervisors are according to some of the women things which can backfire at them. As one of the respondents testified:

‘Knowing how my husband is, if I tell him that my supervisor asks me personal questions on our married life and always makes comments about how I deserve better, I am sure that I will be the one who will be blamed and perhaps he can even ask me to change my work.’ (*Claudette*)

5.2.2.2 Conflict between fellow workers

Another argument which also emerged as part of the FGDs, was that amongst themselves, workers were not quite united in spite of their rather similar circumstances and treatment by supervisors, middle and senior management.

Many participants in the FGDs across all the different firms argued that there were many problems that usually crop up amidst workers which have as background such things as jealousy and personality clashes. These problems often lead to backbiting and as one respondent argues it can go as far as verbal or physical abuse and even resort to witchcraft. This is explained by Malegi below:

‘...you make friends but you can also make enemies... some take what you say about someone and repeat it and before you know you become the number one enemy of that person and her friends... you may have people who sit side by side and not speak a word for months... me, I think that is still okay but at times, it can turn even worse, between women I have seen fights not just insulting one another but even hitting and pulling hair... Some don’t believe it but people also do witchcraft... once I found cloves, lemons and black thread and a needle in my own bag on my return from the canteen... I had to go to a temple to have the priest do prayers for me...till today I don’t know who that was but I prefer to be on my guard...’ (*Malegi*)

As one of the key informants from the preliminary interviews noted, the fact that the sector mainly involves the recruitment of people with relatively low levels of education, as well as

people who come from a variety of regions and socio-economic backgrounds these types of things are bound to happen.

5.3 Job security

When asked about the extent to which they are aware of the changes which are affecting the EPZ, there seemed to be a very basic awareness of the situation. Participants showed some very basic awareness of concepts such as ‘globalisation’, ‘trade liberalisation’, ‘competition’ but generally it seemed that they were more concerned with their day to day working lives - and perhaps legitimately so - rather than took an interest in how these ‘distant’ phenomena had direct implications upon their working lives. Nonetheless, generally there was a strong perception that there was a **deterioration** of the situation and all the FGD participants expressed concern for their job security. For instance as argued by one of the respondents:

‘ These last few months we keep hearing that factories are closing down and some of the workers are thrown out without even knowing... in one case after celebrating the new year, on the 3rd of January when they went they saw that the factory was locked and forever closed... Of course we cannot be insensitive to these... We don’t work out of choice, of course we are scared.’ (*Sheela*)

The majority of workers argued that their job security was important if not crucial for their own or the livelihood of their household. The uncertainties which accompany the restructuring of the sector are therefore impacting upon them psychologically, socially and economically. For instance, some women have refrained from contracting anything on hire purchase for fear of losing their jobs and finding the goods being seized.

It is equally worthwhile to note that among the female workers who took part in the FGDs, there were a few who consider this job as secondary to their husbands’ and/or children’s salaries. While such women did argue that their job was not crucial for their survival, they did acknowledge that without this income, they would face serious financial difficulties as the costs of living were too high. These points are echoed in the following statements. This issue is further elaborated in Chapter Seven.

‘My husband and one of my sons work and earn but we have so many commitments and projects but if I don’t earn it will be very difficult...’ (*Medha*)

‘With time, it is hard to cope with only your husband salary maybe a few years ago it was easier but not anymore and I pray that nothing happens to this factory.’ (*Premila*)

Also it is noteworthy that when asked about their attitudes towards foreign labour in the EPZ, no xenophobic tendencies – common in some countries where local communities feel that foreign workers are taking what they consider to be their legitimate jobs – have been uncovered. On the other hand, some respondents have expressed concern about the exploitive conditions in which the latter often have to work, emphasizing on their insalubre and crammed dormitories and the number of hours they work. However, a minority of respondents have also articulated some concern about the need for the Government to regulate and employers to give priority to local employees rather than foreigners in a context where more and more local workers are losing their jobs in this sector.

5.4 Income in the EPZ

We now turn to perhaps the most important issue related to work in the EPZ at least from the workers’ perspective: that of their income. Across the board, there was a gross dissatisfaction regarding the wages received. All the participants claimed that they were underpaid given the number of hours that they work and the demanding nature of the job. The issue of how their income is used at the level of the household is elaborated in Chapter Seven. In the present section, the focus is on income as an element of terms and conditions of employment.

Given the different firms from which the participants were, there were some differences in wages and more particularly bonus schemes linked to such issues as presence, productivity as well as the end of year bonus. Again, there was a clear link between the size of the firm and the earnings of the workers - the larger the firm from which the respondents were from, generally the higher

the income earned. Nonetheless, all the workers unanimously complained that they were not adequately remunerated.

Many of them in the different FGDs argued that the issue of wages was becoming even more problematic given that the costs of living were constantly increasing while the wages of factory workers had not followed suit. As succinctly put by some of the participants,

‘Our salary in the factory has never been enough but we could manage as things were affordable...Now everything is so expensive and we just can’t cope.’ (*Sunita*)

‘I can barely save...half of it goes to Winners (supermarket for food)...when you pay the bills, the loans and the children’s tuition’s fees, what is left?’ (*Achama*)

‘The salary is very low, too low, but if I don’t work, we can’t make both ends meet ... every month you see that things are going up by Rs 10-15. I used to buy a can of watsonia at Rs 40 and we used to buy 4... our Friday meal...but now it is Rs 70-75 and we can only afford 2. Let’s not talk about milk...those who have have a lot...those who don’t have are getting poorer and poorer...’ (*Marie-Josee*)

On average, including payment for working overtime, the majority of respondents allege that their monthly income falls into the bracket of Rs 4000 to Rs 6000 (ZAR 1000 to ZAR 1500). The monthly prescribed rate has not been revised since the Export Enterprises Remuneration Order Regulations of 1987. However EPZ workers are eligible for a yearly compensation pegged to the level of inflation to make up for the rise in the cost of living.

When these income figures are compared with estimates of the most recent Household Budget Survey (CSO 2007) whereby the average monthly household income is about Rs 19000 and the ½ median monthly household income, which is regarded as the official relative poverty line, is Rs 9500, it is already clear that even while earning, those women and their households were in general struggling to make both ends meet.

The FGD participants asserted that people from other sectors of the economy were being compensated for the rise in the standard of living while in the EPZ, employers were continuously resisting any demands made by employees. As explained in chapter 3, the standpoint of

employers was that meeting demands of employees for increased wages would be passed on to the costs of production which would make them uncompetitive on the world market.

When asked whether they were concerned that any increase in income could impact on the competitiveness of the firm, it was interesting to note that the participants seemed convinced that this would not be the case. In fact there was a strong perception that they were being exploited. For instance, as observed by some participants:

‘the situation of the common workers has remained largely unchanged at the factory while the ‘patrons’ are making a fortune and on top of that they make the workers feel that the firm is struggling.’ (*Kovila*)

‘Employers are greedy and look after their own interests... as we say, ‘patrons’ are becoming ‘gros et gras’ (well-fed) while the majority of us ‘a pe deperi’ (getting thinner and thinner)... there is no justice’ (*Florence*)

In a similar line of thought, in another FGD, one participant argued that her employers were buying brand new cars every couple of years while their salaries are barely enough for them to make both ends meet, implying that the mass of the workers at the factory were not sharing any of the profits which were being made. Other participants in the same FGD and from other factories concurred with this point and argued that workers were always in the words of one participant ‘a payer les pots casses’¹². In short therefore, the main finding pertaining to income in the EPZ was that it was generally claimed to be insufficient to make both ends meet. This issue is taken up again in Chapter 7 which deals with the question of how far women are financially empowered as a result of EPZ employment.

5.5 Collective Bargaining

When asked about the role of trade unions in promoting the interests of workers, the wage issue in particular, but also workers rights in general, the findings in many ways concurred with existing evidence, as explained in chapter three, namely about the relatively low trade union

¹² French proverb which means that all is at the expense/detriment of the workers.

activity within the factories and also the relatively poor bargaining power of existing trade unions as compared to the employers.

Nearly half of the participants in the FGDs were affiliated to an employees union at their own factory which was itself in turn affiliated to a federation. However, in general it appears that the roles and functions of the respective unions of most of these factories are fairly limited.

Some of the participants for instance argued that beyond paying a monthly subscription of Rs 15, and attending an annual meeting where the executive members of the union are elected, there was little more that the union members saw tangibly happening in their interests and favour. For instance, this point is captured in the following quote:

‘The only thing that I acknowledge the union does is to look at the welfare events like the family day, the sports day and organize the outing at the end of the year...’ (*Sangeeta*)

Others argued that the leaders of trade union federations were more useful than the leaders of the factory unions as there was an undercurrent of suspicion that the latter were not strong enough to represent them vis-à-vis their employers. The majority of the participants showed their appreciation for the ‘attempts’ being made on their behalf by the former without which they feel that they would have been even worse off. As argued by one participant, leaders of federations are more independent and powerful and can voice out their opinions whereas those from individual factories tended to be concerned for their own posts than those of their colleagues. Nonetheless there is also an undercurrent of mistrust against some trade unions and in particular their leaders which are allegedly being used mainly as a platform for political interests or for the personal gains of the leaders and their close ones.

Another view that was articulated in the various FGDs was that there was little trust in collective bargaining and this made people more self-centred and individualistic at the workplace. As neatly coined by a respondent:

‘It is best not to expect anything apart from oneself. Chacun pour soi, Dieu pour tous - *French proverb: Each one for himself, God for all*’ (*Belinda*)

FGD participants concurred that they generally find it easier for men to do such activities than themselves as they have ‘so many other obligations’ to cite the words of one worker. Across the FGDs there was also an intimidation and also fear of reprisals for union activities. Also it emerged from the different FGDs that there was a feeling of fatalism about whether any improvements can be made.

‘Everyone can’t be Jane Ragoo - *a leading female Trade union leader* - ... You need to have a strong character to do this...Not be scared of anything... Be able to stand up and talk... How many of us can do that? And what if we are kicked out? They say trade unions can stand up...But who will feed my family if I get sent off? I can’t take that risk.’ (*Roopmin*)

‘I come here, I do my job and I go...There are rules...I know what I should do and what I should not do...What are my rights and what are not my rights...Fighting to get some more money is what they have been doing for years and years but we are still not getting more...It is futile to fight against employers... they decide everything...you can’t win, what’s the point?’ (*Achama*)

5.6 Overtime work

Another pertinent feature of employment in the EPZ is that of overtime work. As explained earlier, workers are subject to 10 hours compulsory overtime weekly as and when the need arises.

It is interesting to note that there has been a gradual shift in perception regarding overtime work in this sector. According to the FGD participants, until the early years of the millennium, when firms were seen as being submerged with orders, the fact that they had to work overtime every week was seen as leaving them little time for their families and this contributed to a feeling of being drained. One of the participants sarcastically argued that the money earned from working overtime was money which went towards medical support as working longer than their regular 8 hours sitting in front of a machine is bound to have an adverse effect on health. There was also mention from some of the participants that often there was an abuse made by the employers by

not respecting the prescribed delays in informing them about when to stay overtime so that they can make the relevant arrangements, particularly at the level of their households.

However, from the FGDs, there is a strong sense that the prevailing perception nowadays has been gradually tending towards overtime work is being missed for being the extra wages foregone and which would have improved the workers and their families standard of living. Thus, when asked about how useful any amount of money earned as a result of working overtime helps towards the monthly wages, some participants claimed that it was useful while stressing that it is becoming increasingly irregular.

5.6 Summary

In brief, as seen above, various factors at the level of the workplace itself lead one to interrogate the value of this sector as a stepping stone to empowerment. On the one hand, the evidence from the FGDs does indicate that in some ways the ‘sweatshop conditions’ which have often been attributed to EPZs around the world in the relevant literature do not seem to prevail locally. FGD participants generally acknowledge that the working environment has tended to improve.

On the other hand however, it is also clear that on many accounts factory work comprises several important shortcomings which indicate that rather than seeing paid employment in this sector as a vehicle towards well-being, improved material and social status and self-development for women, it is generally seen by the latter as a harsh, stressful and inflexible environment. In areas such as the income level and job security, there is a widespread consensus that EPZ workers are lagging behind in the current context as compared to other employment sectors. Likewise, it is clear that the treatment of workers at the workplace which in many ways impinge on their rights, the limited success of trade union activity in improving worker protection and remuneration as well as the general lack of employee-friendliness adversely affect any empowering effects which paid employment may have.

**CHAPTER SIX:
IMPACT OF FACTORY WORK ON
GENDER RELATIONS IN THE HOUSEHOLD**

6. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the impact which work in the EPZ factories has on women's status and gender relations at the level of the household. More particularly, the extent to which employment has brought about a more balanced distribution power and authority within the private sphere and how far this has enabled women to take more control over their own lives, set their agendas and extend their possibilities are investigated.

As explained earlier, some of the elements which should in principle characterize a trend towards the empowerment of female workers, would be in terms of a more symmetrical distribution of gender roles; equal participation in decision-making; more freedom, self-confidence and autonomy; as well as an improved status for a generally better quality of life. On such aspects, the findings of the FGDs point towards a rather complex picture which shows that in some ways there have been some steps towards empowerment while in other ways the situation of women have not changed much or worse they may be interpreted as a sign of deterioration. These points are elaborated further in the following.

6.1 The distribution of gender roles

6.1.1 Equality in domestic distribution of household tasks

Evidence from the FGDs suggests that with the entry of women in paid employment there has been some involvement of men in taking up at least some of the jobs which were hitherto typically female activities. Some of the tasks in which the majority of participants report that their husbands are involved with include cooking and some specific cleaning activities - Hoovering or sweeping the house and the outside yard, as well as some specific types of involvement with childcare. Some participants have also explained that they are receiving more

and more help from their husbands with buying the monthly food provisions and the weekly purchase of fresh products from the market. In some ways therefore, such domains which have traditionally been considered as female domains, have over one generation involved males (at least to a certain extent) as well. For instance, as recalled by one of the FGD participants:

‘When I was a child, it used to be: women have their own chores and men had theirs. If someone sees a man doing woman’s work, he becomes a laughing stock...Cooking or sweeping the house were seen as doing woman’s work and no man wanted to do that. Now many men have to help even if not cooking or washing clothes at least they have to help...stuff like cleaning, doing errands...in my generation women are no more housewives they also work!’ (*Claudette*)

When asked to reflect whether this transition has occurred without resistance, opinions diverged and further probing highlighted a more complex picture. It is interesting to note that only a minority of women argued that this took place naturally. To this minority, the help which they received from their husbands was explained in terms of the caring and understanding nature of the latter.

My husband has got very good feelings, he knows that I am not a slave and that there is so much I can do...There are many things that he didn’t know how to do...He didn’t know how to distinguish fresh from stale vegetables, he didn’t know how to make tea, he didn’t know how to give bath to the children, he didn’t know how to cook at all... But he made the effort and little by little he started to learn about all this so as to make our lives better... (*Santibye*)

Me and my husband do not give each other responsibilities, We are always doing whatever we can whole-heartedly...after all it is for ourselves and not for strangers...if I can do it, I do it and I don’t wait for him, he does the same thing... (*Medha*)

It is important to emphasise that across the FGDs this ‘whole-hearted participation’ has been noted only in very few cases. On the other hand, according to the majority of respondents across the various FGDs there was some resistance from the husbands to engage in such roles. Some of the participants even argue that they still have conjugal conflicts over the distribution of tasks. As Kovila for instance argues,

‘There can never be peace in the house when only one person handles all the chores... At the end of a working day, if I come back and I need to do everything by myself, I revolt.’ (*Kovila*)

Somewhat similarly some other participants have described episodes whereby they have had to set their feet down so as not to be exploited at home as shown in the following:

'Everytime my husband had to do something, he grumbled and was even verbally abusive...I went back to my mother's place with the children for a whole month...He changed his attitude and it has improved since...If I had not done that, I am sure I would have had to be toiling at both the factory and at home' (*Premila*)

'I told him that I cannot be bringing home money just like you and on top of that I need to do all the chores while he comes back home and does nothing and expects to have everything in a plate...He says he is tired but what are we machines?' (*Marie-Josee*)

Others argue that given the length of their working time and the demanding nature of the job, then if they do not receive any help, their husband and other household members would also be penalized. This point is captured in the argument made by Joyce:

'He (the husband) wants it or not, I have to be at the factory at 730 am and at times I come back at 1730. If he doesn't help, there is no way he or the children will have food on time...' (*Joyce*)

However, there is a need for caution in accepting this help at face value. Upon closer scrutiny, there was still some evidence of sexism which was latent in the distribution of domestic labour at least in some of the respondents' households. In effect, further probing about which tasks had remained essentially their responsibilities, it was found that some chores such as washing up the clothes and caring roles had remained essentially female domains. These issues are illustrated in the following quotes:

'There are some chores that men can handle and others they can't... Some many feel ashamed to wash up clothes or change nappies...But that's ok, so long as they help in whichever way they can so that we have the time to do other things they can't do... If we (women) are to do everything we would not survive long...' (*Jeewalee*)

'My husband helps out apart from washing the clothes, even putting the laundry in the washing machine he refuses...He says that he can do everything apart from that...' (*Kalyani*)

In fact this corroborates findings from a number of recent studies (e.g. CASR, 2003) which similarly indicates that in certain domestic tasks such as the above there has been little progress made in terms of male participation. At the same time when asked about the length of time which both men and women tended to allocate to the various domestic activities, the participants of the FGDs unanimously pointed out that they spent on average more time than their husbands on those activities.

