

Book Review

**Stephanie Barrientos (2020) *Gender and Work in Global Value Chains: Capturing the Gains?* New York: Cambridge University Press. 332 pp. ISBN 9781108729239.
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Global supply chains are largely characterised by feminisation of work. Yet, gendered dynamics within these contexts remain underexplored. Based on over twenty years of research, Stephanie Barrientos responds to this theoretical shortcoming and effectively examines how global retail value chains (GRVCs) are shaping gendered employment processes and outcomes for workers. Particularly, she investigates how global value chains linking economic considerations with social reproduction influence shifts in gendered work dynamics. Additionally, she interrogates gendered consequences of economic and social up/downgrading for workers, and the impact of interlayered governance on gender equity in GRVCs (p. 16).

Having organised the book in ten chapters, Barrientos argues in the introduction for the need for gendered analyses across value chains – from retail to production levels. She posits that GRVCs entail commercial production of goods traditionally produced by women's unpaid labour within the household. Interestingly, women now buy these commodities to support their households. As such, these goods are produced by a fragmented, feminised workforce comprising formal factory employees, as well as casual/temporary and home-based workers. Due to their embeddedness in the gendered social order, these women are stereotyped such that their dispositions are linked to docility and the ability to perform intricate work. It is assumed that stitching garments or plucking and sorting fruit are activities women are naturally predisposed to perform. These activities are therefore undervalued in the commercial sphere. Such devaluation in the economic domain, in turn, is a reflection of women's gendered oppression endemic in the social domain. Essentially, these dynamics indicate a blurring of boundaries between commercial and societal spheres.

Barrientos further observes that gendered implications for workers – economic and social up/downgrading – may vary across sectors (agri-food and ready-made apparel), cultural contexts, worker type (formal, precarious and home-based) and regions (within Africa and Asia). Up/downgrading outcomes, she asserts, are not absolute but occur along a continuum. Such implications are also influenced by specific governance mechanisms. To analyse these diverse outcomes, she formulates a Global (re)Production Network or G(r)PN approach which recognises the embeddedness of GRVCs in local contexts rooted in gender norms. Broadly, this is the stage upon which the book is set.

Chapters 2 and 3 facilitate a contextual discussion of the evolution of retail and gendered work in GRVCs respectively. Barrientos argues that while retail is emerging strongly in the Global South, financialisation and consolidation of retailers in developed countries, along with bilateral trade agreements, have been key in driving production costs down in sourcing countries. Importantly,

she posits that cost reduction, speed of delivery and quality are the “mantra of global sourcing” with inherent tensions among them (pp. 44–48). She also highlights gendered hierarchies in GRVCs and demonstrates that women are relegated to lower-level occupations while men constitute the majority in upper-level management from production to retail nodes. Nonetheless, a critical argument she advances is that GRVC employment disrupts conventional gender norms by providing economic independence and higher bargaining power for women within their households.

The fourth chapter constitutes the theoretical bedrock of the book. Borrowing from Global Value Chains (GVN), Global Production Networks (GPN), feminist political economy, labour studies and Kelly’s (2009) prior formulation, Barrientos unpacks the G(r)PN approach in this chapter. She indicates that the framework is useful not only for incorporating gendered examinations in supply chain research but also more specifically for interrogating change in gendered dynamics over time. In later chapters, she also uses the framework as an instrument for comparative analysis.

The G(r)PN approach emphasises interlinkages between commercial and societal spheres at both retail and production ends (pp. 91–92). Barrientos also proposes three dimensions to the approach which are useful for determining up/downgrading outcomes for workers. First, “embedded tensions” capture inherent contradictions between the imperatives of profit maximisation in the commercial sphere enforced through low production costs and short delivery times on the one hand, and expectations of high quality, nurturing and care in the societal (including environmental) sphere on the other. Second, “gendered articulations” emphasise how gendered power relationships unravel within GRVCs given the embeddedness of supply chains in the gendered social order. Third, “contested outcomes” illustrate that women are not passive victims but exercise agency by challenging gendered exploitation. They do so as individuals, by forming collectives such as unions, by collaborating with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other entities, or through hybrid forms of contestation where employers, unions and NGOs work together towards addressing issues in GRVCs.

