

Girls of the Factory: A year with the Garment Workers of Morocco. By M. Laetitia Cairoli.
Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011.

Review by Araceli González-Vázquez

In 1994-95, fifteen years ago, M. Laetitia Cairoli spent a year in the city of Fez, Morocco, conducting ethnographic research on girls and unmarried women working in the garment industry. That year of fieldwork led to the completion of her PhD dissertation, entitled *Garment factory workers in Morocco* (Columbia University, 1997). Much of her data was gathered through participant-observation in a single factory, where she was employed as a worker for three months. In both her dissertation and the book under review here, Cairoli explains how female workers strive to maintain their cultural values despite their engagement with the factory. With this purpose in mind, workers transform the workshop floor into an interior space, recast factory staff into family, and operate in the factory as they would in the household. Interestingly, she also explains that workers and their families strive to ensure that their labor in the factory does not re-order household hierarchies, although she detects how the female participation in factory life begins to introduce some changes, as it provides young females with opportunities for increased personal autonomy, it expands the limits of their social environments, and it allows them to transgress certain boundaries, often gender boundaries.

Page 1 of 4

Republished JBA
10(1): 188-191
Spring 2021

© The Author(s) 2021
ISSN 2245-4217

DOI:
10.22439/jba.v10i1.6
333

M. Laetitia Cairoli has published some scholarly articles on her data in several journals and edited collections, being the most salient: “Factory as home and family: Female workers in the Moroccan garment industry” (1998), “Garment factory workers in the city of Fez” (1999) and “Girl but not woman: garment factory workers in Fez” (2007). *Girls of the Factory* (2011) is an ethnographic account of Cairoli’s days in the factory during the year she spent in Fez. Also, it chronicles fieldwork in the household of one young woman as she endures a very typical cycle of employment, unemployment, and job hunting (described in part III). Cairoli’s book is a notable example of the use of personal narrative as a genre to convey the results of fieldwork. As it refers to Morocco, earlier self-reflexive fieldwork accounts are: widely-known Paul Rabinow’s *Reflections on a fieldwork in Morocco* (1977); Ursula Kingsmill Hart’s *Behind the courtyard door* (1994); and Hein de Haas’s *Aroemi Aroemi: Een Vreemdeling in Marokko* (2004) (“Aroemi, aroemi: A Stranger in Morocco”¹).

In the last three decades, textile and apparel manufacture has become a major export industry in Morocco. The sector represents about “50 percent of exports, 40 percent of the workforce, 21 percent of the industrial plant of the country, and 14 percent of revenues” (Husbauer and Brunel, 2009: 82). Morocco has got a high rate of female labor force participation. Economic liberalization, neo-liberal restructuring of the global economy, structural adjustment policies and programs, and foreign investment have led to a high feminization of industrial labor force.

If relatively little economic anthropology has been done in the north of Africa, much less academic work has been focused on worker’s lives or interpersonal relations within workplaces. Other books dealing with Morocco and close to the field of “Labour studies” are John Napora’s PhD Thesis *Work and Power in Northern Morocco* (1998) and David Crawford’s *Moroccan Households in the World Economy: Labor and Inequality in a Berber Village* (2008).

M. Laetitia Cairoli’s *Girls of the factory* is a highly recommendable volume. For those who would take up the challenge to explore the feminization of labor force in Morocco in the last decades, and for those who are interested in the way that work reshapes women’s perceptions of self and otherness, Cairoli’s observations in Morocco will be extremely valuable. Her account offers insight into the lives and aspirations of women at a particular moment in Morocco’s industrialization process. It also provides very precious information on some of the undersides of Morocco’s opening to globalization.

The raw honesty of the ethnographer’s voice is an important element in the text, and something to be praised without reserve. In spite

¹ “Aroemi” is a transcription/translation of the Moroccan word for “roman”, “roumi”, which refers, *grosso modo*, to the Western foreigners.

of the interest of some strategic silences, adopted by the narrator as the result of the conscious choice of the author, the book might lack depth in its approach to issues as labour rights and child labour. Also, given that it deals with labour under Hassan II's authoritarian regime, one could have expected to read some more paragraphs on women's views on issues such as workers' rights, labor activism, and state's politics.

Anthropologists interested in the field of business anthropology will find this book highly interesting. It offers a sensitive approach into the personal and social effects of capitalism and neoliberalism, and raises the great importance of gender as an analytical tool to understand these processes. Readers can also gain an accurate sense of the complex nature of fieldwork, which makes the book particularly suitable for students of anthropology.

References

- Cairolì, M.L. 1997 *Garment factory workers in Morocco*. Columbia University Press.
- Cairolì, M.L. 1998 "Factory as home and family: Female workers in the Moroccan garment industry". *Human Organization*, 57 (2): 181-89. <https://doi.org/10.17730/humo.57.2.082j824l32711736>
- Cairolì, M.L. 1999 "Garment factory workers in the city of Fez". *The Middle East Journal*, 53 (1): 28-43.
- Cairolì, M.L. 2007 "Girl but not woman: garment factory workers in Fez", in Moghadam, V. *From patriarchy to empowerment: women's participation, movements, and rights in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 160-179.
- Cairolì, M.L. 2011 *Girls of the factory: A year with the garment workers of Morocco*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Crawford, D. 2008 *Moroccan Households in the World Economy: Labor and Inequality in a Berber Village*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- De Haas, H. 2004 *Aroemi, Aroemi: Een vreemdeling in Marokko*. Amsterdam: Bulaaq.
- Husbauer, G. C. and Brunel, C. 2009 *Capitalizing on the Morocco-US Free Trade Agreement: A Road Map for Success*. Washington: Peterson Institute for International Economics.
- Kingsmill Hart, U. 1994 *Behind the courtyard door: the daily life of tribeswomen in northern Morocco*. Ipswich: The Ipswich Press.
- Napora, J.A. 1998 *Work and Power in Northern Morocco*. PhD dissertation: University of Virginia.

Rabinow, P. 1977 Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Araceli González-Vázquez holds a PhD in history (University of Cantabria, Spain). She is specialised in the study of gender and Islam. Currently, she is a postdoctoral researcher at the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale, Collège de France/EHESS/CNRS, Paris.