Another issue which is worth mentioning is that some of the participants had purchased labour-saving devices mainly hoovers and washing machines. Although they argue that this significantly helps them, yet they generally receive little help from their husbands and male dependents in their use. As one participant explained with a hint of humour,

‘Upon my constant reproaches to him for being lousy and not doing enough, he found it easier to offer me all types of electrical appliances for every occasion (from Christmas to New Year, Mother’s Day, my birthday) every time I have been getting washing machine, blender, mixer, Hoover, etc... at first I thought so high of these gifts... I found it very thoughtful of him...but then my friends told me: don’t you see that he is killing two birds with one stone?’ (*Simla*)

6.1.2 Caring Responsibilities

One area which has yet to improve according to the participants of the FGDs relates to the distribution of caring responsibilities which is still considered to be mainly a female responsibility. According to the outstanding majority of women, the main responsibilities, not only for childcare but also for elders and for other dependents where applicable lie mainly with women.

All the participants who have children argue that it is their responsibility to wake up early and prepare the meals of their children and husband and send them off to school or work respectively. Some such as Medha below saw it as a natural role:

'My grandmother was doing it for my grandfather and her children
My mother did it for my father and her children
I have to do it for my husband and children
I have to prepare them for work and school...This is my duty.' (*Medha*)

In addition, it was found that in many cases women tend to wake up first in the morning and go to bed last at night taken up by their domestic caring duties. This is clear from the following testimonies which many have related to, across the different FGDs among all married women with children.

'Every day it is the same routine, I switch off the lights in the kitchen last in the evening and I switch them on first in the morning...I prepare their meals for lunch (children and husband), prepare the children's bags, check they have a breakfast before leaving and then I can concentrate on my own hectic schedule to catch my transport for work. My husband brings the bread, he also helps with some chores but I have to prepare the meals and this is what takes time...' (*Joyce*)

'It is only when everybody has slept that I have time to tidy up a little bit and then in the morning the same routine starts again. I have to wake up as from 5h30 and when I am sick or miss the alarm, the whole routine is messed up, my husband has to give children money to buy rotis at school and he also has to eat out and he blames me for making him spend money.' (*Kalawtee*)

From the FGDs, it was also found that there were various strategies and arrangements that women set up in order to ensure that they fulfill these roles. For instance, in some cases, the leftovers from the eve's dinner are used in bread for lunch at school and at work the next day. As one of the participants explained:

For my first child I was making fresh sandwiches and cooking fresh meals every morning, now as I have a second (child) and I also get scared to be late...I don't have any qualms about even making an omelette on the eve and then putting it in their bread the next day, same for other curries...How else would I manage? (*Sangeeta*)

Generally, there was a general agreement that the ultimate responsibility for childcare/sending them to school fell on women which further added to their multiple roles. It is also interesting to note that in many cases, husbands went to work earlier or around the same time as their factory-

working wives and this partly accounted for the responsibilities for preparing children for school to women. However, even in some cases where men started their working day later than their wives- for instance in the case of some self-employed husbands and those who worked afternoon shifts, women still shouldered the responsibility of preparing children for school, often considering it their natural duties for doing so.

In addition a common norm which operates in many Mauritian households further contributes to this excessive load of work attributed to women. Even when their children are old enough to be self-reliant, it was considered their motherly duties to tend to their needs such as preparing them for school. For instance, when asked whether with time and with their children growing up and becoming more independent, they found it easier to cope, many women stated that they prefer to do it themselves. For instance, one of the FGD participants asked in a very evocative way: ‘Is this not why we are called mothers?’ Given these circumstances, it seems clear that the ability to recuperate after a long day’s work therefore seems a remote prospect.

In some other cases, having ‘dependents’ such as elders, in-laws was helpful in terms of sharing responsibilities regarding mainly childcare and their preparation for work when they were in sound physical health to do these tasks. Many of the participants who lived with their elderly in-laws did claim that when their children were small they received some support from the latter in not only preparing them for school but also in dropping them or picking them up with it was a reasonable distance – usually the case in primary schooling years.

However, the older they get, elderly members of the household require care. Those FGD participants who lived with their in-laws considered it as their duty to care after the latter, mainly in terms of providing them with food, helping them with their toilet as well as other mundane needs and this further added to their daily workload. One interesting point which comes up, particularly among some Hindu and Muslim participants is that these were considered again as their ‘natural’ duties to do so. For instance, some arguments which came up often in the FGDs are that ‘men don’t know how to do those things...’ or ‘men can’t do it as well as we can’.

Perhaps one area where women may have made some progress is that caring after the husband is gradually changing. A small minority of the participants, mostly of Hindu and Muslim faith, some willingly, some unwillingly still claim that they are at the beck and call of their husbands doing such things as giving them their underwear and a towel every time they go to the bathroom; setting the table and giving them their food and taking the plate off them after dinner. Conversely, the majority argue that they do not indulge their husbands to such extremes.

‘For many years I had to give him everything in his hands...I even had to put his underwear and towel in the bathroom before he takes a shower...and then I realized that he was expecting far too much from me! I asked him to have mine ready as well as when he grumbled I seize the opportunity to tell him that from now on each one for himself’. (*Sangeeta*)

‘It is good to be romantic at times, but when you have kids calling you for everything, the patron on your back, all the other things to do in the house, you just have to say enough! My husband took time to understand that there are days when I can be nice and there are days when I am tired, he needs to pull his weight.’ (*Marie-Josee*)

6.2 Inequalities in decision making in the household

Another major issue which was brought up at the FGDs was whether there were inequalities in decision making at the level of the household. From the participants it was found that in general most of the ‘important decisions and duties’ such as, purchasing property, and other expensive transactions, moving houses as well as dealing with official issues (such as applications for loans from a bank, paying the income tax, children’s schooling, etc...) were generally the prerogatives of the male heads of households.

On the other hand, as if to compensate for their lack of influence over important decisions, the majority of decisions in the day to day running of the household seem to lay with women. Such issues as what will be cooked for dinner, domestic spending, children-related expenditures are allegedly the decisions which women usually have complete freedom to take.

From the discussions, it appears that in many cases this differential authority pattern is taken for granted. As exemplified in this viewpoint which comes up recurrently particularly among Hindu and Muslim women – at least from this socio-economic group - there is a tacit understanding that men decide for ‘official matters’ whereas women are better off taking care of the simpler things.

‘After all a husband is a husband, he is the head of the household and women can’t replace them...It is a sin to hurt them in their pride...There cannot be two captains aboard the same ship.’ (*Saheeba*)

However apart from rigid acceptance of such traditional patriarchal values, there are also some respondents who find this as a practical distribution of responsibilities. For instance, some participants describe their husbands as being ‘more educated’ or ‘more capable of finding their ways’ or still ‘ask for relevant advice to others’ through the often complex bureaucratic procedures which official matters involve. As one participant argues,

‘I prefer to let him do those things (handle official matters) as I am scared I do a mistake and then I have to face his taunts and grumbles.’ (*Danwantee*)

In many ways therefore, there are limits to how far the experience of employment outside the private sphere has enabled women to muster a certain degree of self-confidence, pro-activeness and assertiveness. Yet it is important to note that across the different FGDs, there is a minority that argues that they share a role in making such decisions and that they would not agree if they were left out of any such decisions:

'We both work hard, we both earn, we can't manage on one income, it is only fair that the decisions that affect both of us be taken together'. (*Belinda*)

'Soon after my wedding, I used to hand in my income and then I see that every Saturday he invites his side of the family and makes expenses... I told him what I thought about it and that I am not agreeable to spending money we could save instead... So since then we both contribute and decide how to spend it together.' (*Marie-Josee*)

'It is not right that both man and woman work, but only the man decides for both...Only those who are foolish capitulate, you are not doing anything wrong just claiming that you are also in the picture!' (*Kovila*)

When asked whether they feel that they have a control over their bodies and in particular over such issues as who decides about having babies or not, most of the participants required further clarifications. Similar patterns were found in each of the different FGDs and I understood that this issue was so much taken for granted that the sheer fact of asking this question was puzzling to them. It was nonetheless clear that they have little or no control over their bodies and about decisions of having children. It is also to be noted that the majority of women were past their child-bearing age. Still, it remains clear that in terms of power and status at the level of the household, women in spite of having access to employment have still a long way to go before achieving complete equality.

6.3 Degree of personal freedom

The majority of participants agreed that as a result of their employment they have been able to enjoy far more personal freedom from not only parental authority when they were not yet married but also vis-à-vis their husbands after marriage. There is a widely held assumption across the board that had they not been in employment they would not be able to enjoy a certain degree of independence from their husbands.

There is a variety of ways through which this experience of personal freedom can be measured. Financially, they had obligations towards their households and as such could not dispose freely

of their income particularly at this stage of their life-cycle (on average middle-aged with dependents) – these points are discussed in detail in the next chapter. However at the level of their social contacts which goes beyond kinship, in their ability to dress and make up according to their choice as well as in their ability to go out without having to seek permission from husband or in laws, there seems that those women have transcended to a certain extent certain traditional barriers of patriarchy. This is shown in the following:

‘My sister does not work and everytime I see her I realize how different we have become: When her husband speaks, she does not speak at all and it is as if she has no say. But I have an opinion and I always say what I think. I think this is something that I would not do if I had stayed at home.’ (*Sangeeta*)

‘Going out to work and meeting people, earning money have definitely changed me... I used to be very shy, I didn’t know how to go to a bank or to a restaurant, I didn’t know how to travel, I was very introverted, now I am more outgoing and confident’ (*Simla*)

In fact as some of the participants argue over their life histories they had been able, through access to employment, to overturn certain rigid structures which were restraining their individual freedom.

6.3.1 ‘Femmes L’izine’¹³

One interesting insight which was provided by several participants was that at the beginning when they were entering factory work, apart from the practical difficulties that they have had to endure as a result of taking up employment, they have had to endorse a negative label. The ‘femme l’izine’ which is popular parlance for ‘factory women’ often had connotations with ‘having loose morals’, ‘of being frivolous’, and ‘unmotherly’ and such labels were even stronger in the rural areas.

This could be explained according to the participants to the unprecedented opportunities for young males and females to work together in close environments and the ‘sexual revolution’ that was perceived to be happening and which was considered as being morally unacceptable in a still

¹³ ‘Factory Women’

very much traditional and yet to be fully industrialised Mauritian society. Mauritians in general are often pinpointed for nurturing preconceived ideas and prejudicial stereotypical beliefs about their own people on the basis of their sex, religion, ethnic background, region, etc... Some of the participants argued that they have had to resist and fight against parental pressure in order to enter factory employment in the first place due to the negative stereotypes attached to such jobs in the early years of this industry.

6.3.2 Sexual Revolution

In fact there is a widespread consensus among the participants that there has indeed been a sexual revolution which took place as a result of the unprecedented employment opportunities which this sector provided for both men and women. The sexual revolution as a result of industrialization has been adequately documented in a number of countries and has been regarded as inevitable as a result of rapid industrialization generating work opportunities for both men and women sometimes often within the same premises. In Mauritius although this aspect of industrialization has attracted hardly any research, from the focus group discussions there was some indications that there was a shift towards more liberal attitudes regarding courtship and sexuality in the EPZ factories.

6.3.3 Self-fulfilling prophecies

In all in the different FGDs that were conducted, there were 9 unmarried women, 3 of whom lived in a consensual union. Although it would be inaccurate to make any generalizations, the latter argued that the fact that they were employed in factories has at least to a certain extent led to their present marital status. In other words, for some of these women employment in the EPZ and the negative connotations that have been associated with it at least in the first generation of female workers of this sector, has led to some sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy which has contributed to their unmarried status. The following table which follows provides qualitative

accounts of what a few of those unmarried women¹⁴ felt were the main reasons for not having been married.

‘ When I joined the factory back in 1988, I made a few friends both men and women and at times after work, we would walk to the bus-stop...There was this young man who works in Government who came to my place to ask for my hand...but some members of his family said that I was always accompanied by a number of men everyday and that I didn’t have a sound character... Since then it was as if I have been stigmatized...All those who could have considered marrying me would run away when hearing those stories about me...’ (*Pouspavadee*)

‘ In the early days when we first started working, the men would always seize any opportunity to start romancing, and many of us (women) did not resist to these flirts... For some they were lucky that their relationships concretized into marriage, I have been deceived a number of times by men and some of them even harassed me, I had a sadistic supervisor who despite having a wife and children was always making nasty comments about my body’. (*Marie-Noelle*)

‘ I come from a Hindu family and accordingly my family has always put pressure on me so that I get married to a Hindu of the same or of a higher caste. At work there was this supervisor from Tamil origin who proposed to me and after several months of not knowing what to do I finally said yes. However after spending some time with me, he got married to a girl from his community. I was rejected by both my family and my lover and my reputation has been tarnished... I have neither wanted to get involved in a relationship again nor I have had anybody who has shown any such interest.’ (*Reena*)

6.4 Importance of work for the EPZ employee’s identity as a woman

When asked to reflect upon the importance of their job for their identity as women, the majority of respondents argued that the fact that they were employed had enabled them to broaden their sphere beyond the domestic and have to a certain extent the opportunity to have access to wider society. The predominant argument was that without work these women would have been confined to traditional roles and not been able to achieve however little the level of emancipation which they have still achieved. As explained earlier, some working women see themselves as having achieved a sense of personal freedom.

¹⁴ The latter agreed to be probed on those issues

The majority of participants were also of the view that working has improved their self-worth and they feel that they have achieved a better self-image which they would not have had they not joined the workforce. At the same time, beyond the experiences associated with working outside the private sphere, the fact that they were able to earn an income and to some extent – albeit limited as shown in the next chapter – improve their personal material conditions such as dressing up, taking care of their look made them see employment as being crucial to their personal development.

6.5 Summary

From the findings obtained from the FGDs and presented above, there appears to be little evidence that working women have achieved anything like equality within marriage in contemporary Mauritius. Although there are indications of some progress in terms of male involvement in domestic chores, these are limited to specific tasks and generally it remains primarily the responsibility of women to perform those chores in combination with their work responsibilities.

They are still primarily responsible for domestic tasks in spite of some progress made in this sense in terms of male participation in some activities. In terms of decision making, in spite of their contribution to the household economy, they clearly have less power than their husbands within marriage. In other words, in a general way, employment has not enabled women to challenge gender relations and redefine gender roles. These findings seem to challenge any empowering potential that paid employment in the EPZ have for women. In the next chapter we turn to an analysis of how far earning an income translates into economic empowerment.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT FROM EMPLOYMENT: MYTH OR REALITY?

7. Introduction

This chapter outlines and discusses the findings related to another key dimension of the empowerment thesis ie the extent to which women workers in the EPZ are *economically* empowered, in the sense of the economic independence and financial self-reliance which paid employment can potentially confer to women. Looking at the adequacy of the earnings in the EPZ in the first place, and how women dispose of their income at the level of the household economy and on the power inequalities centred around gender in the use of women's income, a rather complex and paradoxical picture emerges. This is elaborated below.

7.1 Adequacy of earnings

Before looking at the issue of how the income earned by female EPZ workers are disposed of within the household, it is worthwhile to raise the issue of the adequacy of the income earned in the first place. As already mentioned in chapter 5, one of the conditions of work with which all the FGD participants were particularly unsatisfied is the wage level in the EPZ. The need to remain competitive and for employers to maintain a viable profit margin also meant that any demand from unions for wage increases meet significant resistance. These characteristic features of EPZ concerning income level have been brought up earlier.

Compounded by the fact that the cost of living has been constantly rising, the FGD participants even from the larger firms all argue that their earnings are inadequate and this allegedly applies to EPZ workers in general. The general opinion which was articulated was that although it did contribute to the running of household expenditures, it was not sufficient in itself to sustain them.

One argument that recurrently came up in the preliminary part of the research i.e. in unstructured interviews with various informants including trade union officials, a Chinese interpreter who works for a large enterprise which employs Chinese labour, and a Ministry of Labour official who deals with foreign labour issues, even for foreign labour who come to work here and get paid in USD, the amount of money earned is known to be insufficient. In fact, factors such as the fluctuations in the USD particularly in a context where the rupee has been appreciating vis-à-vis that currency; the reliance on overtime work for adding up to the wage level and the variations in its availability as well as the increasing costs of living have made it at least as hard for those expatriate workers who come to Mauritius with the expectation to earn a better wage-rate than prevalent in their home countries.

7.2. Disposal of earnings

An important dimension which has been investigated given its centrality in determining whether women are financially empowered is the issue of how their earnings are disposed of. Based on the evidence from the FGDs, it seems that generally, the income of most married women are not directly appropriated by their husbands as may be the case elsewhere (as discussed earlier in chapter 2).

At the same time however, due to a number of reasons, this does not mean that they have complete autonomy in using their own income as the majority of participants argue. This finding cuts across all the different ethnic groups. In effect, with the inadequacy of wages and with the need to meet or help meet regular household expenses, women do not have the luxury to dispose of their income in the way that they would ideally wish. Many participants identify themselves with these points cited below and which were made by some of the respondents from the FGDs.

