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Withering Away of the Hong Kong Dream?

Women Workers under Industrial Restructuring

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Introduction

Hong Kong's rapid transformation from an entrepôt into an industrial economy after World War II has often been included as an outstanding example of the so-called "East Asian miracle." This "East Asian miracle" has, of course, received much attention from other parts of the world, both inside and outside of the academe. Recently, the World Bank published its *magnum opus* on the success story of the East Asian economies (China, Japan, the four little dragons and the high-growth Southeast Asian economies), which provided a definitive statement of the hows and whys of the East Asian miracle.[1] The irony is, just when the report was hot off the press, at least for Hong Kong, this East Asian miracle seemed to be gradually running out of steam. With the emergence of new low cost competitors in the Asia-Pacific region and the erosion of Hong Kong's own cost advantage, the growth of manufacturing industries began to slacken in the 1980s. By the late 1980s, a trend of absolute decline had set in. Consequently, a wave of outward investment commenced, leading to a process of de-industrialization and structural transformation in the domestic economy. While the restructuring of the economy has lately received some scholarly attention,[2] the impact of the process on labour has not been widely recognized.[3] How, then, does the allegedly flexible labour market in Hong Kong cope with the backbreaking pace of restructuring?

This paper is part of a larger study sponsored by the Hong Kong Federation of Women and looks at how the restructuring process has affected the lives and work of manufacturing workers, especially women workers. The focus on women workers is necessary because they have always been the backbone of local industries, accounting for the majority of rank-and-file production workers. These "working daughters" of Hong Kong, with their hard work and experienced dexterity, have not only improved the living standard of their own families, but have contributed significantly to Hong Kong's remarkable record of economic growth. With the reversal of fortune in manufacturing from the late 1980s, how have they been affected? This paper focuses specifically on the sociological aspects of the industrial restructuring's impact on women workers. In particular, we trace how, as a result of the economic burden caused by employment instability, the blow to their self-esteem due to the frustrations in job-seeking, as well as the involuntary retreat into domesticity, has led to a general sense of demoralization among women workers. We call this collective sentiment the withering away of the "Hong Kong dream." It is a sense of disillusionment over the commonly accepted "success ethics" in our society which describes Hong Kong as an open society with abundant opportunities for social mobility and prescribes individual hard work as the key to the improvement of one's life and social status. This signals an important shift in the ethos among a significant segment of Hong Kong Chinese and would certainly constitutes a source of major social discontent in the near future.

Women Workers and the East Asian Miracle

In the development literature, there is a long line of discussion on how the process of industrialization affects women. For example, a major debate has been about whether industrialization "marginalizes" or "integrates" women into the labour market. The early modernization point of view generally envisages a gradual integration of women into the labour market as society and economy modernize by liberating women from domestic bondage and absorbing them into paid employment in the formal sector due to the rising need for human resources. One strand of literature on Third World industrialization concurs with this view in that the growth of export-oriented industries has been associated with the growing participation of women in factory work. These export-oriented industries are largely labour-intensive and have relied on the availability of low-cost labour, mainly female, in Third World economies.[4] Apart from cost considerations, it is also argued that such labour-intensive consumer industries like garment, textiles, footwear and electronics are best suited for women workers.[5]

The proposition that industrialization marginalizes women, on the other hand, was first popularized by Boserup.[6] She argues that "Since men are decision makers, both in the family and in the labour market, are better educated and trained than women and are less burdened with family obligations, they are much more likely to draw benefit from these changes (development of modern industry) than women who end up at the bottom of the labour market hierarchy."[7] The decline of home industry and the expansion of modern large-scale industry had led to a decline in women's employment in industrial production. The dependency tradition in Latin America also agrees that industrialization tends to marginalize women, but for different reasons.[8] Dependency theorists contend that it is the specific form of "dependent development" in the periphery, based on imported, capital-intensive technology, that excludes women from the wage labour in the formal sector.[9]

While the literature on the relationship between industrialization and female employment is growing, the study of the impact of industrial restructuring and de-industrialization in the newly industrialized economies (NIEs) has barely begun. Lately, a few researches have been devoted to the subject of the industrial restructuring in the NIEs. In East Asia, the experiences have not been homogeneous. Some countries witnessed a continuous tech-

nological upgrading and diversification, like South Korea and Singapore. In others, like Hong Kong, the story has been one of contraction in traditional industries with only sluggish growth in more advanced production. A study has also revealed some aspects of the impact of restructuring on employment in textiles and garment industries.[10] Yet, these studies focus more on structural transformation rather than on the human consequences. Only very few, however, have documented that restructuring's employment impacts on women.[11]

Our study contributes to this emergent literature on industrial restructuring in the NIEs by (1) highlighting the effect of gender through both quantitative and qualitative data; and (2) by shedding light on the "hidden injuries" of restructuring which has reshaped the ethos of working women in Hong Kong. We want to show both commonality and diversity among women workers. As a group, women constitute a disadvantaged labour pool, compared with blue-collar men. Multi-faceted gender biases in employment are well documented in the social science literature,[12] and this study elaborates them in the particular context of economic restructuring in Hong Kong. Our central argument is that familial responsibilities as well as gender stereotypes in the labour market have combined with the specific forms of restructuring in Hong Kong to lead to a general deterioration of living and working conditions among women workers.

De-industrialization in Hong Kong

By the 1980s, Hong Kong's hyper-growth record of the 1960s and 1970s had become a matter for history. The average annual growth rate of real gross domestic product (GDP) in the 1980s was 7.5 per cent. Stepping into the 1990s, the economy appeared to settle down to a pattern of slow growth. Real economic growth rates in the first few years of the 1990s were obviously lower than in the 1980s. Average GDP annual growth rates from 1980 to 1989 and 1990 to 1994 were 7.5 per cent and 5.2 per cent, respectively.

More important than these macroeconomics trends, however, was the tremendous structural transformation undergone by the economy. In the 1980s, the share of manufacturing industries in the national product declined relative to other sectors. The tertiary sector also overtook manufacturing as the high-growth sector. In terms of contribution to the GDP, financing and business services have had very impressive growth rates in the past few years, so has the commerce (wholesale, retail, export and import trades, and hotels and restaurants) sector.[13]

Changes in the sectoral distribution of national product has also been mirrored in employment (Table 1). Even in absolute terms, the number of workers employed in manufacturing was dwindling in the 1980s. In line with the relocation of manufacturing production to low-cost countries, the number of workers engaged in manufacturing was almost halved between 1987 and 1994, sliding from 918,600 to 558,300. The commerce sector (wholesale and retail trade and import/export) now became the largest employer, increasing its employment from 627,900 to 849,000 in the same period. The financial and business services sector also recorded a growth in workers engaged. In the decade ending in 1994, manufacturing employment slumped by 39.2 per cent, while financial and business services and transport and communication shot up 132 per cent and 64 per cent, respectively. Growth rates were equally impressive in commerce and community services.

Central to the structural transformation of the labour market was, of course, the process of de-industrialization. Parallel to the decline in employment, the number of manufacturing establishments had dropped from a high 50,606 in 1988 to 33,863 by the end of 1994.[14] At least a total of 16,743 or one-third of all manufacturing establishments in 1988 had either closed down their business, moved elsewhere or gone broke. The relocation of manufacturing was proceeding at full speed, causing tremendous disruption to the lives of workers engaged in manufacturing. Just imagine anywhere in the world that a sector would shed over 30 per cent of the sectoral employment and 13 per cent of the *entire labour force* in

Table 1 Distribution of Employment by Sectors at End of Year (thousand persons)

Year	Manufacturing	Construction	Commerce	Transport & communication	Finance & business	Services	Others	Total
1981	39.2	8.8	20.8	7.0	5.0	17.3	1.9	2407.0
1982	37.2	8.5	21.5	7.6	5.3	18.0	1.8	2404.1
1983	36.3	8.1	21.8	7.7	5.5	18.8	1.8	2426.7
1984	37.0	7.6	22.1	7.9	5.3	18.5	1.6	2505.2
1985	36.1	7.5	22.6	8.1	5.8	17.5	2.3	2543.3
1986	35.0	7.7	23.0	8.3	6.2	17.6	2.3	2625.4
1987	34.2	8.0	23.4	8.5	6.4	17.3	2.3	2688.5
1988	32.0	8.5	24.3	9.0	6.8	17.6	1.9	2740.7
1989	29.7	8.4	24.9	9.6	7.4	18.2	1.8	2748.6
1990	27.7	8.3	25.9	9.9	7.7	18.9	1.6	2741.0
1991	26.1	8.2	26.7	10.0	8.3	19.3	1.5	2793.8
1992	23.9	8.5	27.4	10.7	8.4	19.6	1.4	2787.2
1993	21.5	8.0	28.5	11.2	9.5	20.0	1.3	2865.0
1994	18.8	7.9	28.6	11.4	11.5	20.2	1.5	2968.5

Sources: Census and Statistics Department, *Quarterly Report on General Household Survey*, various years.

less than a decade's time. While the relocation of capital has been fairly easy in Hong Kong due to its geographical proximity to mainland China and the latter's adoption of an Open Door Policy since the late 1970s, the mobility of labour has not been equally painless. Although the specter of *mass* unemployment has not hit Hong Kong so far, the real employment problem is a bit more complex than the "frictionless" picture portrayed by the government and many economists.

Gender Differences in the Changing Labour Market

How are men and women affected under this rapid process of industrial restructuring? If one looks at the official unemployment or underemployment statistics, it is easy to conclude that the impact has been minimal and does not differ across gender. In the fourth quarter of 1995, overall unemployment rate stood at only 3.5 per cent. Furthermore, unemployment among female workers in fact appeared to be less serious than among males: by the end of 1995, female unemployment rate was 3 per cent, but 3.7 per cent for male workers.[15] It appeared that workers had no difficulty in finding a new job after leaving manufacturing, and it seemed easier for women workers to find jobs than for men!

