

## Chinese Women in Industrial Home-based Sub-contracting in the Garment Industry in Kuala Lumpur: Neither Valued nor Costed

LEE LEE LOH-LUDHER

### ABSTRAK

*Artikel ini meneliti keadaan yang menyebabkan lima-puluh lima wanita Cina yang telah berumah tangga meninggalkan sektor formal dan memasuki sektor tak formal, khususnya untuk melakukan kerja di rumah secara sub-kontrak. Mereka menerima sub-kontrak daripada pembuat pakaian untuk menjahit, memotong kain dan menyulam di rumah sambil menjaga keluarga mereka. Artikel ini juga membincangkan sama ada kerja yang dilakukan oleh wanita itu dinilai dan dihargai oleh syarikat, famili dan pekerja/wanita itu sendiri. Pekerja sub-kontrak di rumah ini merupakan tenaga kerja simpanan yang mudah untuk disingkir, luwes dan murah. Mereka membentuk satu sektor tak formal di dalam struktur yang formal bagi membolehkan pembuat pakaian memperolehi keuntungan. Walau bagaimanapun, sungguhpun pekerja sub-kontrak ini memanfaatkan industri pakaian dari segi membantu memastikan keupayaan kesaingan dan keluwesan industri itu, namun industri tersebut tidak menghargai atau memberi nilai kepada sumbangan mereka itu. Begitu juga suami wanita/pekerja itu tidak menghargai sumbangan mereka kepada kesejahteraan keluarga mereka.*

### ABSTRACT

*This article examines the circumstances leading to fifty-five married Chinese women's withdrawal from participation in the formal sector to enter the informal sector specifically in home-based sub-contracting work. These women sub-contract from the garment makers to sew, cut and embroider at home while caring for their family. The article also discusses if the efforts of these home-based sub-contractors are costed and valued by the factories, their families and themselves. The home-based sub-contractors provide an industrial reserve army that is truly disposable, flexible and cheap. They create an informal sector within the formal structure giving the best of both worlds for the extraction of surplus by the garment makers. However, although home-based sub-contractors offer tremendous advantages to the garment industry to ensure its competitiveness and flexibility, the industry, evidently, does not value them nor are they costed. Even the husbands fail to value these women's contribution to family well-being.*

## INTRODUCTION

This study undertaken on women home-based sub-contractors in the garment industry in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, offers a glimpse of the ordinariness as well as the uniqueness of the life of these Chinese women home-based sub-contractors, who are otherwise invisible. It examines the circumstances leading to the women's involvement in home-based sub-contracting. The aim is to generate an appreciation of the complexity of their lives, their predicament over the conflicting demands of productive and reproductive work.

These women sub-contract from the garment makers to sew, cut and embroider at home while caring for the family. They talk about their relationships with the factories, their daily work schedules, methods of compensation and payment and the nature of their work. They tell about their past, present and their future.

The study illustrates their relationships with their husbands and children, friends and other relatives; and the factories from which they sub-contract. Are their toil, efforts, contributions and sacrifices valued and costed by their families, the factories and by themselves? The researcher hopes that a deeper interest and concern for the complex issues related to home-based industrial sub-contracting can be developed.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study attempts to place some of the questions on Gender and Work center-stage. It discusses the entry of married women into the labour force and the feminization of labour in Malaysia with increasing foreign investment in search of cheap labour for labour intensive industry. It also observes the withdrawal of these married women from participation in the formal sector to enter the informal sector specifically in home-based sub-contracting.

Only Chinese women were chosen as the subject of the study as this is the most dominant group of home-based sub-contractors in the garment industry. The ratio of Chinese to Malay workers in the garment industry in 1981 for example is 4.3:1 (Hing 1986).

This study hypothesizes that Chinese women in the garment industry became home-based sub-contractors as it allow them to meet the demands of their reproductive role as institutionalized by the patriarchal kinship structure of the Chinese families, and which gives the women almost whole and sole responsibility of the domestic sphere. The socialization of these women into this traditional thinking of gender division of labour causes them to accept it as natural and they resort to home-based sub-contracting in order to meet the demands of their reproductive role. This allows them to generate main or extra income for the household and participate in the productive role. The study also aims to see if

the efforts of these home-based sub-contractors are costed and valued by the factories, their families and themselves.

## METHODOLOGY

The fieldwork area is Kuala Lumpur, primarily in areas of Chinese concentration – Salak South, Kepong, Jinjiang, Old Klang Road, Sungei Besi and Cheras. Kuala Lumpur was selected because according to the concentration of apparel companies, as at 31<sup>st</sup>. December, 1993, the Federal Territory ranked third, after Johore and Pulau Pinang (MIDA 1993). The focus on Kuala Lumpur was also because the sub-contractors could be located and identified in previous encounters in another research. This was an important reason for the choice as there was no formal register or record of sub-contractors to form the sampling frame. As home-based workers had the tendency to avoid authorities, contacts from earlier researches formed the main lead and were vital to locating and identifying the home-based sub-contractors.

The fieldwork for this research was carried out during different periods beginning October 1992 until February, 1996 over a period of almost four years and updated till early 2001. The research involved two samples. The first sample is that of the factories, tailors, boutiques and other garment manufacturers/makers that employ the services of home-based sub-contractors. The second is the women home-based sub-contractors.

