IDLEAKS

IDleaks Thesis Award 2018

Best Thesis
Emma Vogt

Engendering Empowerment for Women Garment Workers?
An Analysis of the Gender Reality of 'Women in Factories' Participants in South India

The jury was thoroughly impressed by the thesis of Emma Vogt that critically dissects the concept of 'women empowerment' as it is used in current discourses of Corporate Social Responsibility.

For her research, Emma travelled to South India and visited various garment factories, conducted interviews with female garment workers, spoke to HR manager at two factories, and various local NGOs who implemented different types of Corporate Social Responsibility interventions in the garment industry. Her empirical efforts also included an in-depth analysis of Wallmart's 'Women in Factories' programme.

Here, she shows how "women empowerment" is purposefully constructed in this programme in a way that steers clear of challenging existing structures or threatening disruption of production. It does not talk about gender-biased hiring practices, about living wages or about forming unions. The Corporate Social Responsibility version of 'empowerment' that she encounters is the struggle of the individual, not that of an organized collective. It is about personal growth and training, not about systemic injustice.

Importantly, however, Emma also does not stop at simply identifying the many inadequacies of this specific corporate social responsibility programme. By discussing other Corporate Social Responsibility programmes in the region that have taken a different approach, she offers concrete pointers of how such programmes could facilitate more meaningful empowerment that might help to improve worker's situation.

Through a series of interviews conducted with women who participated in Walmart's Corporate Social Responsibility programme, Emma shows how this limited conceptualization of "empowerment" translates into limited meaningful change. These interviews – that were conducted at home and at the factory – also confirm how gender, together with other identity markers such as age and social-economic class, shape every single part of the women's daily lives, at work and at home. Yet, in her analysis of the interviews, Emma also highlights how, within this environment of restrictive gender stereotypes, some women find creative ways of non-conforming, of doing their own thing and working on bettering their own situation and that of their children.

So while the overall tone of this thesis is certainly not that of gloomy pessimism, it forcefully demonstrates how Walmart's Corporate Social Responsibility programme falls short in bringing about more meaningful and systemic change for these women. In the author's own words, the empowerment it is set up to deliver is 'liberal', and not 'liberating'.

Emma Vogt has written an impressive thesis that was picked out unanimously by the jury as the winner of the 2018 IDLEAKS Master Thesis Award. Her writing is that of a critical and self-critical mind, who never gets lost in the immense richness of her material, and always remains very aware of her own position as an outside researcher – as a white Dutch female who communicated with the women through an interpreter. And while the jury did find it somewhat problematic to make sense of the situation mainly through conceptual lenses developed by Western feminist thinkers, the authors self-critical positioning helped to mitigate some of the risks that come with this.

It is a remarkable academic achievement, that demonstrates the author's deep personal engagement with the topic and with the fate of her participants. Moreover, it shows the author's desire to not simply blame and shame, but to contribute productively to the discussion of how corporate responsibility and moral accountability can have a place in the globalized garment industry.

The jury consisted of Johannes von Engelhardt (UvA), Alana Osbourne (UvA/KITLV) and Wouter Oomen (IDleaks, UU).

Special Mention
Miriam Ocadiz Arriaga

(E)motion of Saudade
The Embodiment of Solidarity in the Cuban Medical Cooperation in Mozambique

Throughout this evocative and compelling piece of work, the author poses questions pertaining to inter-scalar relations that warrant more scholarship both in the humanities and in the social sciences.

First, she asks how we can better understand relations of aid between countries grossly charted as being in the global 'South'. In so doing, she troubles the very terms used in popular and academic discourse to map the world. Underlining that the Caribbean's geographic and economic realities as well as its historical ties to Mozambique complicate prevailing Euro-American divisions of space, she narrates the link that has tied these nations throughout the decades.

Second, moving beyond the history of 'South-South' relations, Ocadiz Arriaga introduces another scale of analysis: that of development discourses, which she situates at the 'macro-level', and which describe these relations in terms of solidarity. Finally, through a detailed and somewhat poetic recounting of her fieldwork encounters, she presents embodied, on-the-ground accounts of the ways "political discourses on solidarity are deconstructed to be personally internalized within this intercultural encounter." She thus brings attention to the everyday lives of Cuban care-workers in Mozambique and to their negotiations of development discourses around solidarity and so-called 'South-South' relations.

As a jury, we have found Ocadiz Arriaga's work exciting and engaging. At its core, this multi-layered analysis raises important questions and teases themes central to development studies and discourses. It engages with these critically, drawing on an array of references that span disciplinary divides. Furthermore, the form of the thesis is refreshing, original and, in its reflexive nature, inherently postcolonial.

For these reasons, we have chosen to attribute the thesis an honorary mention. We hope that the author sees this as an invitation to continue unpacking this subject and carries her work beyond its self-proclaimed aim to merely 'document the connections, both historical and contemporary, between countries labelled as underdeveloped', to address the potent political dimension of her queries. Good luck!

The jury consisted of Johannes von Engelhardt (UvA), Alana Osbourne (UvA/KITLV) and Wouter Oomen (IDleaks, UU).