Nevertheless, this rosy picture has been deceptive. Trade unionists and labour activists have incessantly contested the validity of these official figures. Unemployment figures only report as unemployed those who say they are "actively seeking" work.[16] As we shall see below, however, women can be out of work for a variety of reasons which are often misinterpreted as "not actively seeking" and, hence, not classified officially as unemployed.

Besides, the General Household Survey does not disclose to the public detailed breakdowns by gender of the unemployment statistics.[17] As a first approximation of the gender differences in unemployment situations, we shall first examine some of the other official statistics where details are available for workers of different genders. According to the 1991 census, some 41 per cent

of the working population in manufacturing were female, while 31 per cent of the entire female labour force were also engaged in manufacturing.[18] Hence, manufacturing has traditionally been a major source of employment for working women. Over the last few years, however, the restructuring process has reduced significantly the number of women workers employed in the sector. From the end of 1987 to the end of 1995, according to the reports on *Employment, Vacancies and Payroll Statistics*, the number of female employees in manufacturing dropped from 430,376 to 164,248, or by more than 61 per cent. By contrast, the number of male employees had dropped by a smaller 52 per cent, or from 437,571 to 211,518 (see Table 2).[19] Consequently, the share of women workers in manufacturing dropped from 49.6 per cent in 1987 to 43.7 per cent in 1995. In three of the five largest (in terms of employment) manufacturing industries, the percentage decrease in the number of female employees also far exceeded that of male employees. Only textiles, where restructuring started much earlier, had a larger rate of decrease in male employees than female ones.[20] In wearing apparels, the percentage was roughly the same for different genders (Table 1). Even these figures could have underestimated the magnitude of shrinkage in female employment in manufacturing because they measured the number of "persons engaged" in "manufacturing establishments." The former term includes clerical and other non-production workers whose number have increased in "manufacturing establishments" when the latter have more or less transformed themselves from assembly plants to operating headquarters for their regional operations or trading offices. So, the percentage decrease in female employment in production is very likely to have been concealed by the increase in clerical and non-production workers who are likely to be female.

Naturally, employment trends have an effect on wages. In 1987, the real average daily wages (including fringe benefits) in manufacturing was $194.8 for women and $251.9 for men at the craftsman and operative levels. In 1995, male average wages increased to $288.9 while female wages were only $184.2 (Table 3).

Table 2 Changes in Manufacturing Employment by Gender, 1987-1995

Industry	1987	1995	1987-1995 (%)	Female/Male difference[1] (%)
Wearing apparel except footwear				
Total	258221	80222	-68.9	
Male	79162	24477	-69.1	
Female	179059	55745	-68.9	0.2
Textiles				
Total	119081	58787	-50.6	
Male	67013	30877	-53.9	
Female	52068	27912	-46.4	7.5
Plastic products				
Total	77963	14511	-81.4	
Male	41322	9078	-78.0	
Female	36641	5433	-85.2	-7.1
Electrical and electronic machinery				
Total	125841	34823	-72.3	
Male	45753	15037	-67.1	
Female	80088	19786	-75.3	-8.2
Fabricated metal products, except machinery and equipment				
Total	60800	24435	-59.8	
Male	40551	17299	-57.3	
Female	20249	7136	-64.8	-7.4
Manufacturing				
Total	867947	375766	-56.7	
Male	437571	211518	-51.7	
Female	430376	164248	-61.8	-10.2

Note: 1. A negative percentage indicates a larger decline in female employment than male employment.

Sources: Census and Statistics Department, *Report of Employment, Vacancies and Payroll Statistics*, 1988, 1996.

Table 3 Changes in Real Average Daily Wages by Gender in Selected Manufacturing Industries, 1987-1995 (Constant 1992 dollars)

		1987	1995	Change 1987-1995 (%)
Garments	Male	256.6	225.9	-11.9
	Female	214.7	184.2	-14.2
	Total	222.0	189.7	-14.5
	Female/Male (%)	83.7	81.5	
Cotton spinning and weaving	Male	249.3	242.5	-2.7
	Female	212.9	203.1	-4.6
	Total	231.1	225.9	-2.2
	Female/Male (%)	85.4	83.8	
Knitting	Male	249.3	230.6	-7.5
	Female	225.6	170.8	-24.3
	Total	231.1	182.6	-21.0
	Female/Male (%)	90.5	74.1	
Electronics	Male	229.3	265.3	15.7
	Female	189.2	181.1	-4.3
	Total	198.3	197.6	-0.4
	Female/Male (%)	82.5	68.2	
Metal products	Male	258.4	282.6	9.4
	Female	163.8	164.5	0.5
	Total	216.5	260.6	20.3
	Female/Male (%)	63.4	58.2	
Manufacturing	Male	267.5	288.9	8.0
	Female	198.3	184.2	-7.1
	Total	220.2	220.4	0.1
	Female/Male (%)	74.1	63.8	

Note: All wage statistics are September figures.

Sources: Census and Statistics Department, *Report on Survey of Wages, Salaries and Employee Benefits*, 1988, 1996.

The ratio of female to male wages also slumped from 77.3 per cent in 1987 to 63.8 per cent in 1994. During this period, average female wages in manufacturing dropped in real terms by more than 7 per cent, a stark contrast to the 8 per cent increase for male workers. In major industries within manufacturing, the pattern appears to be the same, since female workers witnessed their real wages dropping while those of their male counterparts increased. In knitting, for example, female craftsmen and operatives suffered a 24 per cent decline in real wages between 1987 and 1995, while that of their male counterparts only 7.5 per cent. In electronics, male workers had a hefty 16 per cent increase in real wages, as against the 4.3 per cent drop for female workers. Hence, it is clear that the restructuring process has brought a decline in real wages for female workers and has widened the income gap between men and women in the manufacturing industries.

Hence, by examining some published official statistics, we can infer that the impact of the restructuring process is markedly different for men from that for women. Yet, official statistics rarely provide information beyond the aggregate level and cannot answer satisfactorily questions regarding the impact of the industrial restructuring process on women workers and their responses. Given the tremendous contraction of industrial employment, who still remains there and who manages to find a new job in other sectors? Is unemployment a serious problem among former manufacturing women workers? What effects do these changes in employment status have on their living standards and families? How are they coping with the changes and how do they perceive their own situation? How does their gender affect their employment opportunities and life chances? In order to answer these questions, we are going to report the key findings from our survey and intensive interviews of manufacturing workers. It is hoped that, with more knowledge of their situation, we can generate more public discussion towards a more adequate institutional and policy package to improve their lot.

Beyond Official Statistics

Since official statistics in Hong Kong do not furnish sufficient breakdowns to allow for a more detailed examination of the conditions of women workers in the manufacturing industries, we conducted a telephone survey in January 1995 and successfully interviewed a random sample of 1,004 respondents — production workers employed in the manufacturing sector since 1989. While our prime target group was women workers, for comparative purposes we interviewed both male and female workers and generated a random sample having roughly the same proportion of males and females (499 males, 505 females).[21] Among these respondents we further conducted 40 intensive in-depth interviews with women workers and 20 with male workers in different situations of employment.[22] The data generated from these interviews allow us to understand, through women's own voices, what economic restructuring means to those most affected by it.

Our telephone poll questionnaire examines the different types of employment status change of our respondents during the period 1989-1995. These types include *stay* in full-time job in the manufacturing sector; *switch* to full-time job in non-manufacturing sector, *exit* from factory with no intention to seek full-time employment; and *unable* to find a full-time job. A summary of the paths of employment change of our respondents between the time of the survey and five years ago is presented in Figure 1.

When we compare the paths of employment change across genders, striking differences emerge, as Table 4 suggests.

It is obvious that much fewer male workers (18.4 per cent) were being pushed out of full-time employment (exited or unemployed) than female ones (57.6 per cent) in the process of industrial restructuring. Among those exited from full-time employment, retirement (30.8 per cent) and health problems (19.2 per cent) were the most common reasons for male workers, in contrast to child care for female workers. A major difference between men and women can also be found for those respondents

Figure 1 Changes in Employment Status among All Respondents

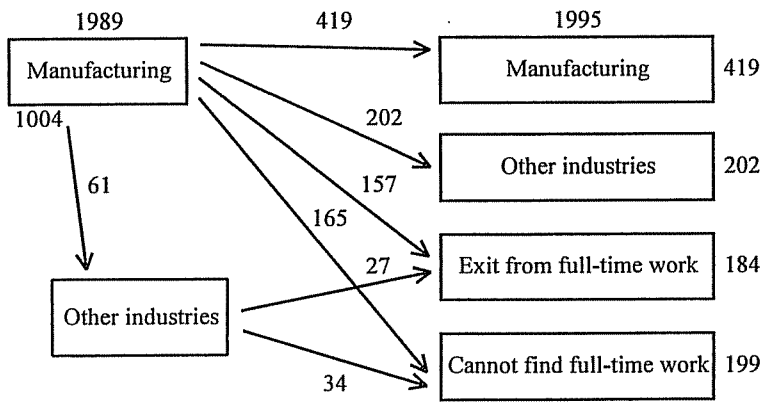

Table 4 Changes in Employment Status of Manufacturing Workers by Gender (%)

Current employment status	Male	Female
Remain in manufacturing	55.7	27.9
Switch to other sectors	25.9	14.5
Exit from full-time employment	5.6	30.9
Unable to find full-time job	12.8	26.7
(N)	(499)	(505)

Source: Sample survey.

who had been unable to find a full-time job. The proportion of women workers who were unable to find a full-time job (26.7 per cent) more than doubled that of male workers (12.8 per cent). Some 61 per cent of female respondents in this category had been seeking work for half a year or more, but only 39.3 per cent of male respondents found themselves in this situation. In fact, the majority (55.7 per cent) of the job-seeking male workers had been doing so for only three months or less, but the comparable figure for female workers was only 32.2 per cent. This clearly indicates that the labour market position for male workers is superior to their female counterparts.