Ideally, the two samples were drawn randomly from the respective sampling frames. However, both populations were not known. There was no existing list of all garment makers, especially small and micro-enterprises and owner operated ones. A few were members of industry association like Malaysian Textile Manufacturers' Association (MTMA). Even when listed in the MTMA directory or Yellow Pages and other advertising directories, there was no indication if they used the services of home-based sub-contractors and more so the women home-based sub-contractors.

The home-based sub-contractors, on the other hand, were not part of the registered workforce and therefore, there was no register or record of the population of sub-contractors to use as sampling frame. MTMA and garment factories had informal listing of names of small and medium size factories, which sub-contract from manufacturers but did not have a record of home-based sub-contractors. Thus the total number interviewed in person was 62.

The home-based sub-contractors were introduced by two groups – the factories, tailors and boutiques which sub-contract and sub-contractors who introduced fellow sub-contractors. The snowball sampling of those introduced by garment makers and fellow sub-contractors was a more effective and fruitful way. Due to the self-perception of the women home-based sub-contractors of the informality of their work (not 'serious' work) and their preferred avoidance

and distrust of authority, these home-based sub-contractors, were not a ready group for interview. The introduction by a common acquaintance allayed fears and suspicions and literally opened the doors.

A total of 152 names were collected from the garment makers interviewed. However, only 126 were in the Kuala Lumpur area, with others outside of the area of fieldwork. Out of these 126, only fifty-five agreed to be interviewed. This high refusal rate of the home-based sub-contractors was mainly due to fear of exposure and the reluctance to reveal themselves.

A manageable number of thirty was selected through the process of discriminate sampling for multiple in-depth interviews, home visits and case study. The number of thirty was decided to achieve a balance of generality and intensity. Given the limitation of time coupled with the willingness of sub-contractors to expose and invite entry to their privacy, the number had to be manageable. The women were primarily the sampling unit while contextual information was collected from the other members of the households i.e. the husband, the children, and members of extended families. All the husbands, children and members of the households, nuclear or extended, were interviewed and involved in participant observations.

The researcher in deciding on the method faced the dilemma of balancing the intensity and the generality. The desire was to have intensity without losing something in generality. The method chosen reflected the variations and the reality. A qualitative rather than a quantitative approach was adopted as it was more sensitive to the women being studied and it better captured the voices of the women in their own understanding and terms. This was also founded on the belief that the women have not one but many voices and the individual and the collective voices needed to be heard.

The methodology selected allowed the researcher, also a woman, to develop a special relationship with the subjects – the home-based sub-contractor. The researcher employed a feminist perspective that advocated not a singular methodology but a combination of methods (Reinharz 1992). Interviews, multiple in-depth interviews, participant observation, case study were among the methods used.

The qualitative statistics gathered from the research helped to present an overview of the profile of the home-based sub-contractors in the study, although the interpretation of the data had to go beyond this superficial explanation. As the study involved women who rarely gave opinion about themselves or their work publicly, the analysis had to take into account more than what were articulated. The general profile was thus supplemented by the larger analysis gleaned from the voluminous observations made during the numerous visits to the homes besides oral accounts given by the women. These biographical accounts were also supplemented and complemented by the notes of attitudes and emotions from participant observations, which gave 'flesh' and 'spirit' to the responses. There were, of course, instances where the assertions risked

being unsubstantiated, influenced by presuppositions or pre-dispositions. This was unavoidable as the interaction between the researcher and the sub-contractors was mutually influencing and interactive over the long period of the study. However, through the use of extracts from women's own voices, their stories, it was hoped that any distortion or bias could be minimized.

The multiple in-depth informal interviews over time proved to be thought provoking for the women and stimulated self-awareness and self-analysis throughout the period of study. This evolving process too, could not be presented in mere figures and statement of facts but was captured through the case study method.

The analysis of the predicament faced by the women working at home involved various inter-linkages between the individual household and the wider social and related economic structures. The complex and intricate relationships between individuals (e.g. sub-contractors and husbands, children and extended family members), and individuals and institutions (e.g. sub-contractors and garment makers) illustrated the centrality of the household as the site for home-based production and reproduction of social life. It offered a picture of the lives and predicaments of these women within these dynamics.

This study is written in a manner to invoke a special relationship with readers by emerging a norm of self-reflexive reporting of the discussions/observation process. It was apparent that the women have multi-layered reality – lived reality, reality constructed by need, reality based on patriarchal ideology, each one as real as the other. All these realities are valid, if not equally so. These differences in their realities have to be included in the analysis.

The feminist interests in the analysis also required a redefinition of some concepts, which might be tainted by the women's own valuation of domestic role of women and productive work. It sought to examine the value women placed in their work, their definition of 'success', which encompassed factors other than economic value. The women helped to revise concepts and understanding, helped the researcher to see the world differently, uncovered previously neglected and misunderstood worlds of experience. e.g. worker's satisfaction, and worker and employer relationship.

Though the case study method was used as a methodology, the information obtained was not presented in the form of cases because of the voluminous length of each case. However, the voices of these women still needed to be heard and therefore, were presented as 'her stories' organized under the different topical headings. The voices gave powerful illuminations and profoundness to the analysis.

## THE GARMENT INDUSTRY AND FEMINIZATION OF THE LABOUR FORCE

From the study, it was apparent that most of the Chinese women home-based sub-contractors interviewed entered formal labour force, mainly as workers in the garment industry, while they were single and young. They, however, withdrew into the home-based sub-contracting work after marriage and child bearing.

