

# **Women Workers in Textile and Footwear Industry in Albania after the 1990s: Hardships and Possibilities**

By  
Nermin Aga

*Submitted to  
Central European University  
Department of Gender Studies*

*In partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Arts in Gender Studies*

Supervisor: Professor Allaine Cerwonka  
Second Reader: Professor Eva Fodor

Budapest, Hungary  
June 10, 2008

## **Abstract**

This research aims at analyzing the experiences of women workers in textile and footwear industry in Albania after the 1990s. Particularly it elaborates on how women feel about working in these export-oriented factories, what are the hardships and the possibilities posed to them by their work and what are some of the specificities of shop floor work in the post-state socialist context of Albania. It argues that the women's perceptions about factory work are ambiguous. On the one side they see it as a good opportunity for their lives in economic and social terms; on the other side they feel frustrated about the hard working conditions that characterize this job.

## **Acknowledgements**

My greatest gratitude goes to my main informants and women and men I interviewed, without whom the realization of this research would not have been possible. I want to thank them for their help, kindness and their friendly attitudes. Many thanks go also to my supervisor, Professor Cerwonka, for her scholarly help during the writing of this thesis.

Special thanks go to my family, especially my brother, and relatives who supported me during my research period in Albania. Also, I want to thank my friends in the thesis workshop for their valuable and supportive comments about my thesis. Many special thanks to Mada, Vika Sali, Kai, and Cristina, for making my life easier at Kerepesi.

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## Introduction

The emergence of export oriented factories in Albania started after the 1990s with the collapse of the communist regime. The open-market economy during the transformation years in Albania has highly encouraged foreign investment. Declared as among export priorities sectors by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of Albania in 2004, the clothing and shoe sectors are characterized by feminization of labor force, a trend which has been observed in other developing countries as well (Beneria 2001).

The aim of my project is to analyze the situation of women working in these textile and footwear factories in Albania. The question I addresses is what the experiences of women workers in textile and footwear industries in Albania after the 1990s are. Particularly I elaborate on how women feel about working in these export-oriented factories, what are the hardships and the possibilities posed to them by the work and what are some of the specificities of shop floor factory work in the post-state socialist context of Albania. My data is based on field work in two export- processing factories in Tirana, Albania.

The main argument of my study is that the women's perceptions about factory work are ambiguous. On the one side they see it as a good opportunity for their lives in economic and social terms; on the other side they feel frustrated about the hard working conditions that characterize this job.

There has been extensive research on women workers in export-processing zones in various countries (Enloe 1989; Tiano 1994; Kim 1997; Freeman 2000; Salzinger 2003); however, no extensive research has been conducted with women workers in export-processing factories in Albania. My research contributes to this literature by bringing in the Albanian context and the experiences of women workers in textile and footwear factories in Tirana, Albania. In this particular historical moment when Albanian government is employing strategies

for “ameliorating the business climate for foreign investment” (Strategies of Employment Report 2004), it is important to take into consideration the perspectives of women who are employed in some of these foreign invested factories.

In the first chapter of the thesis I lay out the theoretical framework and literature review concerning the issues of: globalization, international division of labor and transition. I also elaborate on the methodological considerations of my research, which is mostly based on qualitative methods. In the second chapter, I give an account of economic and social situation of women’s employment in Albania during the transformation years; the rural/urban division and the foreign enterprise in Albania after the 1990s and the significance that these factors have for women working in export-processing factories in Albania. Finally, the third chapter of the thesis is based mostly on the interpretation of the accounts of some of my interviewees. In this chapter I lay out the complex feelings of the interviewees concerning the working conditions of the factories, and their personal and country’s socio-economic situation.