It is also clear that more male workers were able to remain employed full-time in manufacturing industries. The living standard they maintained by their work had also improved for a majority (60.4 per cent) of men in manufacturing, while only 43 per cent of women reported an improvement. It is also not true, however, to say that male workers were simply "stuck" in manufacturing, because a higher proportion of them were able to find another job in non-manufacturing sectors than female workers. For those who had switched to non-manufacturing sectors, furthermore, 38.9 per cent of men had difficulty in finding their current job, but about half of women said so.

Focusing on female respondents, the majority of them were between 30 and 39 (35.8 per cent) years of age, with primary education or less (52.4 per cent) and married (80.4 per cent).[23] Most were employed five years ago (from the time of the survey) in textiles (33.7 per cent) and wearing apparels (30.0 per cent). Metal and machinery (which include electronics) also hired a large group of our respondents (17.7 per cent). Since our survey targeted only those who worked on the shop floor, most of them (75.4 per cent) were employed five years ago at the operative level, while a substantial minority (11.6 per cent) of them were technicians (mostly as quality control technicians). Most were typical working mothers married with one or more children. What, then, has been the impact of the restructuring process on their life and work?

The Withering Away of the Hong Kong Dream

Besides deterioration in these objective conditions, our survey and in-depth interviews reveal other aspects of women workers' collective predicament: the fluidity of employment, a declining living standard, severe demoralization and a trend of involuntary retreat to domesticity among working women. In the following sections, we will present women's own articulation of these "hidden injuries."[24] Overall, with the economic sector that had anchored these women in working class locations almost gone, women workers are pushed both downward on the class ladder and backward to domesticity as their gender destiny.

We describe such an emerging collective sentiment among a substantial segment of Hong Kong's working class as the withering of the "Hong Kong dream." Widely espoused by the Hong Kong people and recognized by social scientists as one of the central components of the ethos of the Hong Kong Chinese, the Hong Kong dream is a "success ethics" that places premium on opportunities and portrays economic advancement as a matter of individual efforts, hard work and perseverance. Cultural wisdom has it that all these should eventually pay off as an improvement of living standard and optimism for the future generation.[25] Yet, among women workers and their families who are caught up in the process of economic restructuring, the discrepancy between their life situation and the social ideology has become so wide that the latter can no longer be sustained.

Fluidity of Employment

In the above section, we have seen that restructuring has differentiated the employment status of women workers. Although some have managed to keep their full-time factory work, many others have to be satisfied with part-time work of various kinds, or else being forced to exit from paid employment. A small minority have switched to full-time employment in the service sector. Yet, a closer scrutiny of the interview data suggests that it might be

inadequate, if not misleading, to focus on women's *current* employment status, as an indicator of their employment situation. Employment status, registered in government statistics or in survey responses, is only a snapshot of their situation at the time of any particular survey. To women workers being caught up in a fluid and unstable labour market, the nature of their employment defies easy descriptions by conventional categories like "employed" or "unemployed." What economic restructuring has severed is exactly the assumed stability, or the sense of relative permanence, linked to the notion of "employment status." During our research, a woman reported that she went from "employed" to "unemployed" and then back to "part-time employment" in a matter of five months, between her first and second interviews with us. Therefore, we suggest that it may make more sense for government officials, labour unions, women's advocates and academics alike to talk about "stability and quality of employment," rather than rest content with the simplistic notion of employment status.

The following profiles show that women in different employment status, when we met them in 1995, share very similar attitudes towards employment: *all of them wanted to work.* Nevertheless, all have been subjected to forces of circumstances (emanating from the labour market and the family) that have pushed them to change job (both within and between sectors) and mode of (un)employment frequently in the past five years.

Women Staying in Full-time Manufacturing Jobs

Among those women workers who remained in manufacturing (27.9 per cent of the entire sample), the majority (63 per cent) were in the textiles and wearing apparels industries. A substantial minority (17.3 per cent) were found in basic metal and machinery industries (mainly electronics). More than half (52 per cent) of them had also changed their jobs from one factory to another at least once in the last five years. Almost 37 per cent of them had changed firms for more than once, reflecting the instability in the

manufacturing industries. Most of these changes were due to factory relocation (China or elsewhere), which caused 33.3 per cent of our respondents to change to another factory. Plant closure and slack work accounted for another 20.3 per cent and 15.9 per cent of the last change of workplace.

In spite of the high rate of inter-firm mobility, the workers were also found to remain more or less in their old industry. It appears that workers remained stuck in the old industries where they worked five years ago as they did not have the requisite skills or opportunity to switch to other manufacturing industries. Not only were they stuck in their old, "declining" industries, there appeared to be little occupational mobility for them. About 90 per cent of all operatives five years ago remained as operatives in their current job, and only 4.1 per cent of them had been promoted to the supervisory grade.

The fluidity in the employment situations of those remaining in manufacturing can be illustrated by the case of Yuk-fu, 35, a packing worker in a printing factory. She immigrated from mainland China in 1980, joining her husband, a mechanics, 42, and they have three children, respectively aged 11, 9 and 2. She lives with her mother-in-law. Over the past 15 years, she has worked in factories making watches, toys, stationary, and, in 1986, after working as an assembler in a stationary factory for six years, she switched back to toy making. When the factory was relocated to China in 1991, she took up a sales job in a fashion chainstore for several months. Because she could not handle the "complicated human relations" in the store, she quit and found a job in a printing factory. After a year, she changed to this present factory, earning about $5,000 per month. When asked whether her present job was a temporary or permanent one, she replied:

> I don't think it can last. Sooner or later, my department will disappear. Our boss has told the four of us in the packing section the other day that "either I don't give you a pay raise or I close this department." All because he has opened a factory in China.... We replied, "If you like, you can dismiss us (and compensate us with severance payment). Prices are so high

> these days, it's unreasonable not to raise our wage." Therefore, he gave us a $5 per day pay raise and fired a worker who has worked for him for nine years... because it seems a new legislation is to come out, and he's afraid that she would meet the 10-year qualifying condition for more compensation payment....

Another woman worker who is able to hang on to her job as an ironing worker in a garment factory described herself as a "long-term temporary worker." Sueh-fong, 49, a divorced single mother, earns $4,000 a month to support her 11-year-old daughter. When asked if she considered her present job a long-term one, she explained:

> There is no such thing as long-term job in this kind of work. When he (the boss) wants to dismiss you, he dismisses you.... In 1990, I earned $4,000 or more. Now, it's still $4,000 because there is not enough work. And then, the work procedures become more difficult.... We have to stay on the shop floor and wait for work to come. We sit there for an hour or so and they give you some work to do. We work for a little while, and it's time to get off. That's why we are earning very little.

Another interviewee, Fung-kuen, 33, made a comment during our interview that drives home most poignantly about women workers' fluid "employment status." We asked her if she was still an employee of her factory, and she said, "I am not sure. It's ambiguous." She has worked in this factory for 10 years and since 1992 has become an internal subcontractor (*baotao*). Her employer relocated production into the mainland in 1990:

> As *baotao* I get a $4,000 basic subsidy each month. Until now, even without work to do, I am still entitled to that amount. My work is to ensure that there are enough workers to meet delivery deadlines in high season.... Now, even sample making has moved to the mainland, I have to do what apprentices do: making shoulders and linings, very cheap tasks. Other departments in the factory are the same. All kinds of work have been moved away and no more work is done here. Only the supervisors or foremen come back and sit....

In short, even women workers, whom we classify as "remaining in full-time manufacturing," articulate a strong sense of insecurity. They have seen the "mega-trend" of relocation and have heard about the difficulty of switching to service work for those over 30. Anticipating that factory work will soon become history, many stay on so that they can collect a lump sum of severance payment when the factory will eventually close down. Many others just find themselves helpless, pondering about applying for public assistance.

Women Having Switched to Service Jobs

The sense of job insecurity and fluidity among women who have switched to service jobs is as equally widespread as among those remaining in manufacturing. This group of women expresses a collective mood of uncertainty and vulnerability, and they often attribute it to "luck" or "accident" to explain their landing on their present service job, after having made strenuous efforts of job search. Their stories about the fluidity of the service job market warn against any complacency that could be conveniently read from the number of "relocated employees."

In fact, only 72, or 14.5 per cent, of our respondents who worked in manufacturing five years ago had managed to get a non-manufacturing job. Within this minority group, 25 per cent found work in the commerce (wholesale, retail, hotel and restaurant) sector, 24 per cent were in the community, social and personal services sector (mainly, the public sector), and 18 per cent had changed to finance, business and commercial services. Most of them (88 per cent) moved out of the manufacturing industries after 1990: 3 per cent in 1989, 9 per cent in 1990, 16 per cent in 1991, 22 per cent in 1992, 19 per cent in 1993, 28 per cent in 1994 and 3 per cent in 1995. This perhaps indicates the accelerated pace of industrial restructuring in the early 1990s.

The relocation of their factories to the mainland and other places was the most frequently mentioned reason for job mobility (30 per cent) by those who had changed sectors. Under-employment ("not enough work") came in second with 24 per cent, and

10 per cent got out of manufacturing due to closure of their factory.