The increasing opportunity for employment was opened to these women during the 1970s when the government of Malaysia launched aggressive promotion for foreign direct investments. These women were presented by the government investment brochures as unskilled and therefore, cheap labour with the manual dexterity suitable for the labour intensive work such as sewing operation. This attracted investors from the industrialized and newly industrialized countries like Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore to Malaysia in search of lower cost labour. What began as import-substitution efforts quickly developed into export-oriented strategies. The influx of capital movement from these countries facilitated by changing social and economic factors was part and parcel of the new international division of labour where the capital intensive, high technology and knowledge-based industry remained in these newly industrialized countries and the labour intensive industry moved to Malaysia. The garment manufacturers from Singapore, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong relocated to Malaysia and concentrated primarily in predominantly Chinese areas in Johor, Penang and North Perak region and the Klang Valley.

The garment industry grew rapidly and by the 1990s, it experienced double digit growth. The five-year period between 1985-1990 saw a 245 percent rise in the export earnings. The industry, however, remained labour-intensive and employed almost 120,000 workers, 85 percent of whom were female. It could be said the industry's success premised on the backs of these women workers who constituted the cheap labour on which the industry depended.

The garment industry has drawn on a pool of industrial reserve army of girls especially Chinese girls from the New Villages and rural areas. These girls, had experienced changing social conditions of the post *Merdeka* (Independence) years which opened greater opportunity for education to them especially in the 1960s. These conditions had created in them the desire to be gainfully employed. They formed a readily available pool of workers. Because they were readily available, they were made relatively cheap. This pool of industrial reserve army was activated to serve in the newly created secondary labour market of unskilled workers for the assembly lines. The men continued to dominate in the primary labour market and were paid a family wage.

The garment industry was able to attract a phenomenal number of young Chinese women from the industrial reserve army into the garment manufacturing establishments due to three main reasons. Firstly, these girls, who studied in

Chinese-medium schools, had little alternative employment due to the increasing emphasis on the use of *Bahasa Malaysia* in the preferred teaching, administrative and sales jobs. Secondly, these girls were attracted to the opportunity of skill learning, which may enable them to improve their future e.g. with the opening of a tailor shop. Thirdly, they preferred piece-rate payment since it offered them the possibility of higher earnings through improved skills and greater diligence. The number of workers in the garment industry grew from 31,094 in 1985 to 120,000 in 1993. This represented ten percent of the total workforce of the manufacturing sector. The Chinese workers comprised 79 percent of the total number of garment workers. Women workers were eighty-five percent of the total employed. This meant that there were 11 times more Chinese than Malays in the garment industry. There appeared to be a mutual preference for Chinese both by the employers, mainly foreign investors from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, and the employees. The ethnicity factor appeared to be more by choice and mutual preference than by design of the political or social institutions. The rapid growth of the garment industry combined with the 'Chinese' characteristics of the industry presented its own culture-related issues and problems to the working relationships.

#### RAPID GROWTH AND SHORTAGE OF SKILLED WORKERS

The rapid growth of garment industry exerted a heavy demand on labour especially sewing machinists who were primarily women workers. Sewing constituted a major part of the total production cycle time and is the principal component (30 percent-75 percent) of its production. The garment manufacturers classified sewing machinists as 'unskilled' worker so that they could pay them a low wage. From the study it appeared that the garment industry was extractive and exploitative resulting in the suppression and subordination of the women workers. Salary was kept very low. The daily pay could be a mere RM5 – RM8 per day for the production workers. The workers might be paid as little as 7sen to 10sen per piece. The compensation was so low that if a worker had to send two or more children to a babysitter (RM120 – RM200 per child), she was likely to have a negative salary. Obviously, she could not 'afford' to work.

Wages, it could be argued, were kept deliberately, rather than naturally, low. With no minimum wage legislation and the investment promotion emphasizing the availability of 'cheap' labour, it could be perceived that this exploitation of the female labour was allowed by the government to attract foreign direct investment. Thus, it was not that the labour was intrinsically cheap but was actually suppressed and these women were 'greened' into 'unskilled' low-wage workers. In reality, sewing is a skilled job and the quality of the finished garment depends significantly on the skills of sewing machinists. Smooth, even, straight stitches on the delicate fabric enhance the quality of the finished garment as opposed to

stretched or cramped, uneven and crooked stitching. As there was very little training given to the workers, much of the sewing skills were gained hands on while working. These skills were instead classified as natural capacities and accumulated experience. This gave rise to the great demand for experienced workers. Garment makers resorted to 'pinching' workers from each other by offering higher wages.

The dependence on experienced workers was compounded by the reluctance of the manufacturers to train their workers. The factories regarded the female workers as transient and secondary workers. These workers were regarded as disposable. The factories dismissed them without penalty during lean times. While it was true that many resigned after marriage and childbirth but there were also those who loyal long term workers in the factories. Little was done by the industry as well as the government to encourage the training of these women workers. Although Malaysian Textile and Apparel Centre (MATAC), for example, were set up to train workers, they were only able to conduct 42 courses for 1273 participants in the 3 years of their existence. The trainees represented a mere one percent of the total employees of the garment industry. The RM1.45 million start-up grants allocated by the government for the establishment of MATAC was a very small fraction of the huge revenue the industry had contributed to the economy. Thus, it was apparent that both the government and the garment makers were reluctant to invest in the training of these women workers.