‘Come the end of the month...after paying private tuition for the children shopping for food, helping the husband in paying our loan for the house, sorting out the various bills associated with the household... food, electricity, gas and water bills, etc and paying Mammouth, what is left for me personally? Nothing at all! And I work 6 days a week! Can you believe it ?’ (*Sangeeta*)

‘when I first started working, it was the first time I was actually earning, I was not married yet, I would help my parents in paying off some bills and use the rest to buy clothes, shoes, make-up, chocolate and I could also some saving...Then, a thousand rupees was really worth something,... now I am married with three children. I just don’t see my earnings! it disappears in less than a week !!! My husband does not expect me to work but if I didn’t work and contribute to the household, we would end up in poverty!’ (*Medha*)

‘Children’s private tuitions, shopping for meat and vegetables, helping my husband...I have to wait for a special occasion to treat myself to something... like you know...a pair of shoes,new clothes...’ (*Simla*)

It was only those women who were not married or in a relationship - by virtue of the fact that they were single, divorced, separated or widowed - who had complete autonomy in disposing of their income, for evident reasons. In one exceptional case however, a participant whose husband was a drunkard kept hold of all her income so that he does not waste it, as explained in the following quote:

In my case, my husband has fallen in alcohol, everything he earns he spends it on alcohol and when he does not have any money he borrows from everyone...If I give him my money how will we survive. If he does not have a sense of responsibility, I need to be responsible towards my children and I cannot work and pay for him and his friends booze. (*Claudette*)

It is interesting to note that the general idea of financial independence for women as perceived generally by the participants would be to have the option to use their money to buy items which they personally need in their everyday lives without having to think about those items foregone in doing so. Such items which they generally need are mundane things such as cosmetics, new clothes and footwear and expenses associated with going out (transport, food, etc).

The majority of women do not consider that their husbands would prevent them from buying any of those things in case they want to do so. In fact across the different FGDs some participants

argue that whenever they feel the need to buy anything that they need, they simply buy it. As subtly put by one of the participants:

‘For small expenses, I *inform* him that I have to buy this or that, I don’t ask him his permission to do it. But for major expenses, it is different.’ (*Premila*)

However, the awareness of the need to be cautious about spending frivolously signifies that they only do so on occasions such as the New Year, weddings among close kin and respective religious festivals for the different ethnic groups. For example, across the FGDs there was a consensus that on special occasions, exception had to be made as captured in the following:

All year round it is a lot of sacrifice, you see things you like or what the children want but you can’t afford, you prefer to wait for special occasions such as the end of the year, weddings, birthdays then you can justify spending... (*Maheswaree*)

7.2.1 Distribution of roles in running the household budget

Another interesting finding pertains to the marked distribution of gender roles in running the household budget. According to the FGD participants, the distribution of responsibility regarding running the household financially entails that women meet certain specific expenses while men meet others. When asked how this distribution of tasks is decided, it was found that in the majority of cases such decisions were based on a mutual consent based on ‘what everybody else does’ ie a certain norm about gender distribution of expenditures. Upon further probing, it was found that behind the adherence to this norm, there seems to be a sense of duty towards husband and household in a context where the household economy could not do without their contribution. These are neatly captured by the following statements :

‘Life has become too expensive... We grew up thinking that we can depend on our husbands to feed us, that they are the main breadwinners...but if we don’t work there is no way they can cope! Prices are constantly going up!!!’ (*Belinda*)

Without my income, there is no way my husband can cope! And he is a police constable! I know so many of my colleagues who have to rely on ‘sits’, the credit system available at the cornershop etc in order to make both ends meet. It is a constant struggle.’ (*Simla*)

7.2.2 Priorities in the disposal of income

Based on the discussions with the various participants, the following Table (8) provides a basic breakdown of the order in which the income of the female worker is generally utilized. This exercise was carried out systematically in the various FGDs with married participants and reflect the views of the majority of the participants about their own expenditure patterns and that of their husbands.

Not all the participants fit neatly in those categories. For instance, not all households had to reimburse a loan or pay rent or had dependents educational needs to be met. Likewise, not all husbands were gamblers or drank alcohol. As such this exercise is purely indicative of what applies to the majority of married participants in the FGDs. Caution should therefore be used in interpreting or making generalizations about these findings at the wider level of Mauritian society.

Table 8: List of Priorities regarding disposal of income		
Priority	By female EPZ worker	By female EPZ worker's husband
1st	Children/Dependants (Children's Tuition Fees ¹⁵ , specialized nutrition for infants, unforeseen expenses including medical or educational, etc...)	Payment of Housing Loan or payment of rent.
2nd	Helping Husband (Contributing to Housing Loan Repayment or savings)	Purchase or payment of expensive household appliances
3rd	Recurrent Expenses (Helping towards the purchase of food provision, selected utility bills, etc...)	Running the Household (utility bills, food provision, etc)
4th	Miscellaneous: (purchase of commodities which have practical or aesthetic benefits for the household. (Ex: Kitchen utensils, bed linen, curtain...)	Savings (Including savings for household members health, educational or other expenses)
5th	Self (small personal savings/ sit repayment , buying personal things – clothing, footwear, make-up, etc)	Self [Personal expenses (eg: local transport for outings with friends, Gambling- Horse-Racing or Football, drinking with peers, etc)]
6th		Treating their wives (going out, new clothes, jewellery, etc)
<i>Compiled from FGD data with current EPZ workers</i>		

¹⁵ In Mauritius, although children have access to free state education up to secondary level, the educational system is widely acknowledged to be highly competitive and elitist in nature. As a result, there is an over-reliance on private tuition for 'better grades' which open up access to upward mobility. In this study, the majority of women who have children have stated that they usually handle this expenditure.

7.2.2.1 Expenditure on self as last priority for women

It is interesting to note from the above table that a broadly similar picture with clearly delineated gender roles with respect to the usage of their financial resources, emerged from the various FGDs despite the heterogeneity of experiences with respect to variables such as regional, ethnic, educational, or income backgrounds of the respondents.

An analysis of the findings illustrated above, shows that Mauritian women, at least those working in the EPZ, have not widened their degree of choice concerning what they can do with their income. Instead, they regard expenditure on themselves as their last priority whilst funding for their children and/or dependents where applicable, the sustaining of their households and helping their husbands in doing so as their main priorities.

It is interesting to note that to these participants, there was no feeling that their money was not within their control. Instead a nuanced picture emerges whereby although objectively, their income was beyond their control and was submitted to the imperatives of the household economy not to say the head of the household, yet to the majority of the participants, they choose and at the same time it is their duty to do so. For them, it seems that the ability to exercise choice in disposing of their income and the duty to dispose of their income to the transcending needs of the household were not antagonistic but were their 'natural' line of conduct.

Conversely, only a few women argued that this was 'imposed upon them'. For instance as Marie-Josee argued:

'Saving up, spending on myself and treating myself ??? My husband would kick me out of the house, he won't be able to run the household with his salary alone.' (*Marie-Josee*)

To this minority of women, although their income was not literally snatched from them, yet they did not have any control over it. They were given the responsibility to meet certain expenses. One of the respondents argued that at times she 'felt like a thief when taking her own money' to buy something for herself.

Sometimes, if I see all my friends doing something like going to the flea-market, or if there is a sales at the factory, and I spend some money, I feel like a thief...and yet it is my own money. On the other hand if I tell my husband, I will have to spend this or that much on this or that thing, he will think that I am wasting money...and if ever there is something which is over and I need to ask him money to buy he will say, you see, if you had not spent it you would not need to make me waste more money. So I keep him out of it. (*Joyce*)

In some other cases, it is clear that there is an abuse of women's income. For instance as the following testimonies indicate, together with having to contribute to the running of the household expenses, in some cases, women's income is used to finance expenses which the latter are not necessarily agreeable to but which sometimes even carry on after they voice out their disapproval.

My husband is like a kid. He keeps getting things on Hire Purchase and I have to be his guarantor as he does not have a pay slip (he is a mason and works informally)... and when he cannot pay, I have to pay. We had many arguments in the past but he never listens and I cannot let Mammouth come and seize it. (*Marie-Josee*)

I work and bring money home, he invites his nephews and nieces and buys them sweets and all...Once, twice it is fine but he has given them a bad habit and when I told him we have to stop that he gets angry...To avoid trouble I let it be. (*Fareeda*)

As explained in chapter 6, this often taken for granted deference to male authority continues in spite of women earning.

7.2.2.2 Nature of expenditure by gender

An analysis of the types of expenditure which are made by the two sexes reveals that men allegedly tend to spend on more 'important' things such as investment and repayment of loan in land and housing, or other expensive commodities such as motorvehicles, electrical appliances, among others while their wives tend to spend on items which are perceived by the respondents themselves to be 'mundane'.

It is also noteworthy that the participants themselves do not seem to think in terms of savings and investment as opportunities for financial independence and by extension financial empowerment. Rather, their notion of financial independence seems to be limited to the possibility to afford items which they desire with their own money. In fact, the majority of participants argue that savings are not done systematically and this owing to the fact that with children and the general living expenses do not allow them to do so. As far as investment is concerned, most participants indicated that they let it to their husbands to make those decisions.

7.2.3 Acceptance of sexism

When the participants were asked if they did not feel that there was a certain element of sexism in this distribution of household expenses, an overwhelming majority argued that they considered this as normal and they did not see it as problematic. There was a general acceptance that it is their husbands who have the responsibility to engage in the major expenses. A few others went on to say that it would not be moral on their part to challenge the authority of their husbands. Women from the Hindu and Muslim ethnic communities generally made up the outstanding majority of those who felt that way.

On the other hand there were some women, more particularly from the creole community, who considered that they were bringing at least as much money as their husbands to the household and they did not view it very positively that the latter had an upper-hand in decisions regarding the use of their salaries. However, because of practical realities they usually abided by the way that their income was organized to meet the monthly expenses of the household.

Although caution should be applied in generalizing the ethnic variations in the gender differences in expenditure on the basis of this small-scale study, it is nevertheless worthwhile to note that Asian households tend to be more traditional while Creole Households tend to be more liberal. Nevertheless there is evidence that there is a marked gender bias in the spending responsibilities and priorities of households.

7.2.4 Importance of income for EPZ women's material conditions

When asked to reflect upon the importance of this income for women in spite of the fact that it did not translate into a significant material improvement in their living conditions, the argument which was put forward by a majority of women was that without this they could potentially be in danger of facing poverty.

In fact, there was a constant fear expressed by the participants that they are laid off by their factories as has been the case with many of their fellow workers. Some of the participants are so scared that they lose their jobs that they argue that they are deliberately refraining from taking any items on hire-purchase (and warning their husbands from doing so) for fear of finding themselves in the impossibility of settling their debts and find their goods seized. This is shown in the quote below:

'There is one at my place (the husband) who every year likes to buy something on Hire Purchase from Courts or Galaxy. I have told him to sort out how he intends to repay it if ever I lose my job as this is what we keep hearing in the news these days.' (*Marie-Josee*)

All the participants were aware of the pressure on the sector although they did not seem to understand global context and how the forces of globalisation are impacting on the sector. They were mainly concerned with the scare-stories reported in the press about the unscrupulous employers who close their factories overnight without any prior notice (and often without the appropriate compensation).

For the participants, having spent most of their working career in the EPZ and given that they do not have the experience or educational qualifications to work in any other sector or learn a new trade, there was a major concern that if they lose their source of income it will be hard to obtain another job. At the same time, most of the participants as is characteristic of most working women in this sector have a high age profile which further impede on their possibility to be reshuffled to other sectors of the economy. As neatly summed up in the following view:

‘I have literally grown up in my factory, I have been working there since 18 and all I know is how to sew. If I lose my job, I won’t be able to do anything else because this is all I know, I can’t work in any other sector...at my age (48) do you think that I can go and smile at tourists or work on a computer?’
(*Maheswaree*)

For those reasons, those women are particularly reliant on their income and there is an overall opinion that no matter how strenuous the conditions are, yet they depend on this income to make both ends meet.

7.3 Coping strategies

Against this background which is indicative of a feminization of poverty - that too of working women – as well as embedded gender inequalities in the disposal of income, it was useful to enquire albeit in a cursory manner, how women and by extension their households could cope in their everyday lives with such a restrained budget and so many expenses.

It was interesting to note that the majority of participants explained that they had in place a number of strategies which they had themselves initiated or which were already available and which allowed them to subsist. The following are some of the most often used ones:

7.3.1 The ‘Mette Sit’ informal lending and borrowing system

A significant number of female participants in the various FGDs had their own network of friends or colleagues who would put money together in a common pool and cyclically take money from this pool for their personal use. Such informal loans or ‘Sits’ as commonly called varied according to the number of people involved, the time period, and the amount of money that would be pooled together. A strong sense of mutual trust was key to the smooth operating of the ‘sit’ system. Often, one individual can be part of various ‘sits’ at any one time. The following captures one of the most common sit system adopted:

‘We are a group of 12 women, some of us work together and others are some of our close relatives...we have known each other for a long time and we all trust each other blindly... we cannot involve people we don’t know well...Each month we all put Rs 500 together and we get a sum of Rs 6000. In turn over a year each one of us will benefit from this sum at one go but we select at random who will get it first, second and so on. Now if one of us needs money urgently for any reason (bereavement, medical reasons or to perform prayers or celebrate a wedding or an anniversary) we can make arrangements and swap turns...’(Kalawtee)

The sit-system thus operates just like a bank loan or an overdraft facility without the associated hassles of the formal mechanisms and the long and often demanding administrative procedures and security checks. Interestingly, sits are quite often raised without the husbands knowing. Nevertheless, rather than spending it upon their own needs, their main priorities in using these sits are their children. As one of the respondents argued, a point that is also shared by many others, *‘after all, this is our role as mothers’*.

7.3.2 Credit system at the local cornershop

Another system of coping which is predominant is the use of credit facilities for relatively small sums of money at the local cornershops for the purchase of basic commodities. A majority of respondents argue that they have resorted to such facilities or are still resorting to such facilities. However, the predominance of cornershops has been increasingly challenged over the last few years by the ever-increasing presence of super and hypermarkets which are more attractive, have generally a wider variety and higher standards of quality and service.

Nonetheless, as argued by several FGD participants the more impersonal nature of those large stores and the non-availability of credit as well as the costs in terms of time and money of traveling to those stores still allow for many lower working-class people to utilize the local cornershops. As argued by some of the participants in spite of some disadvantages such as the lack of variety and the somewhat higher costs of retailed commodities, the availability of credit is an important advantage:

Towards the end of the month when our provisions are nearly over and when we haven't earned our wages yet, I can still go and get what I need from the cornershop. It is a few rupees more expensive. For instance if a can of tuna is being sold at Rs 28 at Winners (Hypermarket), here it will be about Rs 35 but if you don't have the cash, what's the point? Here the shopkeeper notes it down in a book and we can pay him back at the end of the month. (*Florence*)

Personally, I prefer to buy everything in a bigger store. You can take your time, choose, there is a wider variety sometimes there are deals, you buy one you get another one free...But they don't offer credit and people like us don't use credit cards etc...I go there to buy things when me and my husband we've been paid...when we run out of things and of money as the month draws to a close, it is the small shop that is of greater help. (*Danwantee*)

7.3.3 Kinship support

The participants from the semi-urban and rural regions seem to have access to kinship support in a number of forms which help them in their everyday lives. According to some of the participants from those regions, some lending/borrowing of money does take place from/to close kins which are often the next source of support when faced with financial difficulties. In particular it has been noted that participants from the Hindu and Muslim faith/ethnic backgrounds (at least those who have been selected in this small-scale study) tend to rely on kinship support networks involving mainly the close relatives for both cash and kind support in times of need. These points are illustrated in the testimonies below at the same time suggesting that the belief that as a result of industrialization, there is an attenuation of kinship ties is debatable:

In my family, we are still very close-knit and whenever there is any hardship, financial or emotional, we are always there to help and we can expect the same from each other. Sometimes, if a child is sick and can't go to school we make arrangements for any other family member who can look after him. (*Roopmin*)

Two years ago, my boy's school was organizing a trip for all CPE students to go to Rodrigues. He wanted to go but it was costing too much for us poor people to afford and I said no. Then he went to tell his grandmother and the latter, and my brothers-in-law all helped to raise the money and I had only about one quarter to add for him to go. People say that the family spirit is no more there but in my family, we know the value of blood ties. (*Saheeba*)

7.3.4 Informal v/s formal

It is worthwhile to note that rather than resorting to more formal sources of financial help such as banks and cooperative societies, the above informal and more mundane sources of support are prioritized by these women. Although caution should be used in interpreting those findings it would appear that, women in this class category seem to be more likely to resort to unofficial and more discrete forms of support to support their everyday running costs.

7.4 Summary

As mentioned before, whilst many commentators on the issue of gender empowerment have stressed on the empowering effect of paid employment, the general findings from the FGDs, by no means indicate this. When the issues of how far women have a control over their earnings and how it is used at the level of the household are investigated, the findings which come up seem to challenge the potential for complete financial independence.

Earlier in Chapter Five, we saw that the wages in this sector are claimed to be low and have been seriously lagging behind as opposed to other sectors of the economy. As also indicated in Chapter Three, there is no indication that in the current context of rife global competition where employers are concerned with keeping costs down, wages are likely to improve. In this chapter we can see that these allegedly ‘meager’ earnings are themselves not disposed of in a way which shows that women control their income as a resource and by virtue of which they can extend their possibilities. However, rather than these women regarding this as a missed opportunity for their empowerment, they ultimately tend to consider it their duty to commit their income to their household expenses rather than complain about it.

While there is documented evidence of men taking over the income of their wives elsewhere (See chapter 2), the findings of my FGDs are not conclusive in this respect. Nevertheless as is shown below, the expectations (or indeed dependency) of their husbands and/or other household members on the income of the women workers whose contribution to the sustainability of the

household above the poverty threshold is vital, leaves little if any margin for fulfilling their own material needs. On the basis of such findings, one can arrive to the conclusion that in spite of earning an income, financial empowerment does not seem to be a reality for women working in the EPZ.