An example of women in this situation is Lai-hing. In her mid-40s, with a son (18) and a daughter (13), she was a full-time shop assistant at a convenience store. She had worked there for less than a month when we interviewed her. After having worked in sweater manufacturing for some 30 years, she quit factory work in 1994 when her factory closed down. Since 1991, factory orders had become intermittent and slack. At times when her factory suspended production, she took up temporary work as a shop assistant in a fruit store for several months, and later as a part-time worker at a convenience store for six months. In 1992, she tried working at McDonald's for two days and applied for cashier position in supermarkets. Now, she worked the night shift from 11 pm to 7 am, earning a monthly income of $5,000. She explained that every time she was able to find a job, it was usually because there was an urgent demand for labour. Otherwise, employers found her too old and would rather wait for another applicant:

> That one time, McDonald's recruited anyone who walked by. They were to open a new shop in Tsim Sha Tsui, a 24-hour shop. We were almost pulled in by that guy to register.... The Seven-Eleven (convenience store) job, I got it, because they just changed the store manager and needed someone immediately and also because I lived nearby.... But, when I saw an employment notice at the Wellcome (supermarket) store down the street, I filled out a form and the manager told me that he had found someone already. But, the notice remained there for several days. I knew that they did not like my age and I dared not ask again.

When asked if she would hang on to her present job, she was as worried as other women we talked to:

> I believe there will be changes in the near future. I have heard that the rental lease expires in October. When that happens, the store must move elsewhere.... I wish they would stay in this neighbourhood.... For us, location is a big constraint....

In another case typical of this group of women, Kam-lin was unsure how "permanent" her latest job in a laundry workshop

was going to be. At 41, Kam-lin had three grown-up children (respectively aged 21, 18, 17) and her husband worked as a security guard. She had worked in the weaving industry since the age of 14 but was forced to take up an unskilled operative job in a small metal factory in the late 1980s. In 1994, after she was laid off by the factory, she washed dishes in a restaurant and found it too exhausting. When we met her for the interview, she had only worked in the laundry workshop for less than three months. She said, she had not yet passed the probation period:

> But here, human relations are very complicated. There are some troublesome people who want to fight for promotion.... I do not have any fixed idea for any particular occupation. But, I do want to change to something else....

The experience of these women points to the fact that, even when service jobs are available, they may not offer stable employment. Moreover, as will be discussed in a later section, the work conditions of these low-end service jobs are demanding while pay rates are low.

Reluctant Exits From Full-time Employment

The situation of this group of women best illustrates the extent to which economic restructuring has disrupted the conventional meaning of employment status categories like "employed" and "unemployed." Many women in this group had had several service sector jobs before reluctantly exiting from full-time employment due to a combination of push and pull factors: low pay, clash of family time and work time, and physical exhaustion. Their work histories in the past five years suggest that having switched to the service sector does not preclude the possibility of eminent exit from full-time employment. Their frequent job change shows that the line between being employed, unemployed or reluctant exit is indeed volatile, and thus has limited conceptual validity. To complicate the picture, it must be noted that, even when they were not formally employed, many were engaging in some sort of informal work, like baby-sitting and direct sales.

Of all surveyed women workers, 30.9 per cent who worked in manufacturing five years ago had exited from full-time employment. Accordingly, the *exit* momentum started in the early 1990s, as most of them (65.3 per cent) left the manufacturing sector between 1992 and 1994. The main reasons for *exit* from full-time employment (with no intention of job seeking) were child caring (51.1 per cent), followed by retirement (12.3 per cent), health conditions (7.7 per cent) and caring for family members (6.5 per cent). So, there is a strong indication that familial responsibilities fall largely on women which compel them to retreat from gainful employment. Nevertheless, it is very likely that the demand for familial care on women workers might have combined with the unfavourable labour market under industrial restructuring to push women workers back into the domestic arena of caring duties. This should also be read against the context that around 25 per cent of those exiting were still having part-time jobs in order to make ends meet.

Shun-mei, 29, a mother of three children had just given birth to her third child six months before our interview. She had worked in the clothing industry for 12 years, since she was 14. Her husband, 33, was a lorry driver. When garment orders became slack in 1991, she started working part-time at a Jockey Club (a horse racing club) gambling centre. Later, she found a full-time sales position at a goldsmith shop, earning $5,000. She then switched to a clerical job, for its better work schedule. When the company went out of business, she became a saleslady for cosmetic products, earning some $10,000 a month. After three months, she quit this last job, which she liked, because of her husband's complaint about her work schedule and of her own exhaustion at combining childcare and work:

> I like sales jobs. It's really nice. You come to meet more people. Some customers are quite interesting. Clerical and factory work is too rigid and monotonous. He (my husband) does not like my sales job. People make passes at me. It's different in a garment factory: no one looks at you. But, in cosmetics sales, there are many people in the department stores, and we have to approach customers so that they will buy. And, even if we don't take the initiative, there will be guys who come on us.... He always complains about my getting off at 8 pm and having no Sundays off.... Because my husband has Sundays off. So when I had my sales job, he had to take care of kids on Sundays. He was upset, and he asked me to quit....

About her future plan, she anticipated:

> After two years, at least, maybe I will look for jobs again. If I really work again, I shall employ a Filipino maid to help me out with housework. Otherwise, it would be too exhausting even for a woman made of iron. I know that. I have been through that.

For the time being, as many other women she has found someway to combine her full-time mothering work with some informal work:

> I have just joined Amway, doing direct sales. It's kind of OK.... There is no formal work schedule to constrain me. For instance, when I go to have tea and *dim sum* (and meet my prospective customers), I can take along my baby. I don't have to worry about childcare....

This pattern of frequent job change in a matter of several years is common among women who have seeming success in switching to the service sector, only to quit full-time work again due to other constraints. For example, altogether some 6 per cent of our female respondents had done so. Siu-wah's work history offers another illustration. Aged 30, with two kids attending kindergarten, Siu-wah had been in the clothing industry from 1982 to 1989. She had worked for four restaurants in just four years from 1991 to 1994:

> Jobs in restaurants offer similar pay everywhere. If one finds a restaurant with shorter working hours or higher pay or closer to home, one changes.

She attributed her "success" in finding service sector job to accidental luck, implying a lack of personal control and confidence in a future job search:

> It's mere accident. I was acquainted with the waitresses in the restaurant I went to regularly. I told them that I was looking for a job and they suggested restaurant work. With their introduction, I started. It's so accidental... (I was not as lucky on other occasions.) Last year, I felt very exhausted with my waitress job. When there was an opening for an amah position in the Castle Peak Hospital, I applied.... I was even younger at that time, and the Hospital was within walking distance from my home. But, they rejected me, without giving me a reason.

She had also tried working as a chambermaid at the Gold Coast Hotel, only to find that the job demanded so much attention to meticulous details that she found herself unsuitable. She quit after one day. Although the pay for waitressing was good, averaging $8,000 per month, she eventually quit the job when her daughter refused to be baby-sat by others, "crying every morning on leaving home." The long work hour at the restaurant, getting off at 11 pm, made it difficult for her to take care of her daughter's school work. Now, she baby-sits a six-year-old, providing her with three meals a day, for a monthly income of $2,500. She explained to us her plans for employment, again oriented towards her daughter's needs:

> Primary one is a transition period for her. I'll see how she manages her academic work and then decide whether to work or not. Even if I work, it may not be full-time.

In another case, age discrimination frustrated the woman's intention to find full-time employment again. Siu-guan was 45 and had resumed garment making in 1986 when her two children were "old enough to look after themselves." When the factory she worked for closed down in 1992, due to relocation and emigration of the owner, she found a job as an assistant in a cake shop. Yet, in 1994, she was laid off:

> The company was restructured and two workers got laid off almost at the same time. It's a Japanese-owned chain bakery. They imitated Maxim's cake shop: employing only the young.... I tried to look for other jobs. I even went to the Labour Department to register a job search. There was one with suitable work schedule, 11 am to 3 pm. It turned out that they only wanted those below 40. That's why I was not accepted. I am so much older that I lost interest in finding a job.

In short, given their mothering responsibilities and age discrimination, these women could not find full-time employment. Their lack of intention to find for a full-time job should be read as a response to unfavourable circumstances emanating from the labour market and their family, which have left them with no other option. It is at this point that we find the dividing line between this group (the reluctant exits) and the next (the unemployed) a bit artificial.

Unemployed Women

This last group of women comprises those who wanted but were unable to find full-time employment at the time of our interviews. As the experiences of Shun-ming and Wai-lan indicate, it can be difficult both to find and to hang on to a service job. These unemployed women are those most victimized by age discrimination and feeling most insecure about the future.

A total of 26.7 per cent of all surveyed women workers reported they could not find a full-time job. Among them, 46 per cent had a part-time job. Deducting this 62 yields a total number of unemployed women workers of 73, or 14.5 per cent of all respondents. The figure is much higher than the unemployment rate (2.7 per cent) reported in the General Household Survey for the first quarter of 1995. For those unemployed persons who had a previous job in manufacturing, the unemployment rate was 3.8 per cent, higher than that of the labour force as a whole, but still much lower than the proportion of our respondents who were jobless.[26] Our figure is also consistent with the finding of surveys conducted by the Federation of Trade Unions (FTU) on its members which typically yield an overall unemployment rate of over 10 per cent. The 10-15 per cent unemployment rate also seems to have a robust quality, since several other surveys using different methods and with different sample sizes also come up with figures in this range.[27] More specifically for the manufacturing sec-

tor, the FTU reported a 24.4 per cent unemployment rate for its members in the manufacturing sector in the first quarter of 1995, 28.3 per cent in the second quarter, and a whopping 34.2 per cent in the third quarter (*Oriental Daily News*, 21 October 1995). If the official unemployment rate is too low and the FTU figure is too high (when non-union members are counted), our figure seems to be more realistic in reflecting the employment problem among lower-level employees in manufacturing.