The government proposed that the garment manufacturers should automate to reduce the dependence on labour. While the garment manufacturers acknowledged that this was the best long-term solution, they were unwilling to invest. Most of the machines were acquired during the period of expansion between five to ten years ago. Hence, the manufacturers were reluctant to replace them. They preferred to relocate to areas of cheaper labour whether domestically or even internationally. They tried to combat the shortage of labour by employing foreign labourers. They imported Bangladeshi men and Indonesian women to work in their factories. However, foreign workers brought with them numerous social problems causing constant changes in public policy related to the hiring of foreign labour. The instability of the solution caused it to be perceived as a short-term measure. To most garment makers, a more viable alternative was to sub-contract especially to women home-based sub-contractors.

#### HOME-BASED SUB-CONTRACTING: A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE

It was evident from the study that the nature of the garment industry allowed its production process to be put out vertically and horizontally. Vertical sub-contracting could occur at various points, normally at designing, cutting of the



fabric, stitching, finishing and packing. Horizontal sub-contracting, on the other hand, was employed when a type of work was put out to several production units and home-based workers.

The factory as the production unit (parent firm), instead of doing the work itself, put out parts or the whole of its split-up process of production to a sub-contractor that might be an enterprise or an individual to undertake. However, the production unit continued to assume full responsibility for the work in relation to the client.

#### PROFILE OF HOME-BASED SUB-CONTRACTORS IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY

The majority of the fifty-five respondents interviewed were in the ages of 26–30, 31–35 and 41–45 years. The first peak is typical of withdrawal from the formal labour force and entry to the home-based sub-contracting work due to marriage and childbirth. As the children attain school-going age, some of the women were able to return to work outside of the home.

The women in the 41–45 age group were those who entered sub-contracting at the time when they were young and remained there because of the lack of opportunity to reenter the labour force. With the absence of retraining opportunities, rejoining the labour force was difficult due to advancement of industrialisation. Another reason cited by the interviewees was that the factories preferred younger women. The employers claimed that younger women were easier to train and possess a more flexible disposition, suitable for the assembly line jobs. The home-based sub-contracting offered them an option for continued productive work.

Only a small percentage, 15 percent were re-entrants into home-based sub-contracting after exiting sub-contracting for work outside of home. This group of re-entrants considered home-based sub-contracting in a casual/part-time

TABLE 1. Age of Chinese women home based garment sub-contractors  
in and around Kuala Lumpur, 1994

Age-Group (years)	Percentage
20–25	3.0
26–30	26.0
31–35	23.0
36–40	14.0
41–45	24.0
Over 45	10.0
Total	100.0

manner i.e. working according to preference than needs. Two of the cases were late entrants to home-based sub-contracting. In one case, the respondent was the only child and had the responsibility to care for her aged mother. She chose home-based sub-contracting to meet the need for income while at the same time carry out the responsibility of caring for her aged mother. In another case, the respondent was widowed and had to assume financial responsibility to care for the children. At fifty-one years of age and with little education, she had few opportunities for work. Home-based sub-contracting offered her comparatively easier entrance to productive work. Seventy three percent of the respondents had six or less years of formal education. Only one respondent had more than ten years of education. All were educated in Chinese medium schools.

Of the fifty-five respondents, 78 percent were still married; six women (10 percent) were abandoned by their husbands; two were divorced, one was a widow and three were unmarried but had the responsibility of caring for their aged parents. All respondents who are still married or were previously married (whether abandoned, divorced or widowed) have children.

Of those who were married, 48 percent have one or two children, 37 percent have between three and four children and 15 percent have five children. Sixty percent have at least one child who was below five years old. Sixty-six percent have at least one daughter, but ninety-two percent have at least one son. This indeed is an unusually high percentage of women with sons in a sub-set of occupation.

Out of the fifty-five respondents, thirty five percent have nuclear families while 65 percent live in extended families. Sixty percent had relatives occasionally living with them, while thirty percent could not rely on support from their in-laws or siblings or parents for babysitting or occasional childcare. Fifty percent had other tenants sharing their homes. Of these eight were tenants themselves living with their landlords. For these respondents, their workplaces were their own bedrooms.

## REASONS FOR HOME-BASED SUB-CONTRACTING

The primary reason cited by all the respondents for their participation was that home-based sub-contracting provided for the integration of productive work with domestic responsibility. The current trend of progress and development of society has led to the ever-pervasive forces of increasing materialism and struggle to improve conditions of living. There is a desire for productive work but there is also a conflicting demand of domestic responsibility. These Chinese women are still influenced by the dominating ideology, which translates into women primarily shouldering the domestic responsibility for the care of the young and old especially.

The majority of the home-based sub-contractors described the need for money. Six respondents cited personal security and being main income earner for household expenses because they primarily shoulder the responsibility of being household provider. In three cases, even though they were not regarded as the heads of the households, they were in fact the main provider. In the other cases they need the money for personal financial independence. Three explained that they came into sub-contracting in order to help someone else.

A wife's desire to work is secondary to those of her husband. Though many of the women wished to work outside of their homes they were not allowed by their husbands. They deferred to their husbands' wishes for them to remain at home to assume their domestic responsibilities. In some cases, they even had to use their salaries to pay their mothers-in-law or for babysitters who took care of their children so they could work. As 'the lord and master of the house', it was the prerogative of the husband to make the major decisions for the family, with or without consulting the wife. Often the wives were threatened or bullied into submission.