**CHAPTER EIGHT:
EXPERIENCES OF JOB LOSS IN THE EPZ: EMPOWERMENT OR
DISEMPOWERMENT?**

8. Introduction

In this chapter we turn to an analysis of the findings from the semi-directive interviews with women who have lost their jobs in the EPZ. Looking at the experiences of laid-off workers brings some useful elements to the discussion about the extent to which EPZ employment is empowering for female workers. In particular, as elaborated in the following, it provides evidence which interrogates the notion of empowerment and offers a rich description of the disempowering processes within which EPZ workers are caught as the sector restructures itself to face globalization processes. This chapter helps to put into perspective, albeit retrospectively, the centrality of paid employment for, not only the female worker as an individual, but also for her household.

As mentioned in chapter 4, the findings for this aspect of the study are based on a series of some 24 interviews with retrenched workers from EPZ factories. The chapter is structured as follows. The first part provides a brief overview of the socio-economic background and characteristics of the respondents as a group. In part two, the common experiences of those women after their retrenchment are examined shedding light upon the generally adverse socio-economic as well as health impacts which unemployment brings about for them and their households. In part three, I highlight the difficulties which women have in their attempts to adapt to unemployment and offer a brief critique of the existing policies which the Mauritian Government has devised in order to help those who are losing their jobs in this sector. The next section examines the impact which retrenchment has upon them as a gender group, assessing the extent to which any of the benefits they acquired while in employment are sustained or eroded. The final section looks at the very few atypical cases which have been identified among the respondents where the experience of unemployment is less daunting and even beneficial before providing some relevant conclusions about the overall findings of this specific aspect of the research.

8.1 Overview of the socio-economic profile of the respondents

As Fryer and Ullah (1987) argue, unemployed people are not simply unemployed but instead they vary significantly according to age, gender, class, labour market and family status among other things. The same point applies to the women studied in this small-scale study. The selection of the latter has been explained in chapter four. In the following we look briefly at the actual profile and main socio-economic characteristics of the participants.

8.1.1 Age group

A number of common characteristics are shared by them. In terms of age, the women interviewed were in the age range of 38- 49 with the majority being above 40 and having joined the labour market in their late teens.

8.1.2 Factory type

They had all been employees of 8 different large factories producing garments mainly for the European and US markets which have closed down in the period 2003-2005.

8.1.3 Length of time in employment at their respective factories

Most of the women studied also claim to have been in employment with their respective firms for extensive periods of time. 6 of them have in fact joined their respective factories and remained there until the factories closed down. Those who have moved factories have done so rather rarely, a major reason being when they got married and moved houses, they looked for the closest factory. Another reason which explains this relatively little turnover is the fact that the conditions of work, mainly in terms of pay in some of those large factories were allegedly better. This high presence of this age group among local female workers in the sector corroborates prior evidence about the ageing EPZ workforce (e.g Burn 1996; Bunwaree 2004) we saw in chapter 3.

Another important common point they shared was that after those few years in which they had lost their jobs, they were still unemployed, some on the look-out for another job, whether in the clothing sector or elsewhere while others, particularly those whose husbands or other household members were earning and could support them, have come to resign themselves to being

housewives. One exception is the case of a retrenched worker who has found herself a job in a small and informal food catering enterprise.

8.1.4 Type of occupation in the factory

According to job category, while I argued earlier, the EPZ workforce consists of multiple occupations and levels, for the purpose of this study my main interest was to explore the implications for the majority of those who lose their jobs and this majority is known to be the shop-floor workers. Most of those who were interviewed were mainly machine operators ('machinistes' as they call themselves), packers or pressers with only two women working at a somewhat higher level (in quality control).

8.1.5 Educational Level

The respondents also had relatively low educational attainment levels with the highest education being the School Certificate (ie O level). As mentioned before this is a common characteristic of the bulk of the EPZ workforce on the shopfloor.

8.1.6 Income Background

The monthly salary that these women used to earn, was in the range of Rs 3500 – Rs 6500, with the majority claiming to have been earning around Rs 5000 and the quality controllers earning up to Rs 6500. They all come from a working class background with a total household income after their job loss being in the range of Rs 10000 – Rs 15000 monthly with the exception of two cases where the total monthly household income was above Rs 20000 (one where the husband has a more remunerated job as a policeman while in the other case there were 4 income earners in the household). As mentioned earlier, as compared to the ½ median monthly household income, ie Rs 9500, which is regarded as the official relative poverty line, it is clear that even while earning, those women and their households were struggling to make both ends meet.

8.1.7 Marital Status, Number of dependents and Region

22 out of the 24 women interviewed were married while the other 2 were widowed. The majority have children under 18 years of age. Of the 24 women, 12 had at least one child at college. The others had children who were in employment or looking for work. 7 women also

have elderly dependents who live in their households or in the same compound. All of the women studied are from the districts of Port-Louis and Plaines Wilhems and the factories they used to work were also from those regions.

8.1.8 Main differences

Together with the similarities shared, there are also a number of pertinent differences which highlight the point that women who lose their jobs in the EPZ are not a homogeneous group. Without going into too much detail, it is important to highlight that one pertinent difference lies in terms of their personal financial circumstances. Financially, some women were somewhat less worse off not to say better off than others on account of the occupations of their husbands or of other members of their households; the number of dependents and expenses related to them; their household expenditure and the extent to which they are indebted (housing loans or rent, goods on hire-purchase, etc...). These points will become clearer as the findings are presented and discussed later in this chapter.

Another important difference that needs to be highlighted in the Mauritian context is the differential ethnic background from which the respondents were from – 13 hindu, 6 creole and 5 muslim women.

The above basic data on the profile of the women studied is intended as a simple numerical check rather than having any statistical significance. Nevertheless as will be shown in the following, in some cases, these variables are useful for analyzing and understanding the data collected.

8.2 Common experiences of Job Loss from EPZ factories

The following sections present and discuss the main findings which emerge from the interviews with respect to the common experiences of job loss from EPZ factories. The loss of the job and income sets in motion a number of processes which are not necessarily linear in the sense that they do not follow the same patterns when listening to the testimonies. People's personal

circumstances vary; some are socio-economically or psychologically less affected than others due partly to the fact that they have informal support facilities. Some for instance even found some benefits of no longer being in employment but a few months later, they started to find it hard to be without a source of income and were forced to make adjustments to their lifestyles. Others are harder hit particularly when the loss of income leads to destitution and is compounded by psychological and health (perhaps psychosomatic) issues. In other words, it would be wrong to treat the experiences of job loss as homogeneous, given the different personal circumstances and different ways in which the interviewees are affected.

Nonetheless, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to dwell too deeply into each and every case studied however rich and detailed their experience of job loss is. The emphasis instead will be to highlight the most common threads within these experiences with a specific attention on how these are indicative of a reversal of empowerment. Ultimately, put in a simple way, in spite of differences in terms of the severity of the implications of job loss, across the majority of the interviews, there were strong messages of financial distress which in turn also brought about social, psychological and health hardships for the individual which often impacted directly on her household members.

For sake of clarity, the findings in this section are organised thematically according to the various impacts which the loss of employment has on the women interviewed thus illustrating the drawbacks associated with the EPZ as an employment sector and the disempowering processes which these entail.

8.2.1 Financial Impacts

Earlier, based on the findings of the FGDs the extent of financial empowerment of women in employment was open to question for a number of reasons pertaining to the relatively low level of income earned in the first place as well as the limited, if any money was left for themselves as individuals, after their income was spent on children and on the household expenses. Yet, it

seemed that, subjectively, women were content and resigned to this situation so long as they could have some income in the first place to juggle with the requirements of their households.

From the interviews carried out, it is clear that the most immediate and hardest-felt impact of job loss from the factory was precisely financial hardship as their own purchasing power and by extension their household budget was adversely affected. In fact, all those interviewed argued that the income which they received *while in employment* was already meagre but yet it allowed them somehow to make both ends meet at the end of the month. Thus, while many deemed it important to stress that they were not necessarily affording everything that they wished for or sometimes even what they needed, yet their earnings in most cases brought about a significant if not a vital contribution to the household economy. This finding corroborates that of the FGDs as spelt out earlier. In fact, for all the respondents, the loss of revenue signified that they were forced to be more cautious about how and on what they spent their money. The loss of income was adversely affecting their own and their households' material living standards and even their lifestyles. The majority of women considered themselves financially reliant on their husbands (and in a few cases even upon their children who were already in employment) for anything that they wanted to buy.

8.2.1.1 Compensation upon termination of employment

Before proceeding to examine the financial implications of job loss in more detail, it is worthwhile to note that all the women studied have received a compensation as a result of being laid off. The compensation was in line with section 7 of the Remuneration Order (R.O) for Export Enterprises whereby employers are required to compensate upon termination of contract employees who reckon more than 12 months continuous employment.¹⁶ However, there was a

¹⁶ Extract from Export Enterprises R.O 1984

“7 (a) Where the services of an employee are terminated he shall be entitled to receive compensation which shall be equivalent to –

(i) where he reckons more than 12 months but less than 3 years continuous service with an employer not less than one week's wages for each year of service;

(ii) where he reckons not less than 3 years' continuous service with an employer, not less than 2 weeks' wages for each year of service

general agreement that the compensation was largely inadequate. At best it allegedly gave them a temporary cushion of a few weeks before facing the stark reality of the loss of income. For instance, in spite of the sum received, as the following testimonies from Salima who worked 8 years at Summit Textiles and Taslima who was employed at Floreal Knitwear for 14 years indicate, there was a gross dissatisfaction with the amount received:

‘I received something like Rs 20000 but it was peanuts. I gave it to my husband and it went in the household expenses and it was over within weeks’ (*Salima*)

‘I did receive about Rs 40000. What do you get with this sort of money nowadays, fortunately my husband was the owner of his house, and I have never been a big spender. But little by little this money has been spent on what we consume.’ (*Taslima*)

A few of the participants have also made use of the sum they received to settle long-term loans or articles bought on hire-purchase. One participant even spent her compensation money in marrying off her daughter earlier than expected as a way of ‘sending her to a better place’. Another participant argued that she spent a lot of her compensation money in medical treatment as a result of medical complications which she argues arose as a result of her losing her job. In fact, across the board the interviewees argued that the cost of living was too high for them to be satisfied with the amount of money they received as compensation.

Here it is perhaps worth noting that the fact that all the women studied have been compensated, can be associated with the size and credibility of the firm as well as its respect for the legislations in place when closing down. The larger and more long-standing firms - as the ones from which those selected for these interviews came from - have tended to abide by the legislations in force when terminating employment of its workers. This contrasts with some evidence from press reports of smaller factories which have closed down without paying their workers any form of compensation as well as anecdotal evidence of some employers who had conveniently left the country without informing their workers about an imminent closure. A trade union official who

(b) Notwithstanding paragraph (a), no compensation shall be payable in any case of dismissal on grounds of serious misconduct where the employer could not in good faith be expected to adopt any other course than to dismiss the employee”

has been interviewed has also alleged that some unscrupulous employers have been using delaying tactics to avoid a complete payment.

8.2.1.2 Deterioration of material living standard

Given the significance of their income in running the household economy, all the respondents considered that the loss of income had put themselves and their household in a difficult situation. Among the main consequences which the loss of revenue entailed were forced changes in lifestyles of not only the unemployed individual but often all the other members of the household. In many cases, there was a need to cut down on the items upon which they spend and draw priority lists.

As mentioned earlier, it is important to bear in mind that some of the interviewees were hit harder than others. This was due to the fact that the women interviewed had a variety of personal financial circumstances prior to being laid off. Those women who were from dual or multiple-earner households where the husbands or offsprings were themselves earning and contributing to the household economy were *less worse off* than those from households where their income was pivotal. Likewise, those who had less financial obligations such as housing loans, articles on hire-purchase, number of dependents (in particular the material needs of children still studying) found it less harder to adjust than those from households which were already burdened by debt or other financial responsibilities. This group, while clearly in financial difficulty is perhaps not stretched to the limit as clear from some of the testimonies obtained and described in the following :

‘With the rise of prices of commodities, it is not easy to make ends meet. We have to be very choosy and purchase mostly the basic needs. My husband’s income is adequate enough but this gives me little margin for myself.’ (V.A)

‘Living on only one salary when everything is so expensive was a big change and forced us to cut down on all unnecessary expenses. For the first time, we had to do budgets even to buy vegetables and meat. We had to spend wisely’ (Rajni)

However, in other cases paid employment in the factory seemed indeed to have been the lifeline which kept them just above poverty and when that income was gone, it brought about destitution. In the words of Dorianne, who was laid off from Leisure Garments:

“... when I was earning, it was already hard to make both ends meet...now imagine how hard it is for me and my family...” (*Dorianne*)

Similarly, as described by Celia who was clearly in dire financial difficulty after finding herself out of job with a husband in a precarious job and three small children:

“... We’ve had to cut back a lot, can’t waste anything ...even milk for the children I can’t give them milk everyday. I have to buy things for my children but I can’t give them milk everyday. Sometimes they look for a little extra to eat but ...we have to sacrifice we can’t...” (*Celia*)

Likewise, in the case of Royni (44) who was laid off at the same time as her husband as they had both been working in the same factory, they had faced major financial hardships literally overnight until the husband found himself a job over the following months. In the absence of an income and the already limited ability to save, poverty was a direct result of job loss. The following case study describes in more detail the situation faced by Royni.

Box 2 : Case Study #1

Royni, 44 years of age, lost her job when Novel Garments Ltd closed down laying off 1100 people. Royni had met her husband Sudhir when she joined work in 1994. Her husband was already working there as a machine operator since 1992. They got married in 1997 and at the time that the factory closed down they had 2 children. It is not uncommon that both husband and wife work together in the same factory and in the event of closure, the difficulties of coping with unemployment are even worse.

The couple did receive a compensation which in total amounted to just under Rs 80,000. They took great care in managing this sum by radically changing their lifestyle overnight. Any expenses beyond strict necessities were cut down to a minimum. Even so this money was gradually spent on household expenses and children's material needs over the next 7-8 months.

In spite of the buffer which the compensation offered, Royni felt that this was the darkest period of her life. In order not to impede the progress of their children at school, the couple cut down their meals to only lunch and dinner. They would cook chicken or meat only during the weekends. Even things which were considered trivial such as use of electricity and water were carefully monitored in order to keep bills to a minimum. They did not have money to go out and 'change their minds' from the stress of having to struggle to make ends meet. Instead she felt the more she stayed at home the more she felt anxious and depressed. Even her husband who was usually of a jolly nature, would not even smile.

There was a reliance on in-laws for help in kind although there was a strong resentment of the feeling of pity which accompanied this help. Royni missed the low but nonetheless 'respectful' standard of living which she could afford as a result of being employed. The job loss had made her helpless and she also felt that she had become very stressed and her health had deteriorated since she had lost her job.

Both husband and wife have been on the look out for a job ever since they lost their jobs. Fortunately, Sudhir did get a job about 3 months afterwards at a job fair. Although he used to work as a supervisor at Novel, he accepted a lesser job as a checker and partly helped to alleviate the burden of their household. Royni argues however that her life would never be as it was before, neither financially/materially, nor emotionally ie in terms of happiness with life.

The situation was equally precarious for those who had contracted loans or had prior financial obligations. Some of the women studied argued that they were helping their husbands with running the household budget while a large share of their husbands' incomes were going towards the payment of loans related to the purchase of land and housing. With their loss of income, their husbands were finding it hard to cope. These are reflected in the testimonies below:

“My husband has contracted a loan of Rs 150 000 in order to fund the education of my son at the DCDM (De Chazal Du Mee – a private university)... Half of my salary was going towards repaying that loan...Now we can't make him stop his course and ruin his future...and my husband and my elder son are stretched to the maximum...18 months more to go and then hopefully as soon as he gets a job, it will be better...” (*Madou*)

“4 years ago, my husband got his share¹... Children are growing up...we decided to build our own house and he took a loan of Rs 500 000. With my earnings and his, we were struggling already to pay the loan and meet our living expenses but now it is even harder... we are discouraged... it is a catastrophe I tell you...and the house is not even completed... when taking out the costs of the ration, bills, tuition and loans, there is hardly anything left for my husband...” (*Sita*)

Another category which was likewise considerably affected was those women who were the primary breadwinners in their household. For instance, Mantee (46) a widow who lives with her 68 years old mother and a son who is unemployed, lost her job after working 18 years at Stylish Knits Ltd. Her income was central to the household. Although she gets a widow's pension and her mother gets an old age pension, yet state support has in itself been largely inadequate and those pensions were supplementing her income. She argues that the bare necessities of life are all that they can afford now that she does not get her income. Their situation is worsened by her son who is allegedly “*unemployed, alcoholic and irresponsible*” and who is a dependent rather than a contributor to the household economy.