## **Chapter 1: Theorizing Globalization and the International Division of Labor and “Transition” and Methodological Considerations of Field Research**

### **1.1 Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

In the international context, the shifting of labor from developed countries to developing countries started in the 1970s and accelerated in the 1980s and the 1990s, as the capitalist production was in search of cheap labor. Companies from the first world shifted their location to third world countries therefore creating a global division of labor with the third world as producers and first world as consumers (Tiano 1994:41). For a better understanding of the shifting of labor from developed countries to developing countries it is important to highlight the main principles of neoliberal ideology which came into being in the 70s and the beginning of the 80s. According to this ideology the market forces should take the leverage and the state should reduce its intervention from all dimensions of economic and social life (Navarro 2007: 1). Furthermore the project of neoliberal ideology includes the deregulation of world trade, the increasing of mobility of capital and work force as well as the elimination of social arrangements (for instance social pacts and protectionism) which hinder the way of the full development and the expansion of capitalism (Navarro 2007: 1). During these years, neoliberalism became the driving force of international economic relations.

Globalization is a phenomenon, which for some people is not new at all. However, according to Vincente Navarro, the application of neoliberal policies to the international economics is known as “globalization”. This neoliberal globalization, he argues, has been around for more than 30 years (Navarro 2007: 1). Some people have argued that this “capitalism without borders”, the globalization of economy worldwide has created economic growth throughout the

whole world and has also brought a new era of social progress (Navarro 2007: 1; Fernandez-Kelly 2006).

Other scholars have argued that globalization has not brought social progress, but it is indeed the cause for the world's growing inequalities and poverty. (Navarro 2007: 10; Fernandez-Kelly 2006). They further argue that neoliberalism has not at all achieved what supposedly its aims are: economic efficiency and social well being. It is argued that the period between the 1980s and 2000 has been less successful in economic growth compared to the period between the 1960s and the 1980s (Navarro 2007: 12, Fernandez- Kelly 2006).

Taking from the book *Neoliberalism, Globalization, and Inequalities: Consequences for Health and Quality of Life* in this chapter I want to further lay out the negative impacts that neoliberal policies and neoliberal globalization have had for many. In addition, I want to situate and trace how garment and footwear factories worldwide have been affected and maintained through neoliberal policies. Further, my aim is to briefly elaborate on Albania, since an extended contextual analysis of the country will come in the second chapter, and analyze the “transition” and globalization trends in the country.

As a consequence of neoliberal policies and globalization, income inequalities have grown and poverty in the world has increased. (Navarro 2007: 13). Many authors critical to the process of neoliberalism and neoliberal globalization argue that neoliberalism as an ideology and practice, serves the dominant classes of both developed and developing countries. These authors argue that the enormous class inequalities that have arisen with neoliberal policies, are a result of class determined public policies such as: the deregulation of labor markets, the deregulation of financial markets, deregulation of commerce in goods and services, reduction of social public expenditures, privatization of services, promotion of individualism and consumerism and so on.



All these policies have been mostly economically beneficial for the dominant classes and the vice versa for the working classes (Navarro 2007: 15).

These aspects of globalization and neoliberal policies are indeed the fundamental forces which have created sweatshops. In the article “Going Up Against the Global Economy: New Developments in the Anti-Sweatshops Movement” by Jill Esbenshade (2008), it is argued that five important aspects of globalization have influenced the sweatshop industry.

By the first feature of globalization, horizontal webs of production, the author refers to the networks of production that are expanded throughout countries and continents. The garment industry has used this contracting system, which information and transformation technologies have facilitated, even further in the global production era (Esbenshade 2008: 456). For instance, brands of clothing such as Adidas, Nike or Gap are produced in different countries through wide networks of buyers, sewing factories and small subcontractors (Esbenshade 2008: 456). Due to high competition the wages in sweatshops worldwide are kept down.