Despite the fact that some of the children had grown up, most of the respondents did not return to work in the factory. The often cited reason is the care of the children and keeping them away from bad company. Others, cited freedom and flexibility working at home. Five cases suggested that working at home freed them from sexual harassment at workplace. They shared experiences of being sexually harassed at the factory. Twenty other respondents had heard of or knew of instances of sexual harassment. They were also unwilling to say if they had personally experienced being sexually harassed. They tended to regard such behaviour as normal and did not view it as something serious. They did not know of any recourse for those who were harassed.

For some, going back to work is not cost-effective. Without subsidized childcare service at the factories, what they earn from the factory are not enough to pay for the services of babysitters for their children at RM150 to RM200 per child. They felt that their possible earnings working in the factory instead of at home, may be the same or higher in gross terms. However, in real terms after making provisions for payments for transport, meals and incidentals related with 'going to work', their earnings from the factory may be lower than that from home-based sub-contracting. It is unlikely that the husband will have to pay for childcare. Thus, if a woman has to send two or more children to babysitter, she cannot 'afford' to work away from home.

## WORK HISTORY

Fourteen out of the thirty cases (46 percent) had their first job when they were between the ages of 18-20 years, six above 21 years old, with one case who started her first job at the age of 40. Two cases started work at the tender age of

12 years to supplement family income. Seventy percent have worked as unpaid workers along side family members or for family members.

Of the total cases interviewed, one- third worked as sewers in garment factories, with tailors or helped home-based sub-contractors. Except for five, all had done some garment related jobs before becoming home-based sub-contractors.

From Table 2, it can be seen that the age of first entry into home-based sub-contracting occurred in the age cohorts of 21-25 years. Almost 53 percent of the sub-contractors entered home-based sub-contracting between that age, basically after marriage and birth of a child.

TABLE 2. Age of first entry of respondents into home-based sub-contracting

Age group (years)	No. of cases	Percent
Below 20	0	—
21-25	16	53.0
26-30	9	30.0
31-35	3	10.0
Above 35	2	7.0
Total	30	100.0

Eighty percent of the respondents said that they started home-based sub-contracting when they withdrew from the labour force because of childcare responsibilities. In 12 of the cases, it was after the birth of the second or third child. Members of the extended family were unable to continue assisting with the childcare or the cost of childcare was higher than income earned. In four of the cases, it was their childcare responsibility that caused them to be late or irregular at work, thus eventually forcing them to resign.

### WORK ARRANGEMENTS

The majority of the home-based sub-contractors were recruited through personal ties. Many were former workers of the parent factory. Others were mainly introduced by the home-based sub-contractors or acquaintances. Active recruitment through advertisements or recruitment drive was used as a last resort when personal ties were inadequate. Apparently, the majority of the women entered sub-contracting during the period when the garment industry experienced rapid expansion (1985-1996), which coincided with the time of labour shortage.

The home-based sub-contractors are paid according to piece-rate. The remuneration scheme for home-based sub-contractors is low but it is not lower than similar piece rates in the garment industry. The difference is basically in invisible costs externalized to the home-based sub-contractors. However, the sub-contractor also avoided invisible costs associated with 'going to work' such as dressing, meals and transport and time and opportunity costs of not being home. Garment industry pay has been known to be at the lower end of the production workers' pay.

There is preference to recruit former workers as home-based sub-contractors as they require less training and monitoring. They possess greater knowledge of the standard required by the parent factory. In the competitive garment industry, where taste and style are often peculiar to each garment maker, such in-depth knowledge is paramount. Often the skilled and model workers are encouraged to sub-contract after they resigned due to family commitment.

As the home-based sub-contractors are not regarded as formal employees, the factory concerned does not follow legal requirements in the terms of employment. The manufacturers do not accord home-based sub-contractors with protection schemes such as social security, medical coverage or insurance. The informal nature of the home-based sub-contracting deprives the sub-contractors of such protection schemes. Work conditions of home-based sub-contractors are without paid leave, medical protection, Employees Provident Fund or Social Security contribution benefits or contractual agreements.

The sub-contractors remain unaware of changes in legislation allowing them to subscribe as independent operators to EPF or SOCSO. They do not know the ways to obtain any possible protection or other benefits. Sub-contractors bear full cost for medical treatment and injuries. Sub-contractors in confinement or too ill to work are not compensated in any way. On compassionate grounds, manufacturers may give some financial assistance to the sub-contractors but this is dependent upon the goodwill of the manufacturers.

Personal ties reinforce a family-like relationship as well as the traditional '*kam cheng*' between garment makers and home-based sub-contractors. Home-based sub-contractors refer to the boss of companies often as '*chea*' or '*ko*' meaning elder sister or elder brother, even though in actual physical age, the sub-contractor might be older. This also reflects a close family-like relationship of mutual assistance. The reciprocal relationship of mutual aid and trust contribute extensively to the softening of the harsh terms and conditions arising from the power imbalance between the parent company and sub-contractors.

#### FAMILY LIFE

The majority accorded priority to the education of the children, and were determined that the children should complete high school education, and secure good jobs, unlike themselves.

Out of the 30 respondents, 80 percent (including the two unmarried respondents) regarded it important to bring up the sons well. They felt that if the sons are delinquent or unable to earn a living, they would lose their security and would not be provided for in their old age.