The unemployment scenario in the industrial restructuring process has been particularly evident since 1990. Most of our respondents (23.1 per cent) lost their last jobs in 1992, with 20 per cent in 1994, and 19.2 per cent in 1993. Still, 30.8 per cent had been unable to find full-time work since 1991. In addition, while a minority had non-manufacturing jobs before exiting from full-time employment, the majority of them (83.5 per cent) had their last full-time job in the manufacturing sector, particularly in textile and wearing apparel industries (71.2 per cent), followed by basic metal and machinery industries (15.3 per cent).

Confronting the worsening labour market conditions, only 54.1 per cent of them were still seeking a full-time job. The implication is that apparently a large number of them have been discouraged and frustrated by the labour market conditions to continue seeking for full-time job. There are considerable difficulties in their job-search as the majority (67 per cent) of them were actively seeking job for half a year or more, while 51.4 per cent were doing so for more than a year (Table 5).

A typical example of workers in this category is Shun-ming, 45, a divorced single mother living with her adopted son, 14, who came to Hong Kong from China in 1985. She had worked in the garment and the basic metal industries until 1990 when she injured her ankle at work. The metal factory was relocated in the mainland, and she found a part-time job selling honey.

> If it had not relocated, I thought I was to work at that factory until I died.... That part-time job only lasted for two months. They did not need anyone after the honey promotion period.... I had also tried working as amah in a construction site, making coffee, cleaning and cooking for the workers. When I went to the site, I realized that I had to walk up to great height and I was very scared of heights.... Every time I asked about other jobs, they would ask for my age and then tell me to wait for their calls. It means they don't want me.

Table 5 Time Spent on Job-Seeking among Unemployed Respondents

Time spent on seeking job	%	(N)
Less than a month	11.4	(8)
2 to 3 months	12.9	(9)
4 to 5 months	8.6	(6)
Half-year to a year	15.7	(11)
More than a year	51.4	(36)
Total	100.0	(70)

Source: Sample survey.

Since then, she has lived on a monthly $4,364 public assistance and disability allowance.

Another unemployed woman was much younger than Shun-ming, but her job search was not any easier. Wai-lan was 34 and had a 9 year-old daughter. Her husband was a technical supervisor working in a mainland factory. She used to make samples of jeans, but she quit her manufacturing job when "there was no more work to be done." She tried finding service jobs:

> Last summer, I called up an employer looking for baby-sitting. It required daytime live-in and my husband objected, so I did not take it. As for domestic part-time helper, he's worried about my safety. Other work like sales in cake shops does not have good work hours (4 pm-8 pm). These schedules interfere with our family dinner.

Although she was open to a wide range of jobs, she had not gotten any:

> I don't have special demands for job, except that its schedule and location are all right. Cashier, restaurant waitress, sales, all are OK. The problem is that they (employers) do not think I have the right qualities. Like selling cakes, people of my age are considered too old already.... I have also registered with the Labour Department for an amah position in hospital. But there has not been any reply.

In sum, we have seen that women in all categories of employment status express a strong sense of insecurity about their financial and employment future. Therefore, the overall employment context of women workers is characterized by fluidity and instability, so much so that those having jobs are as insecure as those with jobs. Another important implication of this observation is that, in aggregate terms, the mass of unemployed women workers is much larger than what is reflected in government statistics, given the increasingly blurred boundaries between categories of employed, unemployed and under-employed.

Downward Mobility: Declining Standards of Living

A secured livelihood and a steady rise in living standards have allowed Hong Kong's working class to lend legitimacy to a social order founded on *laissez-faire* competition and staggering income inequality. When economic restructuring pushes workers out of their secured niche in the labour market, it also removes a whole way of life that has been anchored in security. Downward mobility has become widespread and painful when many women workers find their decades of work experience and multi-faceted production skills becoming unmarketable. Wage rate and overall income have plummeted for those who have jobs while others become welfare dependents. Moreover, when women lose their job, their family as a whole suffers as well. Working class families have to cut back on food, leisure and social life, and many have found it necessary to borrow from relatives to pay for medical and

educational expenses of family members. Because women are usually the ones responsible for dividing the shrinking pie of household finances, they, more than their husband and their children, are the hardest hit by such down-turn of fortune.

Even among workers who managed to keep a manufacturing job, close to 30 per cent of our respondents said that they did not have enough work, suggesting the problem of under-employment had indeed been quite serious in manufacturing. Even though the majority had adequate work, most (57 per cent) of the remaining manufacturing workers regarded their living standards becoming worse off than five years ago. This is consistent with the aforementioned phenomenon of declining real wages among female rank-and-file manufacturing employees.

Consistent with the foregoing finding, close to three-quarters of this category of respondents felt it difficult to find another job if they had to. Only slightly less than 10 per cent thought it was not difficult. More than half (52.7 per cent) who thought it was difficult to find a new job suggested old age as the source of the difficulty, and another 18 per cent thought their low education qualification was the main reason. Furthermore, 6 per cent of them singled out "lack of appropriate skill" as the obstacle at finding work.

For those who had changed to other sectors, about half of them said it was difficult to find their current job. Again, old age was the most frequent source of difficulty in job-seeking mentioned (47 per cent), and lack of the appropriate skills second (14 per cent). As a result of the difficulty of job seeking, more than 40 per cent of our respondents spent more than one month looking for the current job, with close to a quarter using half a year and more. Nine of our respondents (13 per cent) spent more than a year to find their current job.

To examine how the restructuring process has adversely affected the living standards of women workers, we reclassify the respondents into two groups according to whether they had suffered a decline in living standards under the industrial restructuring.[28] The group which has exited from the labour market is

excluded from the analysis, because while it should suffer from a deterioration of living standards due to the loss of income, the choices are directly related to the presence of certain familial responsibilities and are only partly affected by the restructuring process and other background variables. In fact, we have found that this group is indistinguishable from the rest in terms of previous occupation, age and education. We expect this group to be fairly amorphous in composition apart from the common presence of familial responsibilities (e.g. caring for a young child). When we examine the gender distribution of respondents in a deteriorating situation, the result is highly illuminating regarding the divergent impacts of a common process of industrial restructuring on male and female workers. While 58.2 per cent of all women workers seeking or in full-time employment had seen their living standard worsening, only 41.8 per cent of male workers did.

This suggests that women workers, compared with their male counterparts, indeed have "borne the brunt of the restructuring burden." Such examples are not hard to find. Nostalgic of the days when she worked as a skilled sewing machine operator in the garment industry, Sim-jing's (39) occupational pride in her job and the income it once brought was echoed in many interviews in our research. She explained to us that she agreed to be interviewed, not for the interview reward, but for the possibility of putting down on record what her industry was like:

> The golden years were 1976 to 1978.... Even in 1989, I was earning more than $300 a day.... This was one third more than my husband's clerical job.... In 1991, I moved here (to Shatin) and found this sales job. From 1 pm to 8 pm, I only got $3,800 a month! You can imagine how unhappy I was. But, that's the reality.

Another woman, Kwan-ying (45) was unemployed, after having worked all her life for one electronics factory since 1968. She was very proud of her "jack-of-all-trade" experience in microchips production and was equally angry at being abandoned by society because employers these days considered her "under-

qualified" but "over-experienced." Her co-workers' job search experience convinced her that she was unlikely to break away from such a collective predicament:

> I was earning $10,000 a month (in 1990). Because we were in production, with overtime, we could double our income. If, say, we worked an extra four hours a day, we could have up to $15,000 a month.... Alas, now, the more experienced we are, the more difficult for us to find work. Employers find our experience too expensive, and experience is worth nothing when you don't have qualifications.... Sometime ago, I was looking for a $5,000 a month job (half of what I earned!), and I found nothing.... One of my co-workers found a cashier job at Hong Kong Telecom for some $3,000 a month (in 1989)... that's 60 per cent less than her factory job.

In another case, Wai-guen (40) repeated several times during our interview that "it's lucky we can keep our kids alive." This expression succinctly summed up her precarious financial condition. Since her husband had brought home a reduced income since 1990, she had been forced to change from doing out-work, sewing gloves at home, to taking up two garbage cleaning jobs to sustain the family:

> He (my husband) only gives me $4,000 a month and I have to make up the rest to make ends meet.... There are so many different tedious expenses. Like my son, he asked me for $300 for his uniform, and my daughter needs another $300. Basically, they ask me to pay for everything, several dozens for her domestic science class and several dozen dollars for color pencils....

Children's educational expenses impose difficulty for working class parents like Shun-hing (45), who was unemployed and felt guilty at being unable to buy a computer for his son:

> He (her son) wants very much to buy a computer. I, too, want to buy him one. At the time when I got my severance payment, it cost about $10,000. But then I wasn't sure how long my welfare assistance would last.... I thought if I bought the computer, it would use up two months' living expenses. How could we live? So, I didn't buy any computer.

Not only do educational expenses become a financial burden, normal social life and leisure have to be consciously cut due to reduced income. Women workers increasingly find themselves socially isolated. For instance, Lai-yee (39) had been unemployed for four years and reported that she had many times declined to meet with her old co-workers from the factory she had worked for more than 20 years. Maintaining friends had become too costly for her:

> I have lost many friends in the past four years. It is now difficult to maintain friends without some economic resources. My friends may pay for my meal this time, but I have to pay for them next time. My family economy is running downhill. It's natural that I lose many friends. At the beginning, they (old co-workers) would call me up from time to time. But, going to a tea-house needs money, and so I usually make up some excuses and decline their invitation. When you decline them all the time, they stop calling me.