In describing the second element of globalization, buyer-driven chains, Esbenshade dwells upon the commodity chain theory and pins down the distinction between the commodity chain, according to which the actual producer of the product has considerable power and production systems, according to which the buyer highly influences everything, even the cost of the product (Esbenshade 2008: 456.). The garment industry has been highly defined by such buyer-driven chains. For instance, brand names like Nike determine the price to the factory and the contractor cuts down costs to meet the price Nike offers to pay. The way the contractor fulfills Nike’s demand is to reduce labor costs, since the highest costs in garment factories are related to labor (Esbenshade 2008: 456). The contracting factory might reduce the wages, force workers to do unpaid overtime or speed up the working process (Esbenshade 2008: 456.). Even

though the sweatshops I take to examine here are not contractors with big brands like Nike, the women I interviewed gave similar accounts of extended unpaid working hours.

Thirdly, deregulation and privatization as neoliberal principles, have reduced government protections for workers. These principles were not embraced only by the US government, but were also imposed on developing countries by strategies of International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans (Esbenshade 2008: 457). These strategies have led to the rapid multiplication of sweatshops. At the same time, labor laws throughout countries are weakened and citizens are made more and more dependent on export-oriented employment, since due to privatization the number of government jobs and services has decreased (Esbenshade 2008: 457). In Esbenshade's words: "Countries are literally competing for apparel contracts based on who has the more docile and lower-paid workforce." (Esbenshade 2008: 457).

The fourth element of globalization, undermining unions, has occurred via employer repression, the governments' negligence of labor laws, and also via the participation of government in actions that negate labor rights (Esbenshade 2008: 458). This feature of neoliberal policies has had a negative impact on garment and footwear industries since they haven't had the opportunity to organize. Workers who have organized have been fired and attacked by employers. Similarly, in my case study, one of my informants mentioned that the workers who had tried to rebel against the working conditions and for the increase of payment had been ostracized.

Garment industries have also been disadvantaged concerning unionizing since they haven't had the support of their governments, who looking for foreign investments have not introduced laws which would protect unions and in many cases have made them illegal. Another factor which makes it even harder for workers to unionize is the fact that labor has been

reorganized during the globalization period. Production has been organized around small units thus there have been created divisions among workers of different nations, races and genders (Esbenshade 2008: 458).

Finally, use of vulnerable labor, has been another feature enabled by globalization, on which sweatshops have heavily relied. The garment industry has relied on women and mostly immigrants. In USA the majority of garment industry workers are immigrants where as in other parts of the world most garment workers are women coming from rural or informal economies (Esbenshade 2008: 458).

The vulnerable labor the garment and footwear factories rely on is also “cheap labor”. Enloe argues that garment-company managers rely on several patriarchal assumptions about women which help them keep wages low in factories (1989: 162). Like many other scholars have argued, Enloe claims that these managers have defined sewing as a “natural” and “traditional” skill of women (1989: 162). Similarly, during my interviews the main supervisors of both factories claimed that sewing machine is “for women”, that’s why they don’t hire man. “It’s nature”- the main supervisor of the footwear factory said to me. Carla Freeman also mentions in her work that for a long time, the perceived ideas about women’s “physical and temperamental” qualities that are believed to make them adapt for, “sedentary”, “meticulous” and “repetitive” work, have been used for the employment of “cheap labor” (Freeman 2000: 10).

This is related to the second argument of Enloe, who argues that women’s labor are kept cheap by naming other jobs in the factory as “skilled” and reserving them for men (1989: 162). In my case study, both in the apparel and footwear factory there were only a few men working as mechanics or in the cutting, pressing and zippering processes. While I was not given information on men’s wages in my study, it is argued that these positions in these factories are paid more

than sewing, thus creating a sexual division of labor (1989: 162). Therefore, Enloe argues, keeping women's labor cheap is made possible through ideas about: "skills, marriage, feminine respectability and fashion" (1989:166). "The politics of the international garment industry are sustained by relationships inside the home, in the community, in and between governments, as well as on the factory floor" (1989: 166.).