The next four chapters articulate case studies from various regions and sectors and demonstrate the application of the G(r)PN approach. Chapter 5 focuses on Ghanaian smallholder farmers in the cocoa–chocolate value chain and explains how liberalisation exposed them to the vagaries of global cocoa pricing. As cocoa supply became unsustainable, lead firms introduced upgrading initiatives for smallholders. However, these have been marred by gendered dilemmas as women’s unpaid labour remains invisible and keeps production costs low. Inheritance norms also preclude women from landholding, thereby limiting their access to upgrading processes.

Similarly, Chapter 6 discusses Ghanaian and South African horticulture. Barrientos explains that supermarkets exert downward pressure on costs but also demand higher quality. These tensions have led to downgrading for smallholder (mostly male) farmers but upgrading for women employed in larger export farms (p. 146). South Africa has witnessed similar dynamics. Gendered articulations there, however, suggest that migrant and precarious workers – a majority of whom are women – still experience employment volatility. Additionally, permanent workers have enjoyed most benefits accrued from contestation in both contexts while precarious workers have largely been side-lined.

Chapter 7 highlights gendered processes in Indian and Bangladeshi apparel production. In the case of the National Capital Region in India, formal factory work is male-dominated while women constitute the majority of homeworkers. Gendered hierarchies – male-dominated management ranks and concentration of women in lower-rung occupations – are prevalent in these contexts. Barrientos also effectively highlights the limits of social compliance in both countries and shows

that audits consistently fail to account for working conditions of precarious and home-based workers, and are blind to systemic gender discrimination. She also discusses the Accord and Alliance as important examples of gendered collaborative contestation in Bangladesh.

Chapter 8 illustrates two cases of economic and social upgrading in Indonesian apparel and Kenyan horticulture. This chapter highlights the recognition by retailers of the importance of socio-economic upgrading for workers and of building supplier capacity to achieve high-quality output. Barrientos explicates how Nike's initiative in Indonesia, for example, established pathways for worker participation, addressed gendered issues such as discrimination and women's caregiving responsibilities, and also improved productivity and output quality. A similar endeavour in the Kenyan flower sector went beyond economic considerations to provide women "with a space to raise broader concerns" including sexual harassment, childcare, transport and housing (p. 207).

Chapter 9 elucidates interlayering of three governance types. First, private governance entails the formulation by retailers of labour and environmental standards and relates to commercial considerations. Second, public governance involves regulation framed by states at various levels and addresses the needs primarily of formal workers. Finally, social governance speaks to the ability of NGOs and unions to influence policy through advocacy. It pertains to the societal sphere and challenges the gendered status quo (p. 236). Barrientos effectively provides examples of multi-scalar interlayering of these types and cogently argues that all these dimensions play a role in influencing up/downgrading outcomes for workers.

The concluding chapter reiterates these arguments and briefly assesses the implications of automation and e-commerce for women workers in labour-intensive industries. It ends by advocating for a balance between commercial and societal considerations.

Overall, the book is an invaluable resource for researchers. It provides a comprehensive framework for incorporating gender in GRVC research while also offering case studies that demonstrate interlinkages between economic and social domains. These aspects are also potentially useful to help practitioners understand not only that the implications of GRVC employment transcend the commercial sphere but also that quality and productivity are linked to worker well-being. In summary, this book underlines a gender-sensitive approach to GRVC analysis and practice, and advocates for equitable distribution of gains made in these complex settings.

Reference

Kelly, P.F. (2009) From Global Production Networks to Global Reproduction Networks: Households, Migration, and Regional Development in Cavite, the Philippines. *Regional Studies*, 43(3): 449–461.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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