A similar situation was reported by Sueh-fong (49), a single-mother with a son, who went from having a full-time manufacturing job to becoming unemployed between our first and second interviews. In the first interview, she said:

> Of course, my income is not enough for the two of us. Just $4,000 or so... $1,000 for rent, another $1,000 for my daughter's expenses, utilities cost another $1,000. You say how many more $1,000 do I have left? I have not seen a movie in several years. I cannot even afford going to cinema.... Even in tea house, I only order one or two *dim sum*. I go to meet friends, co-workers and neighbours. I dare not let myself eat much.... I am a single parent with only one income.... It's very hard. At New Year time, when I wanted to buy new clothes for my daughter, I had to wait for sales time.

A declining living standard and uncertainty about the future mean a cut back on essential consumption as well. Yuk-ying (34) reported that she cut back on food and had to resort to borrowing when emergency needs arose. Her family, like many others in our study, simply did not have enough surplus to save:

> I cut back on grocery, buying less quality stuff. And, I do not eat as much. I have skipped breakfast and lunch.... At one point, I had lost 30 pounds. I weighed 150 pounds previously.... Once, my eldest daughter was sick and hospitalized, I had to borrow from my mother. My husband did not know about this. I did not want him to know that I have this option.

A reduction in real income is also accompanied by intensification of work for those who are still working. For women who have taken up service work, they find the service workplace allows less autonomy than a factory shop floor, especially for those who have worked on piece rate in manufacturing. For instance, Siu-wah compared her restaurant with factory:

> We have more freedom (in the factory). I could go anywhere I wanted. I could take a break or walk around a bit. I could chat with other workers and no one was there to scold me. It was my own work. I could choose to earn less. But, it's different in the restaurant.... We are surveilled more intensively.... Now, I have to notify someone when I go to the bathroom.

Another woman found service workplaces more hectic, less humane and physically more exhausting. Lai-hing who worked the night shift at a Seven-Eleven said:

> We chatted a lot in the factory, talking about our families. We really liked that. It's different at Seven-Eleven. We have to deal with many outsiders.... We don't talk much at work because we do different tasks and it's always busy. It's much more comfortable in a factory.... I could control how fast I worked. If I was in good mood, I could work faster. (At service job) I have to put up with the boss' mood.... It's very hard work at Seven-Eleven: I lost 10 pounds in one month.... We have to work standing up for eight hours.

Because of her overnight work schedule and her domestic responsibilities, she had broken up her sleeping time into three sessions:

> I get off from work at 7 am. I take care of my daughter for a while, have breakfast, take a shower and then sleep for about three hours. Then I take my daughter to school and sleep again in the afternoon. Around dinner time, I wake up again....

> When I am tired I sleep. When I am not tired, I wake up to do housework.

Women still working in manufacturing industries reported worsening work situations since the late 1980s. Declining or stagnant wages, less welfare provisions, bad attitudes of employers and increased conflicts among workers are common. The following quotations are illustrations of these situations:

> Five years ago, I earned some $10,000 a month. Last December, if I do not count the basic income of $4,000, I earned only $1,000.... Wages have become less and less. We are on piece rate and have to argue with him (the employer) all the time on the rates. He is very mean. There is a skilled worker earning more than $10,000 a month and the boss always asked her, "You own your own flat; children are all grown up. Why should you still work here?"... He also tried to use you to the extreme. There was this delivery worker, making $5,000 a month. The boss made him do everything: repairing the lights, washing the air-conditioners. If he refused to do these extra things, he would be fired (Wai-chung).

> When I worked in the stationary factory, it was difficult to find workers. So they gave us more welfare. It's kind of nice. For example, you got bonuses when you got married or had a baby, and we had picnics every six months. Now, we don't have these anymore (Yuk-kam).

> In the past, workers got along very well. Now, people fight each other. Everyone looks after her own interest.... When one worker gets fired while another one of her age and ability can stay, conflicts arise. Those who have good relations with the boss and join the clique will not be fired (Kwan-ying).

Demoralization and Moral Critique

In their gradual descent from the class ladder, deterioration of material life is but one facet of women workers' collective experience. Perhaps a more covert injury inflicted by economic restructuring is that of demoralization and the corollary of serious affronts to the dignity and moral self-worth of women. In the course of interviewing women workers, we find anger and frustration, at first directed at the unjust socio-economic circumstances, and later at themselves for being useless and helpless at the prime of their lives. Behind this collective demoralization, there creeps between the lines of women's voices a moral critique, albeit not without ambiguities and contradictions, of our social order.

To understand the ethos of the working class being uprooted by events in the past decade, one must begin with the recognition that working has never been just a means of survival. We believe that Hong Kong workers hold both instrumental and affective values towards job and working.[29] Like workers elsewhere, we find that our women interviewees have made moral and emotional investments in the work they do and the workplaces that are integral parts of their identities.[30] That is why when their way of life is threatened, a lot more than a deterioration of standard of living is at stake.

Demoralization is the day-by-day sapping of confidence and a prolonged weakening of the will, the result of several years of job search that ends in vain. Lai-yee's (39) situation after four years' of looking for a stable job was representative of many others. Having worked as a skilled machine operator in a textile mill for 23 years, and having gained the respect of her "sisters" in the mill, Lai-yee was frank about her pride in her work and the bleak anticipation with finding work again:

> I started at the age of 11 (the legal age for work was 14), and after four years I had already become an assistant to the chief spinner. The chief spinner operated a big machine that controlled all other spinners. It's lots of responsibility. Later, I even became a chief spinner.... I'd rather offend my boss than offend my "sisters" at work, so they liked me a lot.... Now, after so many attempts, I really lost all motivation to find a job. I have been to many interviews, they either say I am too old or they have already hired someone else. I went for a job selling jeans, and the guy said it to my face that "I only want those between 18 and 22, those younger ones, not your age." Alas, how frank he was!

Demoralization and lowered self-esteem are also evident in the case of Sueh-fong. In our first interview, she was still hanging on to a $ 4,000-a-month manufacturing job and told us how she would not take up any cleaning work because she could not bear handling dirt and mess. In our second interview six months later, she had already been dismissed and had since tried asking for many jobs without success. She lowered the bottom line of her job search:

> Now I even try dish washing work, which is a step down for me already, but still there is nothing.... I feel very lost right now.... I have no one to talk to. When I meet my old co-workers, and when they know that I am still looking for a job, they shift the topic of our chat immediately. Well, people treat you like you were a fierce tiger when you're poor. Yet, everyone should be given some dignity. Me too, I do have my self-esteem.

The experience of age discrimination was almost universally mentioned with anger by all our interviewees. Many of them had by now been "cooled out" by a labour market that placed premium on younger age groups. Having worked as a "skilled" worker making leather apparel for a decade, Sin-fong was very frustrated by the unreasonable qualifications demanded by many employers:

> Open a newspaper, and you find that they say you are over-aged, under-qualified. There was an opening for a kitchen helper, preparing meals. I thought I had to settle for that since I could not find other things. I have never expected that, for this kind of job, people want you to know English too.... For those who give you a job, the pay is so low. There was a part-time cleaning job I asked about. Monday to Friday, 5 pm to 9 pm, $1,500 per month. Only a bit more than $10 per hour and you have to work more than 20 days a month!

Similar frustration was expressed by Chui-king who also considered her versatile work skills wasted:

> I really don't want to lower myself to washing dishes in the restaurants. You see, I have skills in textiles, dyeing, garment and I can even drive a car. Why do I need to wash dishes?

But, even among those who wanted to take up cleaning jobs, and longed for a cleaning position in government hospitals, age discrimination dampened their hope for a stable job in the government sector. Sin-fong said:

> Because it's a stable job with stable income. But, even when they say the age limit is 45, I have inside information that the real age limit is 40, unless one has connections. The pay is good, around $7,000 a month and it's stable.... We still have working capability and not too old, and children are all grown up, we long for a stable job.

An equally critical indictment of society's irrational preference for the young and disrespect for the experiences of the mid-aged came from Fung-tai (41) who was forced to exit from the job market three years ago when her factory relocated to the mainland:

> Actually, those in their 30s or 40s should be the most important people to the company because they are the most experienced.... I went to check out an amah job in a kindergarten... and the first thing they asked was "how old are you?" They don't hire those over 40. But why not? How could they assume that those over 40 should stay home and rest?... These jobs, no young women are willing to take because they are so dirty and disgusting. They are suitable for our age, but what can we do when they don't want us?

Besides age discrimination, women like Siu-guan were angry at the unreasonably low pay rates of service jobs:

> I went to an interview for an office assistant. Only $170 per day, without any welfare or subsidies. It's not even a monthly-paid, stable job. I don't care about long work hours, but the pay must be reasonable.... I have also registered for a waitress job in the Maxim's restaurant. There is no response. I think it's age discrimination, and that is very frustrating. I am so angry about this that I think I'd rather spend less than taking up the job.

What is most appalling is that even women in their 30s are worried about their job opportunities. For instance, Shun-mei, who quit her cosmetic sales job at the age of 29, said she was

worried that, when she would seek a job again in several years' time, she would be overaged, "having passed 30." In another instance, a 37-year-old Man-tai told us a joke among her women friends that "You need to be high school graduate to get a street sweeping position." She said, "When I was interviewed for a sales job, they just took a look at me, asked me how old I was and then told me to go home and wait." Or, when we asked a 35-year-old Yuk-kam what kind of jobs she preferred, she simply said, "It's not up to me to prefer." And, when we asked if she had gradually lowered her expectation in the job search process, she expressed her helplessness by saying that, "I do not have any demands. It's they (the employers) who have demands on us."