When asked if it is just as important for them to look after the daughters the same way, most of them did not have a firm view. While they said that it should not make any difference especially at this time when women are working and earning but they cannot expect their daughters to look after them in the old age.

Most (90 percent) of the husbands interviewed were of the opinion that mothers are to be blamed for the misbehavior of their children. According to ten of them, the measure of the 'worth' of a good woman is her ability to bring up the children and the success attained by the children.

The Chinese families studied are still traditional – much influenced by culture and traditions. The men assume the role of economic provider and breadwinner with its associated social and political importance. He is '*yi jia zi zhu*' literally translated to mean 'one family's lord'. In 36 percent of the cases, even when the husbands had failed to play the role of main provider, they were still regarded as '*yi jia zi zhu*' in absentia. Even in the cases of abandoned wives, these women still perceived their husbands as the heads of the households and would automatically be accorded that role on the husbands return, as if they had been there all the while.

The women are conditioned to accept their responsibility for the domestic sphere and her duty is to care for her husband and teach her son (*xian fu jiao zi*) and to obey her father, husband and son (*san cong si de*). Her other important duty is to bear a son and care for him to ensure continuation of the patriarchal lineage.

Correlated with the reasons given for entering into home-based sub-contracting, it was obvious that these women were confined to their homes because they had sons. Like other Chinese women, these home-based sub-contractors believed that the most important duty for a woman is to perpetuate the patriarchal lineage and to care for her husband and teach her son (*xian fu jiao zi*).

The patriarchal ideology stipulated an expectation that men should not and would not share domestic chores. Because the traditional influence is so pervasive, the women tended to believe that men should not be expected to share in the domestic work. Though the men claimed that they are capable of housework, they do not undertake these domestic chores believing it to be the duty of their wives and daughters to do so. Only a few men have broken the traditional pattern of gender division of labour to share domestic responsibility. With this expectation and ideological influence, sons too are not expected and thus not trained to shoulder their share of domestic chores. However, out of need and conflicting demands of domestic and sub-contracting work, the sons may, along with daughters, volunteer to help.

Despite the substantial contributions of the home-based sub-contractors to the household income, most husbands still perceived the work of the sub-contractors as a 'hobby' or to reduce their boredom and so transient and insignificant.

#### CONTRIBUTIONS OF HOME-BASED SUB-CONTRACTORS TO THE GARMENT INDUSTRY

It is obvious from this study that garment makers derived many benefits from sub-contracting. It enables a garment maker to better respond to changing demands and seasonal preferences by offering it capacity flexibility. It could access specialized skills and equipment without heavy outlay. It has access to specialization without employing labour or investing in equipment. The parent firm is not solely dependent on its own production capacity. When demand arises, it could put out the excess needs to sub-contractors. It pays only for the work done without retainer payment or penalty for idle time. Home-based sub-contractors receive no basic pay, paid vacation, maternity or sick leave. The garment maker is also free from responsibility to maintain or protect labour in periods of slackened market demand. Home-based sub-contractors are not entitled to lay-off or retrenchment benefits. They could be disposed without compensation. Thus, by sub-contracting, a garment maker achieve numerical and capacity flexibility by casualizing labour. Labour is converted from a fixed cost to a variable one.

The garment makers also benefited from externalizing its cost/risk on to the sub-contractor. They do not have to pay rent for the use of machines or premises owned by the home-based sub-contractors. It is the home-based sub-contractors who pay for the costs of utilities as well as threads and other raw materials used for production. In addition, the garment makers achieve lower costs because the home-based sub-contractor prefer legal and tax avoidance and thus there is less cost of formality. The garment makers are not obligated to contribute to the Employees Provident Fund or Social Security, as the home-based sub-contractors are not legally regarded as their 'employees'.

The home-based sub-contractors suited the high cost-sensitivity necessitated by competitive and seasonal nature of the garment industry. They provide an industrial reserve army that is truly disposable, flexible and cheap. They create an informal sector within the formal structure giving the best of both worlds for the extraction of surplus by the garment makers.

## CONCLUSION

### NEITHER VALUED NOR COSTED BY THE GARMENT INDUSTRY

Home-based sub-contractors offer tremendous advantages to the garment industry to ensure its competitiveness and flexibility. They offer chameleon-like adaptability to the industry to respond to the seasonal nature with its changing style and fashion. They offer their 'natural' skills without the industry having to invest in training them. They purchase their own equipment or allow machinery to be placed in their homes, providing space and utilities, giving the industry nil fixed cost or low overheads. By being casual, the home-based sub-contractors are paid on piece rate basis. They provide the industry with numerical and capacity flexibility. By working from home, these sub-contractors remain isolated, atomized and unorganized, thus are politically weak. As a result, they do not possess a unionized voice to champion their cause and demand rights and welfare measures. They receive no social or medical benefits and protective measures neither for themselves nor their family members. The industry threaten them with withdrawal of work and subject them to exploitation. The industry, evidently, does not value these home-based sub-contractors.

In presenting these advantages, the home-based sub-contractors become prey to the exploitative and extractive nature of the garment industry. They prefer informality due to the cost of formality. With this informality, its presence and prevalence receives little or no acknowledgement and/or recognition. While the garment industry subscribe to the integral role and vital contribution sub-contracting presents to the industry, it does not acknowledge and recognize the role of home-based sub-contractors. There is no official record or register of home-based sub-contracting. Associations of the industry do not accept them as members. There is total absence of official statistics on home-based sub-contractors. Whatever is available is also highly contradictory and grossly inaccurate. It normally underestimates the number of home-based sub-contractors because of non-recognition of its existence. As a result, although their role remains vital to the industry, the contribution of the home-based sub-contractors is not costed.