‘It is very hard, me and my mother we cook only once a day and eat our meal for dinner. During the day, we eat what we can like bread, butter and tea. I have fallen into poverty. My husband was working at the CEB and upon his death, I get a pension from there and also a widow's pension from the Government but all that is not enough. I have had to cut down on all expenses which we can't afford. I used to take my mother to see my sisters and they have small children so I used to buy chocolate or biscuits for them but I can't go out now. I prefer to avoid spending. My mother is old now and she has worked so hard throughout her life we were thinking that at least her last few years would be spent resting and in peace and joy but it is going from bad to worse. My son sits at home and does nothing, when his friends call him he goes and drinks with them, I used to give him some money but now I can't and he does not work. It adds to my stress.’ (*Mantee*)

Likewise, another widow, Taslima (49) found herself in poverty as a result of her job loss arguing that the fulfillment of her most basic needs and that of her three children of whom only

one works that too as a hawker earning a low income, has become an up-hill struggle. In her own words:

“After paying for the water and electricity bills and buying only the basic foodstuff, we hardly have anything left...the widow’s pension and some help from family is all that make us survive.” (*Taslima*)

8.2.1.3 Postponement or cancellation of projects

Another related and common theme which came up recurrently in the interviews were that many projects and aspirations of the worker for her household were ‘frozen’ awaiting for more prosperous times. One point which is shared by many respondents is that in spite of struggling financially there were common aspirations which are generally shared by the majority of the working-classes particularly in their middle-age, irrespective of ethnic appartenance. Among the most important priorities are that of having a house with all the comforts according to their means ‘so that they could have a peaceful retirement after a lifetime of hard labour’ as some respondents have recurrently mentioned. Another important set of priorities are around making ‘the future’ of their kids which include providing them with their material needs and education as well as marrying them off - which is a widely regarded as the ultimate duty of parents in the local context. The loss of the income, albeit being in many cases a secondary income, was in many cases a severe blow to the aspirations of the laid off workers and their families.

As in Sita’s case above, such projects as house construction or extension, projects to make some relatively costly purchases (eg. certain household appliances, motorvehicles) were postponed or cancelled altogether.

One respondent, who preferred to remain anonymous, argued that a washing machine and a cupboard which she had bought on hire-purchase from Courts a few months before being laid off was seized by the debt-collectors. Courts Ltd is one of the most popular chain of stores in Mauritius. It sells household goods, electrical appliances, etc. It is particularly known for

providing these goods on hire purchase which is appealing to those who can afford those items on credit. It is interesting to note that the respondent seemed more concerned with the perceived shame and belittlement associated with what was described as a dramatic seizure - with a lorry and some six Courts officials dropping by her house and taking the two articles '*while all the neighbours came out and watched*'. It appeared that the evident inconveniences of not being able to make use of those articles anymore were overshadowed by the perceived shame and loss of dignity accompanying the confiscation.

'Some six months after I had lost the job, it was after the New Year, Debt collectors from Courts came in a van and a lorry with six men to pick up a washing machine and a cupboard which I had bought on hire-purchase a couple of years ago. I knew I had to pay for these but since I was out of job I had to stop the payments and I explained to the manager at Courts but they told me that they can review my repayment period...and then I didn't go back... I know that they were sending letters and calling at home but we kept ignoring them... When they came, all the neighbors came out and watched and it was such a shame I wanted to hide...and then I thought that it is better they take them rather than me having to make further expenses...' (P.L)

In some other cases, some less material but more emotional or spiritual desires had to be abandoned. Some of the most poignant examples obtained from the interviews which illustrate this are the cases of two Hindu women who had a lifetime desire to travel to India for pilgrimage and who had saved up preferred to put their money towards a more immediate use. In another case, a woman who initially wanted to perform the marriage ceremony of her son could not do so as they would no more be able to afford it. The main reason why the wedding was planned was so that the mother of the laid-off worker who was terminally ill could give her blessings to the wedding before she passed away.

8.2.1.4 Adverse changes in dietary habits

On a more day to day basis, for most of the women interviewed, austerity measures applied and all expenses deemed unnecessary were cut down. When asked about the items which were cut down, it was interesting to note that the purchase of usual food items was found to be among the

main ways in which they tried to budget themselves. In many cases, food treats for children such as biscuits and chocolates (and grandchildren for some) became rarer or at times cut down.

Similarly, many interviewees have stated that they have cut down on the quantity of meat and fish they consumed as well as on drinks. The following interview extracts are indicative of the changes in food consumption which are alleged to occur as the household adapts to the loss of income. In a few of the interviews with those who were the hardest hit with the loss of income, it was clear that women were making a lot of sacrifices particularly in their capacity as mothers, as shown below. For instance, they made sure that their children and husbands had eaten properly before they had what was left.

‘(...) Earlier when me and my husband I would go for the monthly provision, over and above what we would buy as foodstuff for the month, I could take some additional things,... you know to watch TV...peanuts, crisps, cakes, biscuits, chocolates, ice-cream...not only the kids but me also i like it...my husband would disapprove but I told him that I was paying for it...But this is all things of the past now. We are having to tighten our belts and we buy just the essentials unless it is an occasion like a birthday (...)

‘(...) Finance is so tight that we have to be practical... I used to consume ‘Red Cow’ but at that same price I can get two cartons of ‘Milgro’ (a brand of milk) so I go for Milgro. We used to eat meat and chicken all the time now we eat it only during weekends...Fortunately sometimes my in-laws bring in some meat for the children as they know we are in a difficult phase...Even my husband who used to have a couple of rhums at his dinner every night has stopped this bad habit and drinks only during weekends (...)

‘(...) When I was earning I used to provide for a yogurt as dessert to everybody in the house but even this we can’t afford now (...)

(...) To avoid wasting food, I make sure that I cook exact quantities of rice and pulses. We can’t waste...I would never have thought that one day I would have only rice and dholl for dinner. Yet this is what I have been having most frequently lately...sometimes with a chilli...It’s misery I tell you but what to do...

8.2.1.5 Impact upon dependent children

As mentioned earlier, given that women generally had an essential contribution in childcare and meeting the material needs of children, it is no surprise that job loss affected children. Apart from the changes in nutritional habits explained above which also concerned dependent children particularly those who were still in education, there were a number of other lifestyle changes which were imposed upon the latter. These concern mainly restrictions on their leisure activities as well as their consumption habits.

However, it is also important to note that for most of the participants, there were attempts at minimising the extent to which their children would be penalised as a result of the drop in income. As such although in some cases, pocket money given to them was drastically cut down or more control exercised on what they would spend their money on, the interviewees argued that they were putting their efforts in maintaining their material needs (mainly their food, transport and private tuition fees). These points are neatly summed up in those selected extracts which have been somewhat similarly echoed by many other interviewees.

‘(...) Of course, if they ask for money to buy pre-paid phone cards to call their friends, I will say no...or if they want to go to the cinema or shopping... they know we can't afford... but if they need a book or if they need something which will benefit their education me and my husband won't refuse’

‘...When I was working, I used to buy accessories, shoes or get churidars sewn for my two daughters... for each wedding they like to wear new dresses... but now this has stopped... They tell me themselves that they don't want...’

‘The day I learnt the factory closed down I came home and told my son if he doesn't want to find himself in my situation he better study and get a good and secure job...I am putting all efforts to make him pass his exams well. He has one more year to go and we prefer to make sacrifices and pay his tuition fees...With a good certificate he won't have to face what I went through.’

However in a few cases, the household budget was so affected that the impact upon children was inevitable. In particular, it affected the payment of private tuition fees¹⁷. For example, one respondent who had two boys, the younger one who was studying in Lower Six and the elder one sitting for his A level made the former stop taking tuition and focused the financial efforts on the latter as his exams are deemed more important.

One important point to consider here is that in each and every way that their children are affected by those changes/restrictions, many of the interviewees display a feeling of helplessness and often even of guilt. This is neatly captured in this quote by Ameena who explains :

‘ all I ever wanted and couldn’t get, I made it my mission in life to provide my children...When I was earning, I would pamper them and got them used to what I could afford...But now I feel useless when I deny them things such as a phonecard or get angry with them everytime that they want something that I can’t give them...’

8.2.2 Psychological and Health Impact

Other significant implications of job loss are the associated psychological and health impacts. While the majority of women interviewed indicated clearly that the process of losing their job and the uncertainties which lay ahead of them were emotionally and psychologically taxing, perhaps the most important observation is that the more the dependence on an income in order to meet the household expenses, the more affected the respondents were psychologically and in some cases there were even health problems that developed allegedly as a result of job loss.

In fact, in several of the cases studied, the sudden loss of income has left them with a psychological trauma with symptoms such as insomnia, acute headache, feeling of apathy, loss of appetite as well as a feeling of discouragement. One of the interviewees for instance often had nightmares about the way in which she learnt about being sacked.

¹⁷ In Mauritius, private tuitions are accepted as a necessary evil of the educational system. Students and their parents view it as a prerequisite to complement education through public schooling with private tuitions in order to maximize chances of success.

In general, the following clichéd statements come up recurrently across the various cases studied, indicating the commonality of the problems faced by this social group: “ *La tete fatiguer*” i.e. « *mentally perturbed* » ; “ *li zier pas fermer la nuite*” i.e. « *restless, cannot sleep at night* »; “ *ine arrive cotte pas conner ki pou faire* » i.e. « *completely helpless* ». Although none of the respondents have gone as far as to express suicidal tendencies, there was nonetheless a few women who sounded depressed and in many cases there was a strong sense of discouragement that could be noted especially when opportunities to lift them out of their situation are limited – as explained in more detail in the next section – particularly among those where the income was vital for the household economy.

8.2.2.1 Lack of preparedness

In most cases, it was the financial crisis described earlier which was affecting those women psychologically. Most of them were not psychologically nor financially prepared for the closure of their factories. As mentioned in chapter 3, unlike employees from other sectors who can rely on a pension based on the number of years of service, EPZ workers do not get this facility. All they received from their employers were the compensation, as mentioned earlier, computed according to their length of service.

Respondents from two firms stated that their employers observed the general rule of giving them appropriate notice while in other cases respondents complained of a total secrecy so that the latter carried on with their work as usual in order to meet the final orders. They heard from middle management of the closure only 1-2 weeks beforehand.

The majority of women have felt used and abused by their employers. To the majority, owing to the relatively lengthy time periods that they have been employed in their respective firms, they considered it as an utter disrespect that they have not been given more notice. The reactions of being laid off were also dramatic and mirrored the testimonies provided below:

‘I remember falling sick, everytime I have stress I have severe migraines, my eyes turn red and I tend to vomit...On the day I learnt that I felt as if a close one had died and all my friends who are usually so carefree all felt that it was a bad blow as we needed this income to survive and without that we didn’t know how we would manage.’ (*Mary-Jane*)

‘Like all human beings it was a very bad news...I was very disappointed and I felt my life was changing as I was very scared how me and my family would now cope without this income. My husband is a mason and sometimes he spends 2-3 weeks without a job, I am the only one who has been earning regularly and thinking all this was very upsetting. I broke in tears.’ (*Josee*)

However, it is noteworthy that there have been press reports confirmed in my interviews with labour inspectors and trade union officials that there have been cases of factories which closed down without employees made aware until the very morning they came to work. Although there has been no research on the profile of those employers, again it would appear that the larger firms which the cases studied were from, had shown some more respect for their workers’ rights. According to one trade unionist interviewed in the preliminary phase of the research, concealing information about the imminent closure of factories was a deliberate strategy in order to ensure that workers meet their production targets.

8.2.2.2 Concern for their household as a source of anxiety

All the respondents were particularly worried about how to meet not only their own needs but also the needs of their children and the other household expenses. In the words of one respondent Amira (42) who has two daughters still at college:

‘ It is easy to say don’t worry... friends, family, neighbours all say : have courage...but I can’t bear to see my children suffer...I have known poverty and I always thought that I would not let my children know what it is...but for the new year I could not even buy them new clothes...I couldn’t even afford to buy them new uniforms...when I think of all this I feel depressed.’

It is interesting to note that in some cases, at the time of retrenchment, these negative psychological impacts had not been felt immediately. Instead it is over a longer time process that these have gradually started to affect those women. For instance, in the case of Rajni:

“ When they said that the factory was kicking us out, I did not feel any particular sadness... It was winter and I was finding it hard to wake up early for the morning shift at 7:30 am and I have to prepare the meals also... I have a sinus problem... In fact, I actually thought that it was a good thing... I could spend more time at home preparing the children... I could watch my favourite TV serials... Those were things I could not do in a normal working week... I could even take the bus and go and see my mother and spend time with her... But with time, after the new year, I couldn't find any other employment and I was being more and stressed from staying at home doing nothing...”

Another respondent somewhat similarly argued that after 1-2 months of sitting idle at home and reminiscing about the dire financial situation in which she finds herself ‘was more stressful than when in employment.’

8.2.2.3 Isolation from friends from the factories

Many respondents also explained that over and above being a source of income, work was also for them a way of life in itself. Their lives were structured around it. Adjusting to life without work was more difficult for them emotionally than they had anticipated. Allegedly, the friendship networks which they were part of within the factory settings were particularly important to them. They had established some important rapport with their friends.

Some respondents for instance argue that friends were more important to them than their relatives and they could confide in them. Job loss has in this sense severed her ties with those friends. Accordingly while friendship ties at the factory used to provide emotional (as well as financial) support to one another, especially in moments of domestic tension and financial difficulties, job loss has in this sense severed their links with those friendship networks and led to what many respondents have expressed as a feeling of isolation.

A few of the respondents who could rely on other household members for financial support mentioned that they tried to stay in touch with their friends from work via occasional phone calls or paying them a visit or inviting them over. However others found that in circumstances where each cent matters, keeping in touch becomes relegated behind other priorities.

8.2.2.4 Health complications

Without underplaying the seriousness of the psychological tension and trauma arising from job loss, it appears that in some cases respondents have also developed medical conditions. When asked about the health problems which they have contracted following their job loss, severe headaches, loss of appetite, gastritis and anemia seem to be common among this group. One respondent has experienced hair loss and cutaneous problems which she attributes to stress.

Four of the respondents have reported that they have contracted non-communicable diseases such as hypertension and diabetes in the months following their lay-off. Nearly half of the respondents have also experienced important changes in their weight, most of them stating that they have lost a lot of weight, while two of them have stated that they have tended to pack on weight by not doing any of their usual activities. Although it is difficult to assess whether there is a direct link between these conditions/ diseases and the lifestyle changes occurring as a result of job loss or whether these are outcomes of the age factor and genetic predispositions, the possibility of a link cannot be denied.

8.2.3 The ability to participate in social life

Apart from the economic and psychological/health implications of job loss, respondents also point to important changes in their ability to participate in their usual social activities. It is clear from the interviews that the ability to participate actively in social activities is significantly affected as a result of the significant loss to the household economy. Respondents and in many

cases their household members adjust to this income crisis by limiting their leisure and social activities as a coping strategy.

The examples of such constraints abound in the interviews. The majority of respondents have argued that they could no longer attend as many social events such as weddings, birthday parties, etc as before, as these involve transport costs, purchase of gifts and new clothes for themselves and their children as they were now on a tight budget. They had to select those that involved their closest relatives.

Some women, particularly among the Hindu where a sense of belonging to family is pronounced, argued that they used to go to visit their parents or siblings at least once a week but after their job loss they have cut down on those visits. Even phone calls to relatives are monitored in order to avoid making excesses.

For most respondents, their job loss has resulted in cutting them off from the life they were leading before. Some have used the term ‘tout seul’ ie ‘all alone’ to express the isolation which they feel both mentally when they feel they are shouldering the stress of unemployment alone and physically when their friendship support networks are severed as a result of not working together nor having the means to keep in touch.

We saw earlier that even children were affected in some cases. For example, limits were placed on phone calls or on the purchase of calling credit for their mobile phones. Children were also deterred from going to the cinema or other outings with friends again due to budgetary constraints. However, apart from the example of one child who had to stop taking private tuition – but without stopping schooling – removing their children from education was not an option that was envisaged largely due to the value placed on education.

However, in contradiction to the above trend observed in the majority of cases whereby, participation in social activities are deliberately prioritized and cut down, in a small minority of cases the opposite seems to occur. Four respondents, all of whom are hindu women, have found in their retrenchment an opportunity to have more time to engage in social activities, and visit

close kins, particularly those within walking distance. In fact, those women have found in their doing so an escape from the tension of being idle. In addition, it is interesting to note that two of them also send their children more regularly than ever (especially during weekends and public holidays) to their parents so that the latter can be better fed and treated. We shall come back to these points at a later stage when looking at some positive outcomes which unemployment may paradoxically lead to.

8.3 Obstacles to women's integration back in paid employment

Another issue which further exacerbates these disempowerment processes that are set in motion once women lose their jobs in the EPZ is their difficulty, in general, to get back in paid employment. As can be expected as soon as they lose their jobs, many ex EPZ workers look for other opportunities to get back into paid employment. However, as shown in the following, there is a clear lack of opportunities for them to reintegrate the workforce. In addition the *process* of looking for or even the attempts at creating further opportunities are as explained below very taxing to people who are already afflicted with impoverishment and all the associated problems.

The main ways in which the Mauritian Government has been attempting to address the issue of labour shedding in the EPZ and help the laid-off workers are in terms of are in the following terms : (1) matching them with potential employers in the same sector through the organisation of job fairs; (2) training them in order to redeploy them into other economic sectors and (3) promoting micro-enterprises /self-employment. While there is a lack of official data available on the extent to which these strategies are beneficial to women who have lost their jobs, the findings of the present small-scale study are particularly helpful as they shed light on the weaknesses of the current policy initiatives by looking at the practical difficulties which they involve.

8.3.1 Awareness of existing initiatives

It is widely acknowledged that lack of information and awareness of existing measures to address a problem often leads to its perpetuation. In the context of this study, it is interesting to

note that all those interviewed indicated that they were aware of all the initiatives which Government or sometimes even their employers had in place in order to support those who have lost their jobs. Nevertheless, in spite of being aware of and even making use of some of the existing initiatives had not been of much help to them as the following explain in more detail.