Under pressure, some interviewees told us they had nightmares about problems in the workplace, worrying that they would lose their job in a precarious labour market. Others pondered over the day when they would have to depend on government public assistance to survive. But, most of them were of the attitude that, unless absolutely necessary, they would not want to depend on the government. One woman described this last resort of applying for welfare as an option only better than dying. In the meantime, most found themselves dependent on their husband, like the case of Chui-king:

> In the past, I thought I was still young and there was no need to worry about unemployment. As long as I have the energy, I can get work anywhere. Now, my mentality is that since I cannot find work, I can only rely on my husband and my children. I depend on my husband for allowances, and I have to be frugal. I go to the tea house less often.

An indicator of the depth of these women workers' frustration can perhaps be found in their expectation on the government. A substantial majority (about a quarter) of the respondents had no idea of how the government could help them. Another striking fact was the small percentage of respondents who had participated in government-sponsored retraining programmes. Only 7.2 per cent, or 36, of our respondents had done so (Table 6). Not surprisingly, therefore, when asked what can the government do

Table 6 Retraining Activity by Employment Status (%)

	Self-study	Government programme	Others	No	Row total	(N)
Remains in manufacturing	2.1	7.8	1.4	88.7	28.0	(141)
Changed to other sectors	13.7	9.6	2.7	74.0	14.5	(73)
Exit from employment	3.2	1.9	1.3	93.6	31.0	(156)
Unable to find full-time job	3.0	11.3	2.3	83.5	26.4	(133)
Column total	4.4	7.2	1.8	86.7	99.9	(503)

Source: Sample survey.

to help them, only 6.0 per cent of all respondents regarded a retraining programme as helpful to them. In particular, only 3 of those unable to find a full-time job thought retraining could help them, the lowest percentage among the four groups, although about a tenth of them had participated in such programmes.[31] Why they think retraining is not going to help them is puzzling, for the retraining scheme is exactly developed to assist workers displaced from manufacturing.

From our in-depth interviews, we know that from their own experiences and from the stories they have heard from others, they have developed a low perception of the efficacy of the retraining programmes in helping women workers find new jobs or improve the life chances of individual women who have received retraining. For example, one respondent frankly admits that her participation in the retraining scheme is merely to get the retraining allowance.[32] She really does not believe that the training itself is useful for job-seeking. Another respondent has learned about the experiences of several mothers of her son's classmates who, in their 30s and having completed retraining courses, still have great

difficulties in finding a job. Another respondent has a neighbour who has completed an one-year course in computer and still cannot find a job. This view is also corroborated by other sources. In a small scale study conducted by the FTU, for example, it is found that less than half of the retrainees have actually found a job after completion of their training course.[33]

Involuntary Retreat to Domesticity

Deprived of stable employment, women workers in our study are forced to withdraw from the formal labour market which had allowed them job, independent income, friends, social relations and a sense of self worth. Their involuntary retreat back to full-time housewifery does not provide an easy way out. Like Betty Friedan's famous formulation of "the problem without a name" among American housewives in the 1950s and 1960s, we find our women workers trying to articulate a problem which our society does not recognize. For instance, during our interviews, Kwan-ying always interjected her responses with "do you understand?" or "you won't understand." She talked at length about the pains of being deprived of a job after so many years of working. Staying at home was compared to "becoming a disabled":

> In 1990, I started looking for a job but no one wanted me. You know, I have had a working life for more than 20 years and suddenly there is no more work to do, it's like becoming an idiot, because there is too much dead time.... It feels like you're to explode. Even if I don't get paid, I'd like people to give me something to work on, to make use of my time. Do you understand? I have always worked.... I was very motivated at finding a job, at the beginning after taking a break of several months. Now, the whole thing is getting so depressing. It's not about whether I need a job for survival. I just cannot stand becoming disabled. Do you understand?

Against common sense understanding that staying home is an easy solution for women unemployed, many women experience full-time homemaking as oppressive and detrimental to their mental and bodily well-being. Fung-tai prefers the hectic schedule she had when she was a garment worker to being left isolated at home. When we asked whether she felt pressured in balancing both full-time work and childcare when she was still working, she replied, with nostalgia:

> I did not really feel much pressure. It actually was the better way. I was more relaxed then than now.... Because I don't like staying at home. I like working outside. It's less boring and I'd be more lively and happy. You have people to talk to, about different things and you can learn.... It (her past schedule) looked very hectic, but I was with other people all the time and we talked. My mood was different (and better).

Another woman echoed her experience in telling us how she became sick more often now that she was unemployed and stayed home:

> I am now at home all the time and I feel so uncomfortable. There is pain here and there. When I was working, I was like an "iron woman." Staying home all day, getting bored and stuck, makes me feel sick.... My husband always says I have become very dumb and unresponsive. In the past, I could give him advice about his work. Now, strangely, I am no longer capable of that.

The retreat back to domesticity incurs not only physical and psychological costs, it also throws women back into a situation of dependence, mostly on their husbands. The balance of gender power within the family, though never very egalitarian, is generally skewed towards the husband, with women feeling deep indignation of such dependence. When Lai-tao became unemployed, and the family income was reduced by $5,000 a month, she had to ask her husband to give her more allowances:

> I have asked him (her husband) to give me more. But he said he only had a $200 pay rise and could not give me more.... I have to be careful with every item of purchase. I always check out discounts items at Park'n Shop. I don't have money for myself.... Sometimes, I have to ask my son for money. (— That's why you want to work again? — Yes.) I don't want to ask others for money all the time. It's very insulting, losing face. It makes you look like a useless person, if you don't work. If you work, at least, you can buy yourself a dress.

After the wife becomes unemployed, a generally reported situation is that her husband becomes more reluctant to share any childcare or household chores. Fung-tai has this to say:

> He (her husband) becomes reluctant to help. Even in refilling his bowl with rice, he's not willing to do it himself. It was not like that before. In the past, when our son become naughty, he'd help me with laundry.... Now that I have no job, he doesn't do anything.... He said, "the most important thing for you is to take care of the kid."... If I ask him to have an eye on him (the son), he'd say, "I'm very tired. You look after him yourself."

Women are thus re-confined in a traditional feminine role from which they had at least a modicum of liberation when they held full-time jobs. The disturbing trend we witness as economic restructuring unfolds is that working class women are forced to go home and domesticity becomes their only option. In terms of striving for equal opportunity for women, this is definitely a step backward.

Conclusion

Industrial restructuring in Hong Kong has dealt a heavier blow on the female segment of the working class than its male counterpart. Compared to former male co-workers, women workers suffer from a higher unemployment rate, spend more time in search of new jobs and have to accept declining real wages. Women workers' collective predicaments coalesce into four major aspects: in fluidity and instability of employment, declining living standards, severe demoralization and involuntary retreat to domesticity. In this paper, we have documented women's voicing these hidden injuries, "hidden" because their predicaments cannot be adequately captured by categories used in official statistics, and because our society misconceives the home as a panacea for women's unemployment problem.

This study of the relation between women and industrial development in Hong Kong suggests that women's relative liberation from domestic dependence through formal employment can easily be reversed when the path of industrialization changes gear. Today, we see that, even as Hong Kong's economy remains robust, women workers are once again "marginalized" as disposable factors of production. Viewed from the perspectives of women workers, the Hong Kong miracle has turned into a mirage, and the Hong Kong dream has withered. The consequences of such collective demoralization among a sizable segment of Hong Kong's working class are yet to be explored.

We hope that, by presenting the authentic voices and views of women workers on their own predicaments and grievances, we can stimulate more public attention to the social impacts of our rapid transformation from an industrial to a service economy. Women workers certainly deserve public sympathy for their dreadful situation, as their moving testimonies suggest, but their problems are not simply one of their own. The social cost for laying back and not taking the necessary policy initiatives on these matters will be enormous and non-recoverable in the future. While Hong Kong has always boasted that its only asset is its hard-working people, it is a terrible waste of "human capital" when the skills and work ethics that workers, male or female, have accumulated over the years suddenly become obsolete and unwanted, and when they become so frustrated that they finally give up any hope of getting or holding on to a stable and decent job. As the wealthiest economy in Asia (with the highest per capita income in purchase-power-parity terms), Hong Kong can well afford to alleviate their situation and offer them training and job opportunities so that they can become once again proud members of the "Hong Kong miracle." The real question is whether our society will set our priorities straight and put gender and labour issues high on our agenda. We firmly believe we should take the problems of women workers seriously, because this, together with other necessary social reforms, are critical steps towards a stable and prosperous society in Hong Kong in the transition to 1997 and beyond.