### HOME-BASED SUB-CONTRACTORS IN THE FAMILY: NOT VALUED, NOT COSTED

Home-based sub-contractors live in homes of sharply defined gender division of work. The power sustained by patriarchy and the male head of households decrease the value of the productive labour of these women. By carrying out their productive work at home interspersed with their domestic work, what they do, that is, that aspect of production is often not regarded as 'work'. Moreover they do not identify themselves as workers, unlike those working outside of home. Generally, those working outside of the home assume primary identity as



'workers' while home-based workers identify themselves not as 'workers' but as 'housewives'. They continue to assume almost sole responsibility for their domestic duties, even though they may spend six to eight hours on their sub-contracting work. They carry an enormous physical and mental burden, sacrificing rest or leisure time in favour of productive work.

They offer to the garment industry their skills without training, in return for low compensation, no benefits and no protection. They accept the low piece rate compensation but pay high penalty when there are mistakes. They are not paid when ill or during or after childbirth. When they receive their compensation for their toil, they hardly spend it on themselves but supplement the family income to uplift the quality of life. They expose themselves to exploitation. They remain unaware of how vital they are to the survival of the garment industry. They allow themselves to be exploited without knowing their own value.

The home-based sub-contractors adapt themselves to the demands of the industry. They pay for their own equipment and provide space for machines and subsidize overheads. Because they are isolated and unorganized, they have no union to fight their cause. They accept low piece rate payment with neither benefits nor protection being ignorant of the real value of their work.

Since their childhood the home-based sub-contractors had been socialised to subscribe to the 'good wife and good mother first' ideology. The family prescribes for them the reproductive role with domestic responsibility as their duty, yet pushes them into the labour force only to be aligned with the ever-pervasive forces of increasing materialism. They have to struggle to improve the conditions of living and to bring in a second income without which survival is almost impossible. They experience role conflict and suffer conflicting demands of productive work and domestic responsibility. They creatively adapt and 'choose' to work from home and integrate productive work with domestic responsibility. Husbands perceive their choice as subsidiary and unnecessary, fail to realistically assess the quantum and worth of their wives' incomes. They regard their wives' earnings as 'kuih' money, just icing on the cake. The husbands do not accept their wives need or right to work. The women were underemployed in their role for reproduction of the current and future labour force. The husbands fail to value these women's contribution to family well-being.

#### FUTURE HOME-BASED SUB-CONTRACTORS IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY

As Malaysia industrialises, it is probable and even inevitable that the garment industry will move towards automation and higher technology. The industry is aware of the wisdom not to rely on mass production capacity but to convert to middle and upper segment of export market. It has come to grips that it needs new strategies. The garment industry has to continue to focus on high quality and innovative products, moving to the higher end market. The industry also

needs greater market knowledge and distribution services, shorter response time and better production flexibility to penetrate export market necessitated by increase competition. High quality customer services including fluency in foreign languages like French and Italian will improve non-price factors of competitiveness. There is a need to attract international buying and servicing centres of international fashion houses. But is the industry willing to invest into these strategies?

Currently the one operator or one machine pattern is still very much prevalent in the industry. That means that labour intensity and dependency remain high, almost 80 percent of production. With the reluctance to automate, the female labour component in Malaysian garment industry remains stable and at times even increase. In the long perspective, however, change is inevitable and this labour intensive pattern will have to undergo a fundamental change.

The currency exchange turmoil and subsequent economic crisis have varying effects on the textile and apparel industry of Malaysia and subsequently the garment makers and the home-based sub-contractors. The declining value of the ringgit halted the rapid growth of the economy and moderated its development. As a result the garment industry experienced a turbulent time in its effort to adjust to the higher demand brought about by lower ringgit but greater competition in the lower end market from neighbouring countries. Garment makers initially responded to crisis with a scale-down and then with a successful shift in strategy. They reduced their factory operations to decrease overheads and externalised much of the costs to home-based sub-contractors while they stayed with the lower end domestic market and shifted gear to higher value added products.

The home-based sub-contractors absorbed much of the effects to give the garment makers the time to adjust. Some were terminated without compensation. All others initially suffered loss of income with lower piece rate and higher rejects. They diligently worked to meet targets to help the parent companies fulfill orders. The home-based sub-contractors provided for their families during these hard times when husbands suffered loss of income.

Gender bias institutionalized in the social environment, but not conducive to participation of women in the labour force has to give way to allow for greater integration of women. The effects of patriarchal social norms, public policies and legal frameworks have to be reduced to enhance a more enabling environment. The inclusion of women into work should not be just for material gains but to provide them the opportunities to reassert their rights to work. While the home continue to be the site for struggle between reproductive and productive work, measures should be taken so that women need not continue to have to choose between home and work, but to have both or one without having to sacrifice the other.

However, has the garment industry realise the vital role of the home-based sub-contractors have played in assisting them to grow and develop? The obvi-

ous answer is no. The garment makers continue to not to cost the contributions of the home-based sub-contractors to the industry and to value its vital role.