8.3.2 Job Fairs

All the women interviewed have attended job fairs which were allegedly advertised and organised once every three months by the Ministry of Labour. This was subject to demand from the part of employers according to Ministry of Labour officials and trade unions interviewed. Such demand for workers in a phase within which, as explained in chapter three, the sector was shrinking and restructuring itself can be seen as paradoxical. However that could be explained by the fact that there were still some large firms, mainly Mauritian mergers and/or acquisitions which catered mainly for their niche markets principally in Europe which still were receiving large orders and those firms still needed extra hands. The job fairs sought to attract potential employers which had vacant positions with those who had lost their jobs.

None of the women interviewed had found the job fairs useful. On the contrary, many of them have been very critical about them. A whole gamut of issues ranging from the places where the job fairs are held which requires spending on transport, to alleged (or at least perceived) discrimination and favouritism in recruitment have been advanced as sources of concern and even revolt in some of the interviews.

For instance, the holding of the job fairs in places which the Ministry of Labour deemed strategic by virtue of location so as to attract people from the neighbouring districts¹⁸, still required people to travel. Many interviewees echo the point of view of Celia who argues that :

¹⁸ The employers recruit from people who live close to their factories in order to save on transport costs.

‘ When we have to be very careful about each and every cent spent, even transport costs become a problem. I have been to at least four of those job fairs and it is always the same companies and I also notice the same people going there for a job...I don’t know who gets recruited but I spend a whole day and more than Rs 100 in transport changing 2-3 buses and what does it help ?...Just inconveniences... I’m still looking for a job...’

A few of the interviewees believe that they have been the objects of discrimination and this is why they feel that they have not got any job despite attending several job fairs. Some argue that their age is the most important source of discrimination and that employers have tended to recruit among the younger women.

Interestingly one woman alleges that males have had a tendency to be preferred to females. In her case, both herself and her husband had lost their jobs when the factory where they worked had closed down. However, after a few weeks, the husband got himself a job as a checker while she never got any offers. Upon further probing, I found that the husband used to work as a supervisor and the job of the checker could be seen as a demotion in other circumstances but a badly needed source of income in this case.

One issue which develops in several interviews and which is particularly indicative of a sense of disempowerment is the gradual loss of hope of ever finding a job after each and every effort at attending a job fair - which also applies to remaining jobless after taking training lessons. In sum, as one woman succinctly puts it :

‘each interview at each job fair is a strong hope that God will help...I will get out of this nightmare...But each time it is like falling flat on my face again...Until I stopped going to any of them...I don’t believe I will get a job anywhere ... I found it easier to stop hoping and resign than to hope and cry...’ In fact, many of the women interviewed seem to go through such processes before ultimately resigning to their fate of not ever finding another job and in turn abandoning the search for another job.’

8.3.3 Reskilling

As mentioned above, another strategy to redeploy the laid-off workers back in paid employment had been through the provision of training facilities for them so that they could acquire new skills. The idea behind such training is to increase the chances of those women to get jobs in other employment sectors.

In this respect, the findings of the interviews corroborate the general observations outlined in chapter three whereby the ex-EPZ workers were not making efficient use of the facilities provided as expected. In effect, the majority of women interviewed had taken cognisance of the variety of areas of training available but had not actually been through the process. Somewhat similar reasons were provided as to why they had not done so. Again factors such as age (which in most cases in the local context was used to evoke the inability to concentrate and study) coupled with their already low educational level which again led them to doubt their ability ; as well as their lack of hope in their chances of getting any job even after their training had discouraged many of them to even embark on any such courses. Some of the interviewees also evoked reasons such as the relatively distant places where the courses were held and the transport costs involved as other deterrents.

However, there were also a few who had gone through some of the courses. From these interviews, at least two points are noteworthy. First contrary to popular perception, the training provided was not meant to train people with a relatively high age and low educational profile as ex-EPZ employers to take employment in booming sectors such as IT and tourism. A wide variety of courses were available. For instance the few women who subscribed to training schemes trained in confection of dresses, cookery, techniques of making pickles or plumbery and the necessary skills to work as female security guards respectively. Second, some of these courses are not necessarily for people to get a job in an existing enterprise but also to encourage self-employment and micro-enterprises.

Interestingly even those women who have undergone those training schemes have struggled to make use of their newly acquired skills to earn themselves an income. For instance, Josee who

enrolled on a plumbers course argued that she has learnt the basic skills of the trade although she admitted that she requires more practice in order to become a recognised plumber. She also feels that as a woman in an essentially male trade in the local context, she has found it hard to compete with men. In her own words,

“So far, I have mainly been getting some jobs through word of mouth...It is mainly in the neighbourhood when somebody has a leaky pipe or tap...that too is more like doing them a favour... people don't understand that I am trying to earn a living out of it...I feel embarrassed to charge them also...One neighbour even asked me if I new a 'good' plumber who could instal her washing machine as this requires a professional...

8.3.4 Entrepreneurship and retrenched workers

In fact although a lot is being done by Government to democratize the economy and develop SMEs to take up opportunities offered by globalization, very few laid off workers are interested in entrepreneurship or indeed have the mindset to do so. The above few women who have acquired skills to start up their own micro-enterprises have given a range of reasons from the shrugging of shoulders (which seem to indicate they don't know why they haven't and wouldn't consider) to more practical and cultural barriers.

In fact from the interviews, it was found that women were generally reluctant to consider launching their own enterprises. Some who considered themselves as financially dependent upon their husbands did not want to further take risks by investing or borrowing to invest. Others did not see it as an option as they argued that apart from the basic technical know-how in a potential area, they lacked the other abilities (accounting, sourcing, marketing, managing).

These points can be illustrated by using the example of Sita and Sumitra who both learnt how to make various types of pickles with locally available seasonal fruits and vegetables had considered starting such an enterprise but were faced with the inabilities to market their products. They were also reluctant to take a loan and invest in packaging and marketing their pickles as they were scared to take the risks of making losses. Also while in Sita's case her husband and

family were supportive, this was not the case for Sumitra's side of the family. The latter's husband and in-laws were allegedly considering it a waste of time and effort.

8.4 Gender impacts within the household

We now turn to the gender impacts which job loss has entailed for the laid off workers within their households. As explained earlier, in the interviews, an attempt was made to capture the retrospective experiences of what it meant to them as a gender group to have been employed, more particularly in terms of how these women consider themselves to have been empowered. Probing through the respondents' experiences and meanings attached to paid employment in the factory has thus enabled the capture of some interesting insights into, first, the contribution which it had on women's gender status and identity as well as the distribution of gender roles and authority patterns within their households and second, to gauge the changes if any which occurred in these respects as a result of job loss. This section is thus broken down into the above two sections which allow one to compare and contrast the *pre* and *post* implications of unemployment for women in terms of the gender consequences within the household.

8.4.1 Meanings attached to paid employment prior to job loss

Although as shown in chapter two, the links between export-oriented employment and women's empowerment are not clear-cut, nonetheless it is widely assumed that women's access to paid employment is empowering by conferring a certain degree of financial autonomy, and by extension a tendency towards equality in terms of the gender distribution of roles and authority within the household. As explained in chapter three, this question has not been adequately examined in the Mauritian context.

From the findings obtained through the interviews, although it seems clear that paid employment has not placed those women on an equal footing with man, there are nevertheless some indications of progress. As elsewhere, such progress has mainly been in the following terms: a

certain level of financial autonomy of women, which has also given her a say in decision making in the household and some sharing of domestic tasks seem to have occurred as a result of entry into paid employment. In some ways, these points somewhat corroborate findings from the FGDs with current workers.

8.4.1.1 Some degree of financial autonomy

Across practically all the interviews, when asked to explain what work meant for them, it was clear that the income earned did signify a sense of financial autonomy and empowerment as noted from the recurrent usage of the expression '*travail ti permette moi diboute lor mo propre li pied*' ie 'work enabled me to stand on my own feet'. For the majority of respondents who got married *after* they started working in the EPZ, paid employment had given a majority of them some degree of financial independence first from their fathers/parents and afterwards, at least partially from their husbands.

The following captures some examples of how respondents reacted when I probed into how paid employment had *financially* empowered them. Many echo the point made by Mary-Jane below which refers mainly to the ability to purchase things that are desired or needed without having to rely upon their husbands or any other relatives. It can also be noted that having an income is accompanied by a sense of security:

“ I was able to stand on my own feet when I was employed... I didn't need to rely upon anyone to buy things I wanted or what the kids asked me for...I could buy the things any woman needs, clothes, shoes, make-up...not all the time but there are so many occasions... I contributed in running the household, when something is over in the kitchen, I could go and buy it... When you earn money it is something else... you are not scared to put your hands in your pocket when you have any difficulties...”

Somewhat similarly as pointed out by Angelique:

‘It’s only when you don’t have something anymore that you realize its importance. I cannot say that I was totally financially independent because most of my income went in the house, the children, etc... but I didn’t have to account for the money I spent on things which I needed. We can say that within what was possible and sometimes it was not easy as my husband does not have a stable income, I could manage to buy the things which I needed. I was not totally financially independent as I have responsibilities but at the same time I was earning and I was not dependent neither...’

Nonetheless, similar to the findings of the FGDs, it is interesting to note that upon closer scrutiny, this alleged financial independence seems somewhat open to question. Looking at these women’s own conceptions of financial independence as well as how and on what they disposed of their income is indicative of the extent to which they are actually (and objectively) financially independent. To most of the respondents, financial independence is seen mainly in terms of their own ability to afford things they wanted or needed without having to rely upon their husbands for the money. However, it seems that the things women wanted seem to gravitate mainly around children’s needs and wants, as well as on domestic items such as food and kitchen items, interior decorations *and then* on their own needs. In many instances, the fact that the income earned by women played a significant contribution in running the household economy already makes it difficult for women to use their income for their individual needs which as understood from the interviews usually cover clothes, make up and accessories and other shopping needs. This point cuts across all ethnic backgrounds.

In addition, while not denying *some* economic benefits which paid employment confers, to the majority of women, these benefits have themselves not come automatically but instead have developed over the lifecycle. An interesting point is that among the Hindu and Muslim women interviewed where patriarchal values tend to be more rigid, it has taken a lengthy process of conflict and negotiation with their husband before some progress could be made. For example, as Amira, one of the Muslim respondents mentioned:

“I was only truly independent when I was single...since I got married, I had to help my husband in running the household... for the future of the children...at first he wanted me to give him all my money... he planned the household budget...but when some of my friends wanted to go to “la foire”¹, and I had to ask for money...my own money to my husband...I felt bad and I told him that I wanted to keep part of it...we had many arguments over this and I even went to stay at my mother’s place for some time...he could not understand...he had an old mentality...I kept a little part of the money for myself and gave him the rest...later when children started to grow up he told me to deal with some of their expenses...to avoid all this stress, I preferred to give him my salary and he makes the budget...but when I need money I don’t ask I take! Even when I lost my job it is the same thing I ask and I get but the problem is he doesn’t earn that much...”

Somewhat similarly, Sita, a Hindu respondent, argues that when she got married some twenty years ago, she lived in an extended family unit where every income earner was giving their income to her in-laws who then met the household expenses. Although she resisted this idea outright as she felt that she had no control over her own money, she had to abide by her husband’s will. According to the respondent, the husband himself was aware that it was not practical but he felt obliged to do this as a duty towards his parents and the respondent in turn felt duty-bound towards her husband. It was only after the father-in-law passed away and the extended family unit broke into nuclear units, that the respondent argues she started to enjoy some financial freedom and could buy things she wanted without feeling that she had to share them with others.

8.4.1.2 A certain degree of self-development, assertion and freedom

Another issue which came out from the interviews was that employment which is seen here not just as the income earned but also as the relations made from working outside the private sphere (employer-employee, employee-employees, meeting other people outside the factories) also led to a certain degree of self-development and emancipation as well as a sense of recognition of their own self-worth.

Most of the respondents have argued that accompanying both the income and the fact that they were working outside the domestic sphere had made them become more mature, assertive and

confident. For instance, when asked to give some concrete examples as to how they have become more assertive and confident, some women have given examples of things which they used to do only when accompanied by someone for instance their husbands or another 'knowledgeable' person. This is captured for instance in the following quote by Babita:

“Before (starting work) I did not feel capable of doing things like going to the doctor for myself or for the kids, I would never go to the bank alone, I would never go to a shop alone. I would need my husband or another person who knows these things. I was also scared of taking lifts and escalators. It is thanks to going out to work which has made me feel the confidence to do so.”

Likewise many other respondents argued that with the combined effects of earning an income and having friends from the factories they were able to do many things that they did not know how to do before joining work. The examples emanating from the interviews include doing a range of mundane activities *which the earlier generations of women did not do* such as engaging in leisure activities such as outings, shopping, cinema, etc without being accompanied by their next of kin.

With their friends influence, some women mentioned that they were able to vary their dressing styles, making up and assert their femininity. Ameera for instance remarks that:

“ As a muslim I have always worn a traditional scarf over my head and leggings underneath my dress... not burkas but traditional muslim wear... but with time I have started changing my dress codes...of course I don't wear indecent clothes...women have to respect their bodies but...I don't wear things which make me uncomfortable and hot like the scarf and the leggings... At first it was an issue at home and some people from my community were staring at me with evil eyes... but eventually we all got used to it and I see many other muslim women less conservative in their dress codes ... ”

Based on the findings, somewhat similar to the issue of financial independence, it appears that this emancipation has not been an automatically granted phenomenon but has in certain instances come out of an active process of negotiation and disputes even, in turn leading to adjustments being made by both conjugal partners. Rajni, for instance, argues that the factory enabled her to broaden her mindset and to see beyond the family nexus. By sharing her domestic concerns with

her friends at work and exchanging views, she has gradually started to challenge certain sexist practices such as serving her husband his towel for the shower and being solely responsible for all the household chores, etc...

Another respondent who joined the factory after her wedding, found in it an escape from patronizing in-laws and eventually found the experience as one which made her “tini tete are zotte” ie to resist them. In fact in the majority of interviews with Hindu women the issue of ‘patronizing in-laws’ have come up. It is widely acknowledged in Mauritius that when women, particularly of the generation of those studied, get married they are in many cases required to adjust to the way of life of their husbands’ family. In Mauritian folklore, the clashes that arise when in-laws are too controlling and imposing are widely acknowledged. While it seems that employment has helped to challenge this hierarchical relationship, there is still a clear need for further research on how the entry of Hindu women in paid employment has helped to challenge this aspect of the patriarchal system also.

8.4.1.3 Decision-making within the household

Related to the degree of emancipation seen above, many respondents have argued that access to income has helped them has been in terms of their ability to participate actively in decision-making in matters concerning their personal lives as well as their children’s and the household. Earning and contributing significantly to the household economy have entitled women to this right although once again, it does not seem to have occurred naturally but as a result of a process of negotiation and conflict, as illustrated in the case of Angelique below:

‘We fought a lot at the beginning and I wanted him to help out. He was not tidy at all and we divided our tasks, he still does less but at least he does some. Everything regarding purchases he does, when I come back from work I don’t need to go out at all to buy anything, he knows people at the market and we get good vegetables, he pays the bills as he had more time, he used to take the children to school when they were in lower classes. He also did some cleaning and maintenance of the house. But all the other chores, washing, cooking, ironing, everything was me and even the children have his bad habits.’

While most of these respondents argue that the decisions that they take are joint, they nonetheless admit that it is their husbands who generally have a last word particularly on important issues such as taking loans, construction and other major expenses such as purchase of land or vehicles to their husbands. Similar to earlier findings about the limited success which setting up microenterprises have among women, it is equally interesting to note that the respondents in this study do not feel that they can start-up a microenterprise. Apart from the lack of confidence in themselves, the fear of failing and further financial loss to their already precarious conditions are seen as major deterrents. In addition, upon further probing, it can be noted from a significant number of respondents that there seems to be an underlying feeling that it is more of a male thing to go through the process of securing loans and starting a business than a woman.

8.4.1.4 Limited Progress in terms of Domestic Division of Labour

We saw in Chapter Three that the entry of women into the productive sphere had not been accompanied by men taking a share of the caring role which has been traditionally ascribed to women. Similar findings also emerged from the FGDs and these are further corroborated in my interviews also.

What is interesting to note is that rather than finding this as a problem, instead there seems to be an acceptance of the traditional division of labour with the primary responsibility for childcare and doing activities such as cooking and washing up clothes being mainly women's. This was particularly so among women from Hindu and Muslim backgrounds who still, and in spite of having been in employment at the time, feel that it is their duty to do so. However they did point out that in the events that they were sick or on occasions such as celebrations of religious rituals, they would seek their husbands' help and they would receive it.

Labour-saving devices such as hoovers and washing machines have facilitated women's tasks but have certainly not taken these responsibilities away from them. Besides, the weekends were

generally used by women for catching up on a thorough cleaning of the house with some help in cleaning the yard by men.

It is worth noting that creole women have on their part called for a more balanced division of labour in the household. In fact, in two cases, the women argue that their husbands had the responsibility to prepare the children and send them to school as they usually left for work earlier than their husbands when they had their jobs. Practically every creole woman interviewed sought men's help in cooking and washing up.

'When I was working, I demanded that our domestic work is distributed fairly. This is important as I am not interested in doing chores around the house when I am dead tired after work. My husband works from home and I left it on him to prepare the children for school and clean the house. He also helps with cooking. His work is easier and he does not have any employer so he has time, I have to take a bus and be on time.'

A few women have mentioned that their husbands have over time taken over the task of shopping for the weekly groceries and vegetables at the market. However shopping for monthly provisions of essentials was mainly women's task.