Notes

1. World Bank, *The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
2. See for example, Ho, Y.P., *Trade, Industrial Restructuring and Development in Hong Kong* (London: Macmillan, 1992); Lui, T.L. and S. Chiu, "Industrial Restructuring and Labour Market Adjustment Under Positive Non-interventionisms," *Environment and Planning A*, 25(1993):63-79; Lui, T.L. and S. Chiu, "A Tale of Two Industries: The Restructuring of Hong Kong's Garment-making and Electronics Industries," *Environment and Planning A*, 26(1994):53-70; and S. Chiu and T.L. Lui, "Horizontal Expansion and Spatial Relocation: Production and Employment Restructuring of the Electronics Industry in Hong Kong," paper presented at the 10th World Congress International Industrial Relations Association, Washington DC, 31 May - 4 June, 1995.
3. For exceptions, see Stephen Chiu and David Levin, "The World Economy, State, and Sectors in Industrial Change: Labor Relations in Hong Kong's Textile and Garment-Making Industries," pp. 143-75 in Stephen Frenkel and Jeffrey Harrod (eds), *Industrialization and Labor Relations* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1995), and Stephen Chiu and Tai-lok Lui, "Sewing for Change: Production and Employment Restructuring of the Clothing Industry in Hong Kong," pp. 263-88 in Joseph S. Lee and Anil Verma (eds), *Changing Employment Relations in Asian Pacific Countries* (Taipei: Chung Hua Institution for Economic Research, 1996). Also, Ching Kwan Lee, "Engendering the Worlds of Labor: Women Workers, Labor Markets, and Production Politics in the South China Miracle," *American Sociological Review*, 60(1995):378-97.
4. For a good example, see the collection of papers in Kathryn Ward (ed.), *Women Workers and Global Restructuring* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1990). For an exposition of the relationship between industrialization and labour utilization from the dependency perspective, see Fred Deyo, *Beneath the Miracle: Labor Subordination in the New Asian Industrialization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
5. Linda Lim, "Women's Work in Export Factories: The Politics of a Cause," pp. 101-19 in Irene Tinker (ed.), *Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
6. Esther Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development* (Aldershot: Gower, 1987).
7. Boserup, ibid., p. iii.
8. H. Saffioti, *Women in Class Society* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978).
9. On the idea of dependent development, see Peter Evans, *Dependent Development* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).
10. Chiu and Levin, op. cit., 1995.
11. Recently a few studies have been devoted to the subject of the industrial restructuring in the NIEs, but these studies focus more on structural transformation rather than on human consequences. For example, Stephen W.K. Chiu, K.C. Ho and Tai-lok Lui, *The City-States in the Global Economy* (Boulder: Westview, 1997); Gordon Clark and W.B. Kim, *Asian NIEs and Global Economy* (Washington DC: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997); Hugh Patrick with Larry Meissner (eds), *Pacific Basin Industries in Distress* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). For studies which pay special attention to employment implications of restructuring, see John Bauer, "Industrial Restructuring in the NIEs: Prospects and Challenges," *Asian Survey*, 32(1992):1012-25; Committee for Asian Women, *Silk and Steel: Asian Women Workers Confront Challenges of Industrial Restructuring* (Hong Kong: Committee for Asian Women, 1995).
12. See, for instance, Joan Acker, "Hierarchies, Jobs and Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations," *Gender and Society*,

4(1990):139-58; Ruth Milkman and Eleanor Townsley, "Gender and the Economy," in Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg (eds), *The Handbook of Economic Sociology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Barbara Reskin, "Sex Segregation in the Workplace," *American Review of Sociology*, 19(1993):241-70.

13. Stephen W.K. Chiu, O.K. Lai and Ching Kwan Lee, *Women Workers under Industrial Restructuring: Impacts, Responses and Predicaments.* Report Submitted to the Hong Kong Federation of Women, 1996.

14. See Industry Department, *Hong Kong's Manufacturing Industries* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1994), and Census and Statistics Department, *Quarterly Report on General Household Survey: October to December 1994* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1995).

15. Census and Statistics Department, *Quarterly Report on General Household Survey: October to December 1995* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1996).

16. In recent years, the Census and Statistics Department has claimed to have included those who are without a job but not seeking work because they "believe that work is not available to them." It is unclear, however, how they operationalize this and how much of the unemployment figure it publishes can be accounted for for this reason.

17. For example, no breakdown by gender of unemployment in different industries and occupations is available.

18. Census and Statistics Department, *Hong Kong 1991 Population Census: Main Tables* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1992).

19. Census and Statistics Department, *Employment and Vacancies Statistics (Industrial Sector)*, various years. Third quarter figures are reported because the Department reports detailed breakdowns by gender only for third quarter figures.

20. Chiu and Levin, op. cit., 1995.

21. We have in fact conducted another wave of telephone interviews of another 141 women workers, but since including them in statistical analysis would present sampling problems, we have decided to exclude them from the following analysis.

22. The average duration of these interviews was one and a half hour.

23. These two demographic characteristics of our sample differed from the overall background of women workers in manufacturing as reported by the 1991 Census, who are younger (only 32.5 per cent of 40 years old or older) and have higher educational achievement (with 41 per cent having only primary education or less). Of course the age difference can be a result of the time lag between the 1991 Census and our survey (1995), but a more important reason for the difference is that our sampling strategy sampled only respondents who were in production-related occupations. Hence, managerial and professional employees, as well as clerical and sales employees, are excluded. These employees are certainly younger (in the case of clerical and sales employees) as well as with higher educational achievement.

24. This term is borrowed from Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Knopf, 1972). In the concluding section, we will discuss why these are "hidden" in the case of Hong Kong.

25. See, for example, the formulations by S.K. Lau and H.C. Kwan, *The Ethos of the Hong Kong Chinese* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1988, p. 65); Thomas Wong, "Personal Experience and Social Ideology," in S.K. Lau et al. (eds), *Indicators of Social Development: Hong Kong 1990* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1992, p. 218). Ethnographies of de-industrialization in the United States also document similar cultural and moral dislocation in the face of massive plant closure and working class unemployment. See, for instance,

Kathryn Marie Dudley, *The End of the Line* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

26. Census and Statistics Department, *Quarterly Report on General Household Survey, January to March 1995*. (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1995).
27. For example, the Lai Chi Kok Organization of Workers' Concern for Society surveyed 297 interviewees and reported a 11.4 per cent jobless rate in August 1995. The Hong Kong Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood also showed that 13 per cent of its respondents were unemployed. See "Hong Kong Worried About Jobs," *Hong Kong Staff*, September 1995.
28. It is based on two procedures. First, we assume, quite logically, that all those who are unable to find full-time work have suffered from a deterioration in living standards and will be given the value of 1 for the "Worse" variable. Secondly, we classify the other cases based on a question asking those who remain in manufacturing and those who have changed to other sectors whether their living standards have worsened since five years ago. All cases with positive answers to these questions will then be assigned the value of 1 to the "Worse" variable. All other cases will be assigned a value of 0.
29. For a different view, see T.L. Lui, "Work and Work Values," in S.K. Lau et al. (eds), *Indicators of Social Development: Hong Kong 1990* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1992).
30. See, for example Dudley, op. cit., 1994.
31. The percentages for those remaining in manufacturing is 6.5 per cent, 15.1 per cent for those changing to other sectors, and 4.5 per cent for those who had exited from full-time employment.
32. A full-time retrainee receives a monthly allowance of HK$4,000.
33. *Apple Daily*, 4 March 1996.

Withering Away of the Hong Kong Dream?

Women Workers under Industrial Restructuring

Abstract

During the last decade, Hong Kong's economy has experienced a rapid restructuring and the dwindling of the industrial sector. To find out more about how this industrial restructuring affected women workers in manufacturing industries, we conducted in January 1995 a telephone survey of 1,004 workers, of which 505 were female. The survey questionnaire examined different types of employment status change of our respondents during the five-year period before the poll. Following upon the survey, we conducted in-depth interviews with 40 women workers selected from our telephone poll. Our analysis suggests that, when the Hong Kong economic structure is in flux, employment status within that structure become fluid as well. This is most evident from the collective employment experience of women workers in the past five years; many have in fact moved in and out of different employments frequently. As the economies of Hong Kong and the mainland become more integrated, this cohort of women workers confronts a double jeopardy in finding new employment: mothering responsibilities and age discrimination. Economic restructuring also afflicts the quality of their workplace experience and family life, as well as their sense of self worth. Although some cope with the situation by learning new skills, most have become frustrated and angry at being denied full time jobs with reasonable pay, at the time when they are still fully capable of and committed to working. In short, the overall impact on women workers is one of falling down both the class and gender ladders. If they have always been at the bottom of the class and gender hierarchies, restructuring has brought about a further deterioration in both dimensions of their social position. In terms of employment, they are now either unemployed or with marginalized and informal employment, or with service jobs paying less than their manufacturing jobs in the past. At home, they have become more dependent on (and subordinate to) their husbands and are forced to resume the domestic roles of housewife and mother. Gender roles have once again been rigidified as gender inequalities at home and at work are reinforced.

「香港夢」的幻滅？

工業轉型下之女工

趙永佳　李靜君

（中文摘要）

在過去十年間，香港的經濟結構經歷一急速轉型，工業部門大幅收縮。爲了進一步了解工業轉型對製造業女工有何影響，我們進行了一個電話調查，訪問了 1,004 位五年前在製造業工作之工人，其中 505 位爲女性。調查的主要目的在於了解五年間製造業工人的就業情況有何改變。其後我們更對 40 位女被訪者進行深入的訪談。我們的研究結果顯示，婦女勞工在工業轉型下就業處境極不穩定，往往在就業、失業及半失業間徘徊。在照顧家庭上之負擔、勞工市場的年齡及性別歧視之下，大量的女工退出勞工市場，生活質素明顯下降。工業轉型更爲她們帶來一種較爲隱晦的傷害，令她們的自身評價及自我形象大受打擊。在工業轉型下，她們不但失去一份安穩、「過得去」的工作，更令她們一向引以爲傲的生產技術也好像變得一文不值。她們只會感到憤怒及擔憂，深深體會到社會制度的不公平。這種心境我們形容爲「香港夢」的幻滅，對她們來說，香港再也不是一個公平、充滿機會的地方，再也不是一個憑藉個人努力就可以爲自己及家人創造安穩生活的地方。