## REFERENCES

- Baud, I. 1987. Industrial Sub-contracting: The Effects of the Putting Out System on Poor Working Women in India. In Andrea Menefee Singh & Anita Kelles-Viitanen (ed). *Invisible Hand – Women in Home Based Production*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Hill, H. 1992. Indonesia's Textile and Garment Industries. Developments in an Asian Perspective. *Occasional Paper No. 87*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Heyzer, N. (ed). 1988. *Daughters in Industry – Work Skills and Consciousness of Women Workers in Asia*. Kuala Lumpur: Asian and Pacific Development Centre.
- Hing Ai Yung & Rokiah Talib (ed). 1986. Women and Employment in Malaysia. *Jurnal Manusia & Masyarakat*. Keluaran Khas. Kuala Lumpur.
- International Labour Organisation (ILO). 1996. *Malaysia's Labour Market: A Woman's Place*. Bangkok: ILO-EASMAT.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. Globalization of the Footwear, Textiles and Clothing Industries. Report for Discussion at the Tripartite Meeting on the Globalization of the Footwear, Textiles and Clothing Industries: Effects on Employment and Working Conditions. Geneva: International Labour Office:
- Jamilah Ariffin. 1992. *Women and Development in Malaysia*. Petaling Jaya: Peluduk Publications.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1994. Reviewing Malaysian Women's Status – Country Report in Preparation for the Fourth UN World Conference on Women. Kuala Lumpur: Population Studies Unit, University of Malaya.
- Loh Ludher, Lee Lee & Susan Chong. 1993. Women Entrepreneurs: From Petty Trader to Entrepreneur – A Profile of Success. Paper presented at Towards an Engendered Millenium. First ISIS National Conference on Women, 7-8 May. Kuala Lumpur.
- Loh Ludher, Lee Lee. 1994. The Position and Status of Women in the Informal Sector in Malaysia 1994for the Period 1985-92. Unpublished.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995. A Survey of Industrial Sub-contracting and Foreign Labour in the Klang Valley. Unpublished.
- Mah Lok Abdullah. 1994. Productivity in Apparel Manufacturing. National Productivity Corporation. Unpublished.
- Malaysian Textile and Apparel Centre (MATAC). 1994.
- Malaysian Textile Manufacturers Association, 'Textile Directory 1991/92. 1992. Kuala Lumpur.
- Malaysian Textile Manufacturers Association, 'Textile Directory 1997/98. 1998. Kuala Lumpur.
- Maznah Mohamad & Wong Soak Koon (eds.). 1994. Feminism. Malaysian Critique and Experience. *Journal of Malaysian Studies*. Special Issue, 12 (1&2).
- Ng Choon Sim, Cecilia. 1994. Women in Industry in Asia: With Special Reference to the Electronics, Textiles and Garments Industries. Second Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference on Women in Development. Jakarta.
- Pawadee Tonguthai. 1993. Women, Employment, and Industrialization in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand. A background paper for UN Industrial Deve-

- velopment Organization (UNIDO)'s Project on Technical and Managerial Skills Development for Women in the Garment Making Industry in Four ASEAN Countries.
- Pearson, R. 1986. Female Workers in the First and Third Worlds: the Greening of Women's Labour. In Purcell, K. et. al. (eds.). *The Changing Experience of Employment*. MacMillan and the British Sociological Association.
- Raja Rasiah. 1993. Competition and Governance: Work in Malaysia's Textile and Garment Industries. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 23(1).
- Reinharz, S. 1992. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rao, R. & Sahba Husain. 1983. Invisible Hands: Women in Home-based Production in the Garment Export Industry in Delhi. In Andrea Menefee Singh & Anita Kelles-Viitanen (ed). *Invisible Hand – Women in Home Based Production*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Roberts, H. (ed). 1981 *Doing Feminist Research*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Samuel, R. 1996. Pengeluaran di Rumah dan Otonomi Kaum Wanita: Kajian Kes di Kampung Baru Cina, Bukit Merah. Thesis submitted in fulfilment for Masters in Social Science, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Unpublished.
- Shieh, G.S. 1992. "Boss" Island – The Sub-contracting Network & Micro-entrepreneurship in Taiwan's Development. *American Universities Studies Series XI: Anthropology & Sociology* 60. New York: Peter Lang.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. 1990. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications.
- United Nations Industrial Development Organization. (UNIDO). 1993. Changing Techno-Environment in the Textile and Clothing Industry: Implications for the Role of Women in Asian Developing Countries.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1994. Garment Industry Survey of Four ASEAN Countries with Special Reference to Technical and Managerial Skills Development for Women in *The Garment Technical Report*. Prepared for the Government of Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization based on the work of Michel Beaudet, Garment Expert, Rebecca Wajcmann, Eng., Institutional Training Expert, Pawadee Tonguthai, Ph.D, Women-in-Industry National Expert.
- Vagneron, I. 1999. How Can the Situation on the Domestic Labour Market Shape Sub-contracting Arrangements? Evidence from the Garment Sector in Thailand. Paper presented at the Conference on Sub-contracting Labour in Asia: Historical and Global Perspective. 22-24 November. Social Research Institute of Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.
- Watanabe, S. 1972. International Sub-Contracting, Employment and Skill Promotion. *International Labour Review* 105(3). ILO: Geneva.
- Yeung Kok Wing. 1994. ISO 9000 – It's Application in the Clothing Industry. Institute of Textiles & Clothing Hong Kong Polytechnic, Hong Kong.

Lee Lee Loh-Ludher  
 Director  
 Ludher Consultancy