Although the small number of cases studied cannot be generalized, it is perhaps worthwhile to note that when analyzing the responses, it seems that Hindu and Muslim women tend to be more likely to accept and abide by the traditional hierarchical gender relationship and the unequal gender division of labour. They are more likely to take it for granted that the responsibility for childcare and domestic duties is primarily theirs and they are also more likely to submit to male authority. The few Creole women studied tend to be more assertive and challenging towards their husbands and their respective roles. Again there is need for further research to substantiate these points.

8.4.2 Impact of retrenchment on gender status and roles within the household

While the above has provided some indication what paid employment generally meant for those women while in employment, we now turn to the transformations which the respondents state have occurred as a result of the loss of job. My prior assumptions were that losing the premises upon which the above gains (however limited) have been made would entail an erosion of those gains made and lead to a 'return to the domestic sphere'. However, a more complex picture seems to emerge.

Interestingly, based on the findings received, with the absence of income, other benefits such as the emancipated attitudes and participating actively in decision making in the household are not automatically lost. Some women report that they have not seen any changes in the distribution of power within the household as a result of their retrenchment, although some do argue that they have seen changes in the attitudes of their husbands but which they do not attribute to conflict over gender equality but instead for practical reasons such as having more free time. For instance as argued by one respondent:

'I have always done more work than him at home. But when I was working he helped and when my children got bigger they have started to help and I didn't find it that hard but I have to do everything now. In some of the quarrels he did tell me to make myself more useful.' (*Angelique*)

In fact it appears that in the majority of cases there is an alleged detachment of women from issues of gender equality as noted from the respondents in the study. In general, from the findings, it appears that women, at least those who were interviewed, see themselves primarily as mothers and then wives *and then* individuals in that order. This finding also came up in the FGDs with women who are actually working as seen previously. This is indicative of the deep-seated influence of patriarchal values on these women. The main concerns with meeting the needs of their children (mainly schooling and other material needs) as well as the needs of the household combine to relegate issues of equality in the gender distribution of roles and authority patterns in the family to issues of lesser significance. When they lose their jobs, this lack of concern with issues of gender equality is even more pronounced as more immediate concerns

about fulfilling the needs of their children and their households take precedence. By and large, it is mainly in this way that women in this study feel that they have been disempowered.

In a few cases, as explained earlier, the respondents have mentioned some form of embarrassment and even a feeling of culpability when having to ask their husbands for things which they need. Some of them even feel that they have lost the ability to choose or decide what to buy as the money is not coming from their pockets. These points are captured in the following testimonies:

‘I don’t have any control over my life anymore and I feel a burden. I wished I had saved more and then I would at least have pulled my weight. All these years I have helped out but now I feel useless’ (*Mary-Jane*)

‘I feel that I have fallen in my own eyes. I feel that I am responsible for what the children are now suffering. I wanted them to have happy and carefree lives but now I am giving them a lot of tension and stress and I feel useless when I can’t make them happy. I feel everytime they want something I have to deny them’ (*Valency*)

Perhaps the distinction to be made, based on how the respondents view it, is that this lack of choice is not a gender issue but simply one of adjustment to a challenging financial situation. Moreover, although as a result of their unemployment those women stay at home and perform domestic labour, there seems to be evidence that they themselves consider it as normal and rational to do this. This can be seen from the quote below:

‘Being a housewife has changed the pattern of my life. I find myself doing all the domestic chores. I do get some help occasionally as I said earlier but as they all think that I am free now I can manage alone. But I don’t mind and I am not complaining. At least I can be useful in one thing.’ (*Rajni*)

8.4.2.1 Impacts on self-image and dignity

For some of those women, all these changes have impacted negatively on their self-image. Having to be cautious about what they spend their money on; having to ask for money to get things which they used to buy out of their own income were some of the main examples which

led some of the women to feel 'inutiles' ie useless. Some even culpabilised by feeling a 'burden' on their husbands and feeling that somehow they have failed their household. This blow to their self-image also seems to have a spiraling-down effect. For instance, in Valency's case,

"I have lost the desire to wear something nice or make up! How can I dress up in such a situation? When I look at myself in the mirror I feel that in 6 months I have aged by 6 years. I don't feel I am the same person!"

8.4.2.2 Domestic tension

In some cases, it was not only the fact that they had lost their jobs which brought about stress but also the changing attitudes of their close ones. For Sita, for example, although at first her husband sounded very understanding and compassionate, with time his behaviour started to change. In her own words,

"After a few weeks, he has started to feel irritated for every little thing...when I tell him we need money for this or that...not for me personally but for the house or the children...he feels annoyed and this makes me feel so useless..."

The following extract from a case study with Anelique further illustrates the downward spiral that job loss can entail.

Box 3 : Case Study #2

Angelique 49, married with 3 children, 2 daughters still at college and one son who is a seasonal hawker lost her job when Leisure Garments closed down. For more than a year there was a rumour that the factory was on the brink of closing down but their boss has reassured them that the factory would not close down...And then all of a sudden when they least expected it, a human resource manager announced that the factory would close down and it did so within 3 weeks.

Angelique found herself in dire financial difficulty overnight. As most of those who lost their jobs the adjustment to living without an income was very painful. Her children were still dependents. Her son worked occasionally

but his income was barely enough for his own use. Her husband was a car mechanic and was not earning a fixed salary. Since her job loss, she describes that her whole life has turned upside down.

Although her husband was never violent before, within a few weeks after she had lost her job she noticed that her husband started to change his demeanour. The expenses of the household had become the root cause of domestic conflict. It started with the husband demanding details of how each and every cent is spent. At first, in spite of feeling that this was degrading to have to account for every item spent, she acknowledged that she was no more earning and they all had to adapt to the situation. In fact she felt guilty that she was somehow being unable to fulfill some of her responsibilities. However, with time, this excessive amount of control was becoming too much for her to accept and often ended in mutual verbal abuse. The situation has on a few occasions even deteriorated so much that she has been battered for answering back. She has even contemplated leaving the house but she has nowhere else to go. Even the children are being negatively affected by that conflict. She felt that she could no more recognise her husband in spite of having been married for more than 18 years. She is of the opinion that her husband has seen her more in terms of the income that she brought to the household than what she was as a person. It was only after she lost her job that she realised how much she meant to her husband.

8.5 Benefits of retrenchment

From the above discussion, it is clear that job loss brings about a number of problems which as illustrated in many cases can also be described as 'disempowering processes'. While not disputing the detrimental situation which a majority of those who have lost their jobs find themselves in, particularly when their income was a significant contribution to their household economy, yet it is worth noting that in a minority of cases, job loss did also somehow have some positive outcomes.

Although in the majority of cases, similar patterns could be identified in the interviews whereby the interviewees complained of how adjusting to unemployment brought about the social, economic, psychological and even health problems, a minority did give indications as to how they *also* derived some positive benefits out of job loss. It is important to emphasise here that it is mainly those respondents who had other household members absorbing the financial impacts of their loss of income, who tended to paradoxically derive such benefits.

The main ways in which such interviewees stated that they found some benefits out of unemployment are in terms of ‘not having to go through the same routine as when they were at work’, ‘being able to spend more time with their family and kins’, ‘having the luxury of following the sitcoms’ among others... .

One respondent argued with a sense of humour that she felt that she was on a long-term vacation :

‘How long you think one can stress oneself...I tried to look for a job... I couldn’t get any...I have to stay at home...Better I enjoy it... Like I am on a long-term holiday...no need to have the same morning routine (...) no need to go through the stress at work (...) there are of course many benefits of working especially the money...but with my husband’s help and some care as to what we spend money on I am now used to stay at home, chat with the neighbours, do the household chores without any stress...care after the family...’

In the case of two hindu interviewees who happened to be sisters- in-law living near a temple, when they lost their jobs, they found themselves with more time to participate in the regular religious/cultural activities performed there. By doing so they argue that they found some peace and solace that they state they could never get when they were working in the factory.

The case of Salima, illustrated in the following, is particularly relevant here. It is distinct to the saturated picture of disempowerment processes which are in play as a result of unemployment. Contrary to all the other interviews, Salima finds losing her job in the EPZ as a trigger for a positive change in her life, as described below.

At least in Salima's case, empowerment does not come only from having a paid job but more importantly from having the workplace-friendliness and flexibility as well as the possibility to take care of her children, husband and household. Given her strong family-centred values, empowerment to her would be only a means to an end ie meeting her household needs rather than an end in itself for her as an individual.

Box 4 : Case Study #3

Salima, 42 years of age, lost her job when Summit Textiles Ltd closed down. She had been working as a machine operator at that factory for the last 8 years. She started working since she got her second child as her husband (a primary oriental language teacher) alone could no longer meet the household expenses.

She found it a necessary evil to work at the factory as she felt that the work was very demanding and stressful and there was no flexibility from the part of management. Her second child had developed asthma and often needed to be taken to hospital. She generally found it hard to get permissions and once even got a warning. The need for money made her carry on working in spite of her frustrations.

When the workers were laid off, she was concerned about the financial implications but on the other hand she felt a huge burden off her shoulders. Her husband and close family being supportive she spent the first few weeks enjoying being a housewife, chatting with the neighbours and following the sitcoms. She was also able to spend more time with the children.

About two months after she had lost her job, her brother-in-law who was launching a catering business asked her if she wanted to provide some help and make some money. The catering business involved the making of rotis and dholl-puris and 'gateaux-de-l'huile'. The work was literally next door as the whole family lived in different houses but in the same yard. Her working hours are generally from 0530 to 1300 and she usually works everyday. Her main task was to fry the snacks and every two hours, her brother-in-law came to fetch the snacks to take it to the selling-points in town.

She was earning Rs 3000 a month, a salary which was some Rs 2000 less than what she was earning. However she believes that this difference is offset by the fact that she did not have any of the stress of *'waiting for the bus ; dealing with the supervisor ; having to work overtime ; working in the noise and coming home exhausted.'* In addition she saved on transport and the purchase of food at the factory canteen and she argues that she derived some other major advantages

Her main advantages were that she could go back to her place at any time even while working to help her husband and her kids get ready to go to work or school. She could also whenever she had some free time, prepare her own meals/dinner. When she would get back to her place she had time to do the household chores instead of having to wait for the weekends. In the evening, she could spend quality time with her family. She felt that she could spend more time with her children especially when they wanted help with the homework ; watch a movie with the family. She felt that there was no tension in the family, no arguments and conflict arising from her snapping after a long day at the factory. Overall she felt that her whole family was happy and she felt that this change of work and the amount of time that she had to take care of the family was the main reason why all this was now possible. Being able to bring this difference to her family was all that counts to her and is what she considers to be empowerment.

8.6 Summary

The evidence gathered from the semi-directive interviews, in a general manner, questions the notion of empowerment from EPZ employment by highlighting the multiple disempowering processes at work which become the all-encompassing reality of those women as they lose their jobs from the factories as a result of the job insecurity which characterise this sector. Together with the adverse economic impacts on the material living standards both for the individual and her household, there are important adjustments to lifestyles which as we have seen often isolate them from engaging in their usual activities which include or make them feel included.

In addition, this group also lacks the attributes to get back into the labour market. While the Government and employers in this sector are adapting to the changing global environment by diversifying economic activities, there is little scope for these women who are hampered by not only their high age and low-educational profiles but also a deeply ingrained gender complex as well as their lack of abilities or interest particularly in acquiring entrepreneurial skills to lift themselves out of their situations. Given the shortcomings of the current support structures and the lack of initiatives of this group in developing alternative livelihood strategies, they may very well be marginalized from the on-going development process.

In many ways therefore, retrenched workers are denied the resources and the ability to exercise choice and control over their lives which paid employment conferred at least to a certain extent. Given the multiple vulnerabilities which they now face, the argument that comes to the fore is that EPZ employment in spite of the possibilities of empowerment which it can potentially offer also paradoxically carries the risk of disempowerment as a result of the negative impacts of globalisation on this sector.

CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION

This study has set out to critically assess the extent to which export-oriented employment in Mauritius, more particularly in garment manufacturing, has empowering effects upon female workers who make up the bulk of its workforce. I have focused mainly on how far the entry of women in the EPZ has been accompanied by positive transformations not only in their material conditions but also in terms of improvements pertaining to their gender status, role distribution and power relations within the household and a general extension of their choices and possibilities. More specifically, I locate the Mauritian EPZ within the current context of trade liberalization and global competition which is impacting heavily upon labour in this sector to highlight the pros and cons of this employment sector for women and interrogate the notion of empowerment.

A related and equally important aspect of this study has also been to examine the impacts of job loss on those women who have lost their jobs in the EPZ as the sector restructures itself to face the onslaught of globalization processes. This dimension is added to the discussion as labour shedding has been an integral feature of this sector globally. Ignoring it in a debate on the linkages between this employment sector and empowerment would have presented only a partial picture.

Empowerment is employed in this study mainly in terms of the power 'to do', 'to be able' and of feeling more capable and in control of situations, following Oakley (2001) which paid employment can give rise to. I also draw from the interpretations of empowerment as offered by scholars such as Batliwala (1994), Kabeer (1994; 1999) and Mosedale (2005) to gauge the extent to which factory work has enabled women to challenge unfavourable gender relations, control their earnings as a resource of power, set their own distinct agendas and by the same token redefine their gender roles in terms of extending their possibilities.

In brief empowerment is seen as a transformational process and employment in the EPZ as a potential trigger of this transformation is assessed, more specifically within the private sphere.

By focusing on how paid employment translates into employment for women in the private sphere, I therefore sought to study the extent to which there was evidence of an improved self-identity and status, more economic freedom and a sense of autonomy, equal say in authority patterns, decision making and distribution of workload, among other social transformations.

In terms of the methodological approach adopted, I have used mainly an interpretive approach in designing, collecting and analyzing the primary data for this study. Emphasis has been on first-hand accounts from female EPZ workers/ex-workers which I have complemented with informal interviews with key stakeholders in this sector for purposes of triangulation. This emphasis on first hand accounts is justified by my interest in subjective definitions and meanings attached to employment and empowerment/disempowerment. As I argue, while there is a widespread assumption that paid employment in this sector is inherently empowering, more in-depth and detailed studies are required to shed light upon the more complex ways in which gender, export-oriented employment and empowerment engage with each other in a context which is ever-dominated by the workings of global capitalism and patriarchy.

There is a logical assumption that the better the working environment and the conditions of employment for women, the greater the likelihood is for their empowerment. However from the findings of the FGDs with current female EPZ workers, it would appear that at the level of the workplace itself there are many factors which hinder rather than enable empowerment to take place. In effect, it appears that conditions of work are not only lagging behind other sectors of the economy, but they are allegedly deteriorating. While some progress has been made in terms of the rights of workers and the working environment, particularly in the larger enterprises where meeting labour standards are among the exigencies of their clients, there are nonetheless many lacunas which arguably impact upon workers. The EPZ remains a harsh place to work where the imperatives of meeting tight deadlines pressure workers often to work compulsory overtime, and make it difficult for them to reconcile their work with family obligations. Supervisors and management are often criticized for lacking the flexibility and employee-friendliness.

Perhaps more importantly, in terms of job security and relative wages, particularly given the impacts which trade liberalization and global competition from other low cost producers are

having on this sector, rather than progress it would appear that the opposite is under way. With the ever-increasing costs of living locally and where it is hard for them to make both ends meet at the end of the month as it is, it is all the more stressful to be concerned about the danger of losing their jobs. Workers are particularly concerned about their job security and there is a widespread concern that their conditions of work may fail to improve at par with other sectors of the economy given the reluctance of employers to raise their costs of production. In short, rather than seeing paid employment in this sector as a vehicle towards independence and improved social status, various factors at the level of the workplace itself lead one to interrogate the value of this sector as a stepping stone for empowerment.

More specifically at the level of the household, there appears to be little evidence that working women have achieved anything like equality within marriage in contemporary Mauritius. Generally, they are still primarily responsible for domestic tasks in spite of some progress made in this sense in terms of male participation in some activities. In terms of decision making, in spite of their contribution to the household economy, they clearly have less power than their husbands within marriage. These findings seem to challenge any empowering potential that paid employment in the EPZ have for women.

Whilst many commentators on the issue of gender empowerment have stressed on the empowering effect of earning an income, the general findings from the FGDs by no means indicate this. When the issues of how far women have a control over their earnings and how it is used at the level of the household are investigated, the findings which come up seem to challenge the potential for financial independence. The already meager wages in this sector are themselves not disposed of according to the wish of the female salary earner.

However, rather than these women regarding this as a missed opportunity for their empowerment, they ultimately tend to consider it their duty to commit their income to their household expenses rather than complain about it. Men do not systematically take over the income of their wives but nevertheless, the expectations (or indeed dependency) of their husbands and/or other household members on the income of the women workers whose contribution to the sustainability of the household above the poverty threshold is vital, leaves

little if any margin for fulfilling their own material needs. On the basis of such findings, one can arrive to the conclusion that in spite of earning an income, financial empowerment does not seem to be a reality for women working in the EPZ.

In a nutshell therefore to current female EPZ workers, experiences of empowerment as a result of taking up employment in this sector are mixed with this work bringing about some improvements but which perhaps are a long way towards empowerment. It appears that patriarchy and the exigencies of the domestic setting as well as the limited purchasing power of the income – so as not to use the notion of ‘poverty’ – are impediments to women’s ability to use employment as a stepping stone towards their empowerment.

Yet, the real value of the job including both the income derived and the other non-material transformations brought about by being in employment (in terms of identity, self-image, friendship networks...) becomes easier to gauge paradoxically when it is lost. The interviews with laid-off workers in this study have established detrimental effects on the material living standards not only for the retrenched workers but also for their households.

What I have also attempted to show is that export-oriented employment is inherently devoid of any job security particularly in a context dominated by globalization processes which can be antithetical to the cause of labour in general and female labour in particular. A study of the implications of being hired and fired in this sector according to the imperatives of capital is indicative of the disempowerment processes which are involved in EPZ employment.

For most of the women studied, there is a clear link between job loss and poverty as the salary earned was the difference between staying above the threshold of poverty or sinking into poverty. The loss of revenue not only led to severe household budget restrictions and affected all the household members, school children in particular, but also seriously altered their social life being even the root of domestic conflicts in some cases. In addition, in most cases, job loss has led to a degradation of the retrenched worker’s self-image and it has also been associated with negative impacts on her psychological and physical health this has also affected other members of the household. In most cases, job loss and the need to adjust to the loss of an income which

was important to the household economy has led to changes in lifestyles which have considerably reduced their participation in their previously normal social activities.

While perhaps the most likely solution to these problems is to find another job and source of income, evidence from the case studies and FGDs and interviews as well as secondary sources indicate that prospects to join the labour market are restricted for those women.

In order to be globally competitive, the sector has been undergoing a deep process of restructuring which involves the remaining firms in the sector which are locally-owned, climbing up the value chain and producing lower volumes but higher value-added garment products for niche markets. While the survival of the sector was being open into question in the wake of the dismantling of the MFA, more recent trends have been more encouraging. However this process of restructuring has not given an opportunity for the retrenched women to get back into this sector. By promoting lean enterprises, investment in capital intensive production and also using Madagascar for labour-intensive activities, it appears that these women, who have generally spent most of their working lives in this sector often with one firm, are now excluded from this sector of employment. Evidence from the case studies in fact highlights the discouragement of these workers into joining this sector after more than 2 years of unsuccessful attempts.

In addition, other sectors of employment where opportunities are emerging require skills which do not match the profile of those retrenched workers who generally have a high age and low educational profile. As the country further expands other sectors such as tourism, Business Process Outsourcing, and offshore activities, it is hard to reconcile the image of the IT-illiterate, reserved, middle-aged woman who has toiled her working career in front of her sewing-machine or in cutting, ironing and packing garments in the factory, with the requirements of these sectors in terms of the profile of their workforce. The cases which I have studied in fact confirm that these women themselves feel that they are not compatible with these requirements, or that they do not have the hope nor the interest in joining these sectors.

Self-employment and the setting up of micro-enterprises which are also advocated as a solution by the state do not seem to be particularly attractive to those women. In this respect the case

studies outline a number of constraints, both practical and ideological which women face in helping themselves out.

What has also been noted from the interviews is that there seems to be a feeling of resignation to their fate. While they were not engaged in trade union activities while in employment, there is no evidence of those women regrouping as a distinct pressure group in order to voice out their concerns to the state. Again, from the cases studied deep-seated gender biases seem to make it seem 'beyond the reach' of those women to organize themselves. On the other hand, it is also indicative of the lack of representation and power which women as a gender has in society.

The welfare state in Mauritius is limited in terms of what it offers for this new category of unemployed. Apart from institutional support facilities which it offers where the emphasis has been on training, redeployment and empowerment, the evidence from interviews seem to indicate that beyond the rhetoric, little improvement has actually been noted in the situation of the retrenched female garment workers.

In many ways therefore, this study raises the concern that a significant fraction of those who have been laid-off from the garment sector face the threat of social exclusion and this has implications also for other members of their households, especially children. While factors such as the ability of other earners in the household, availability of assets, and the use of formal and informal support networks can help mitigate the impacts of social exclusion, those women who do not have access to those, are likely to be the worst hit. The challenges for the integration of those women are therefore strong.

In a cynical way, all this study has done has been to relate a mere episode of the contradictory ways in which globalization works. It interrogates the sustainability of the EPZ as a strategy of development. Instead of working for the poor, it is clear that it is the poor who work for globalization and it is a classic Marxist scenario of labour being hired and fired at will.

Thus in spite of Mauritius having been hailed as a model of development, a rare example of an African country where Structural Adjustment Policies have actually worked and in spite of being

until recently regarded as a so-called “winner” in the globalisation jargon, it still remains at the mercy of globalisation forces. Although the present Government is putting forward the agenda of “ Maurice: une Ile Durable” ie “Mauritius: a sustainable Island’ with a focus on sustainable development, this study shows that livelihoods as exemplified by employment in the garment sector is itself not sustainable. The challenges for a model of development which is truly sustainable are therefore immense.

In brief, while not denying many benefits which it has brought about for women, it is difficult to interpret these as empowerment as other factors such as patriarchal values and the workings of the global capitalist system exert pressures which constrain and mitigate the ‘ability’ of women to become more assertive, confident and autonomous. More importantly, participation in the global economy for female workers can be construed as a double-edged sword for local female employees. It can signify employment and all the advantages that income brings about particularly to women but it is by no means fixed and everlasting. Instead, characterizing the uncertainties which accompany globalisation, this form of employment is unstable. In particular it brings about, as this study shows, dramatic and life-changing consequences not just for them as individuals but also for their households.

For EPZ employment to be truly empowering for women, a number of changes at the level of the workplace in terms of workers’ treatment and improved wages which in turn demands a fairer globalization, are required. However, equally important, there is also a need for a changing mindsets not only among males but also among women themselves who as we saw in this study often tend to regard their subservient roles within the family as subservient.

Finally, it is worth noting that as in most studies, there are several areas which have been brought to light but which were nonetheless beyond the scope of this small-scale research to explore. For instance, it is clear that female employees in the EPZ are not a homogeneous group in spite of having some common characteristics. Here, as some of the findings have pointed out, cultural factors associated with ethnic, religious or traditional beliefs can mediate the empowering potential of employment. Further investigations are clearly warranted in order to examine the relationships between ethnicity and ability to overcome cultural barriers to empowerment.

Similarly another issue which may require further academic attention is the treatment of female foreign labour in the country which preliminary evidence from this study reveals is a matter of concern. This is yet another social group which again illustrates the paradoxical links between globalization, export-oriented employment and empowerment. These issues all tie in with ongoing debates around the extent to which economic globalization processes are compatible with respect of the rights of workers, more particularly in terms of the extent or indeed the ability of the state and trade unions to promote and protect workers's rights.

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APPENDIX 1: The Multifibre Agreement (MFA) (1974-1994) and The Agreement On Textiles And Clothing (ATC) (1995-2005)

The Multifibre Agreement (1974-1994) and The Agreement On Textiles And Clothing (1995-2005)

The first Multifibre Agreement (MFA) came into force in 1974. It rests on a system of clothing and textile export quotas allocated to developing countries by developed countries. The industrialised nations established these quotas as a means of protecting their own sectors in the face of increasing competition from countries where goods could be produced at lower costs, such as Asia. The quotas allocated to highly competitive exporting countries, such as the South Korean Republic, tended to be very limited, while those allocated to those that exported less were high.

This led clothing exporters to move all over the world in search of the quotas available, contributing to the creation of millions of jobs in countries that previously had a very small clothing export base, or none at all, such as Mauritius, Cambodia or Bangladesh. Indeed, as a developing country reached its export quota ceiling, production was redirected to countries with either unfulfilled quotas or no quotas at all. Some of these states did not have the infrastructure needed for the harmonious development of this sector, but still saw a vertiginous rise in the growth of clothing manufacturers thanks to the quota system alone.

The MFA, renewed on three occasions, (the last renewal was in 1991), profoundly altered the nature of competition in the textile and clothing sector. It also contributed to complicating the production process, by forcing companies to spread different production stages over different factories in different countries. As a result, it is not unusual to find textiles bought in one place, cut in another and sewn in a third.

The MFA was a major departure from the basic rules of GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs), particularly the principle of non-discrimination. Consequently, the countries involved in the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations (1986 to 1994) agreed to progressively integrate the textile and clothing sector within the GATT framework of rules on non-discrimination. Signed on 1 January 1995, the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) established the conditions of this integration process, to be completed by 2005. The ATC replaced the Multifibre Arrangement. The ATC thus established the progressive phasing out of the quota system between WTO members over a period of ten years.

Extract from Grumiau S (2004)

APPENDIX 2: Country Factsheet

Location	South West of the Indian Ocean
Area	Land: 2,040 square kilometres (Mauritius, Rodrigues, Agalega and St. Brandon)
Land/use	Agriculture:43%, built-up areas: 25%, public roads:2%, others 30%
Population/people	1,269,000 comprised of 52% Hindus ; Creoles of African orgin (27%) Muslims (16%) ;Chinese-Mauritians (3%) ; Franco-Mauritians (2%)
Languages	English and French (Official) ; Kreol (Nationally spoken but still informal language)
Independence	12 March 1968 (from United Kingdom)
Legal system	Based on English and French laws
Political governance	<i>Type of government:</i> Westminster type of parliamentary government <i>Head of State:</i> President, Rt Hon. Sir Aneerood Jugnauth, G.C.S.K., K.C.M.G., Q.C <i>Head of Government:</i> Prime Minister, Dr The Honourable Navinchandra Ramgoolam (since July 2005) Elections: Last held in 2010
Main Economic Indicators	GDP at market prices (Rs 265 bn) (2009)) Real GDP growth: 5.3% (2009)) GDP per capita: 7545 USD (2009) GDS (% GDP): 15.9 GDFCF (%GDP): 26.0
<i>Budget</i>	Revenues: Rs 41,847 million (2008/09 Estimates - US \$ 1.47 billion) Expenditures: Rs 51,233 million (2008/09 Estimates - US \$ 1.8 billion)
<i>Trade</i>	Exports: Rs 69,482 million f.o.b. (2007 Estimates - US \$ 2.44 billion) Imports: Rs 121,081 million c.i.f. (2007 Estimates - US \$ 4.26 billion) Current account balance: Rs -12,497 million (2007 Estimates - US \$ -0.44 billion) Import cover 24.9 weeks
<i>Exchange rate</i>	US \$ to Rs 28.45 (31 December 2008 - BoM)
<i>Unemployment Rate</i>	8.5%

APPENDIX 3: FGD THEMES

**FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION WITH
CURRENT EPZ FEMALE
EMPLOYEES**

**(ENGLISH VERSION TRANSLATED FROM
FRENCH/CREOLE)**

(Fieldwork for Masters Degree in Sociology by Research
at the University of South Africa)

Aveeraj Sharma Peedoly

Preliminaries:

- 1. Introduction and brief explanation to participants of the purpose of the study and why they were selected.**
- 2. Brief explanation of what a FGD is and what contribution was expected of them**
- 3. Brief explanation of my own role as moderator**
- 4. Compilation of Basic Profile and Relevant Details of Participants**
- 5. Administering the FGD according to the main thematic areas.**

Theme 1: Conditions of work at the factory

Q1. How do you perceive the following conditions of work in the EPZ sector:

- Salary
- Work Environment
- Employee-Friendliness of the workplace (e.g. facilities, amenities, employer's social responsibility...)
- The right to resort to Collective Bargaining and its Effectiveness

Q2. Are conditions of work improving or deteriorating in the factories? What is the morale at work?

Theme 2: Work/Family Balance

Q3. How easy or difficult is it for you to reconcile work and family responsibilities?
(E.g. working hours, flexibility from employers in case of emergencies concerning close relatives,...)

Theme 3: Changes brought about by employment within the household

Q4. To what extent would you say that your job has entitled you to the following:

- Equality in household tasks
- Equality in childcare
- Equality in decision-making (Elaborate on which types of decisions)

- A sense of Personal Freedom
- Self-Development (Improvement in terms of self-confidence/self-respect/identity assertion)
- Friendship Networks
- An overall better quality of life

Theme 4: Disposal of Earning

Q5. Do you have an absolute control over your earnings?

Q6. In general how and on what do you spend the money that you earn? How does your husband spend his money?

Q7. How important is your income to the household economy?

Q8. Are you earnings adequate for what you would consider a satisfactory standard of living? (if relevant how else do you manage?)

Theme 5: Importance of the Job

Q9. How important is this job to you in terms of your identity and self-esteem?

Q10. To what extent would it affect you if you were to lose your job ?

APPENDIX 4:

**SEMI-DIRECTIVE INTERVIEW GUIDE
(Translated from Creole)
RETROSPECTIVE STUDY OF WOMEN WHO
HAVE LOST THEIR JOBS IN THE EPZ**

**THIS INTERVIEW IS ADMINISTERED AS PART OF A LARGER STUDY ENTITLED:
'IS EPZ EMPLOYMENT A STEPPING STONE OR STUMBLING BLOCK FOR THE
EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN? EVIDENCE FROM MAURITIUS.' TO BE
SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA IN FULFILLMENT OF A
MASTERS DEGREE IN SOCIOLOGY BR RESEARCH.**

AVEERAJ SHARMA PEEDOLY

UNIVERSITY NO: 3500-904-7

PART ONE: SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENT

- 1. Name and Locality**
- 2. Age**
- 3. Highest Educational Level Achieved**
- 4. Occupation at time of employment**
- 5. Ethnic and Religious Background**
- 6. Personal Situation**
- 7. Income Background at time of employment (Self and Household)**
- 8. Factory of Last Employment**
- 9. Length of employment at factory**

PART TWO : HOW DID YOUR JOB BENEFIT YOU WHILE IN EMPLOYMENT?

- a. For example, what can you tell me regarding how your income helped you in terms of your own standard of living?**
- b. To what extent would you say that you were financially independent?**
- c. To what extent has your job helped you in terms of freedom from the authority of parents?**
- d. To what extent has your job helped you in terms of your choice of whom and when to marry?**
- e. To what extent has your job helped you in terms of freedom from the authority of husband?**
- f. To what extent has your job helped you in terms of bringing about an equitable division of labour within your household?**

PART THREE: DISADVANTAGES OF FACTORY WORK FOR WOMEN

- a. Now let's come to the disadvantages particularly in terms of the conditions of work attached to factory work for you as a woman?

PART FOUR: LIFE AS UNEMPLOYED

Let us now come to the issue of your present status as an unemployed person. Could you please state...

- a. Length of time spent unemployed since you lost your job
- b. Were you informed prior to being laid off
- c. How long before?
- d. How did you learn that you were fired
- e. Do you know the reasons and if so what were they?
- f. What were your reactions to being laid off?
- g. Did you receive any compensation and if so was it adequate?

PART FIVE: IMPACTS OF UNEMPLOYMENT ON SELF AND HOUSEHOLD

We now turn to another issue: What are the impacts of your job loss upon you and your household?

- a. How do you manage with your loss of income?
- b. Could you please describe the Impacts on your Material Living Standard :
- c. How is this affecting your own self
- d. How is this affecting your Household
- e. How is this affecting your Children
- f. Any other other Impacts: Psychological/Health Impacts

PART SIX: GENDER IMPACTS

I will now ask you additional questions which concern the specific ways in which you, as a woman, (and the multiple roles normally expected of women in society – childcare, domestic chores, your level of authority and involvement in decision making in the household) have been affected :

If you have made any progress along these lines during the time that you were employed, in what ways would you say that this progress has been eroded, taking into account the following:

- a. In terms of the gender distribution of labour now that you are at home**
- b. In terms of your financial autonomy**
- c. In terms of your ability to participate in the decision making process**
- d. In terms of your self-identity**

PART SEVEN: COPING MECHANISMS

Finally I want to ask you a few questions related to your Coping Mechanisms since you have lost your job:

- a. Have you received any help from your ex- Employer?**
- b. Have you sought help from other people, Government, institutions and if so whom?**
- c. Are you currently looking for a job either in the EPZ or elsewhere?**
- d. How aware are you of current State Support to women who have lost their jobs in the Factories?**
- e. Do you make use of Job fairs**
- f. Have you made use of any of the Training Schemes provided and if so which ones**
- g. Have you made use of micro-credit schemes?**

PART EIGHT: PERCEPTION OF STATE SUPPORT FOR LAID-OFF WORKERS

- a. What are your thoughts about Government support to those who have lost their jobs in the EPZ?**

The End

Thank You for your participation in this exercise

APPENDIX 5:

UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

A. Common Themes set to all interviewees

1. To what extent do you think that it is easy for women to work in the EPZ sector?
2. What are the conditions of work in the EPZ sector? Are these improving or deteriorating?
3. How is the sector being influenced by globalization processes?
4. What are the challenges facing employment in this sector in the context of globalization?
5. According to you, what is the mood in the sector at the moment?

B. Specific Questions to Specific Stakeholders

Trade Union Officials

1. What is the role of trade unions in this employment sector?
2. How strong is trade union activity in this sector?
3. What are the main shortcomings in representing workers in this sector?
4. What are the difficulties which globalization pose for workers in this sector?
5. How would you describe the linkages between the trade unions, the Government and the employers?

Ministry of Labour Officials

1. Generally, do you think that the rights of workers at the workplace are respected?
2. How does the Ministry of Labour ensure that employers adhere to existing legislations and respect the rights of workers?
3. At the moment many factories are closing down and laying off workers. Describe the institutional support facilities which the Government has set up in order to help laid off workers.

Representative of Mauritius Employers Federation/ Employers

1. Generally, do you think that the rights of workers at the workplace are respected?
2. How do you ensure that the rights of workers are respected?
3. The EPZ sector has been relying a lot on foreign workers. Why is this so and what implications does this reliance on foreign labour have for local workers?
4. What are the main strengths and limitations of both categories of workers?

Chinese Interpreter

1. What can you tell me about the conditions of employment of Chinese workers? Are they similar or better than those of local workers? How do they compare with employment contracts in China?
2. What is the profile of foreign workers who come to work here?
3. Are they satisfied with their working arrangements?