In recent years, post-structuralist feminists have tried to analyze how "gendered categories" are formed in the work place, instead of "narrating" history about the work place without criticizing it (Salzinger 1997: 550). Through her research in three factories in Ciudad Juarez, Salzinger traces the "constitution of gendered meanings" in these shop floors. Salzinger argues that gender is a very crucial element for global production (2003:15). However, she says, gender is not a fixed category and it changes according to the context. She argues the traits of masculinity and femininity are created during the work in the shop floor of these firms and they do not exist a priori (Salzinger 2003:30). Salzinger contends that the notion of docile, cheap women is indeed a 'transnationally produced fantasy', since docility itself is produced in the shop floor of the export firms (2003:10). Salzinger also argues that the femininity is reconstituted in the working place and that this constitution of local femininities leads to feminine productivity in transnational production, and not the exploitation of feminine traits, which have been established previously (2003: 31).

Scholars and policy makers have indulged in continuous debates regarding export-oriented zones and the impact they have on women. Similarly, polemics and contradictory views evolve around the globalization and gender debate. On the one hand it is argued that globalization and feminization of the labor force are an advantage for women (Attanapola, 2005: 82). Scholars on this side of the argument argue that globalization and feminization of labor

enable young rural women to be a part of the labor force. They also argue that factory job and economic independence makes it possible for these women to have social freedom and autonomy when it comes to decision important to their lives such as marriage (Attanapola, 2005: 82). Scholars on the other side of the debate underline the negative influences of globalization and argue that women working in export oriented zones are exploited, work in unhealthy working conditions, and are paid less than men doing the same work ((Attanapola, 2003; Lie and Lund, 1994; Loewenson, 1999) in Attanapola 2005: 85).

On the same lines, Susan Tiano in “Women and the New International Division of Labor” part of the book *Patriarchy on the Line: Labor, Gender and Ideology in the Mexican Maquila Industry* argues that there are three perspectives on women in development and their relation to capitalist production (Tiano 1994; 37). The *integrationist* thesis argues that women in development are liberated by participating in their societies’ economic development. The *marginalization* thesis contends that capitalist development marginalizes women by making them peripheral to the roles and resources, which are valued in society. The *exploitation* thesis argues that capitalism exploits women in development by creating a female working force for the accumulation of capital (Tiano 1994; 37).

Before engaging into a discussion about which thesis or argument on globalization and feminization is pertinent to the Albanian context which I examine in my thesis, firstly I want to briefly put forward the historical transition of Albania from state-socialism to capitalism.

The collapse of Soviet Union and the fall of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe was a turning point for the politics and economic conditions of these countries. The one party regime was substituted by political pluralism and the centralized state economy gave way to open market. These fundamental changes have had a huge impact in people’s lives. A very

dramatic social consequence of the transition from a centrally planned to market based economy in the region has been job losses (Glass 2008: 2) as well as the decrease in state subsidies (Gal and Kligman 2000: 1).

It is important to acknowledge here the criticism Gal and Kligman raise in their work concerning the frequently used term “transition”. Gal and Kligman argue that the usage of this metaphor of “transition” is disadvantageous for several reasons. Firstly because it assumes a stageous evolution from one stage of history to another, like the American modernization theory did (2000: 10). Secondly, since ‘transitions’ have occurred in many parts of the globe, the term implies comparison between these transitions without taking into account historical circumstances (Gal and Kligman 2000: 10.). Finally, the term “transition” implies that all aspects of society change in the same direction, which leads to a homogenizing tendency of the socialist regime itself and of capitalism as well (Gal and Kligman 2000: 10).

However, named “transition” or ‘transformation’, the post-state socialist period was highly accompanied by economic, social and political turmoil. Scholars argue that men and women experienced unemployment and the lack in subsidies and welfare differently in post-state socialist societies (Gal and Kligman, 2000: 1). Different assessment reports on women in Albania emphasize the fact that women have been the most disadvantaged group and have experienced transition worse then men. To understand the reasons for the high level of women’s unemployment in transition countries, I lay out here the four theories of Glass on female labor force participation in transition economies (2008).

The first theory of female labor force, ‘segmentation theory’, argues that during economic recession and labor market contractions women will be less likely to lose jobs since jobs are sex-segregated and there is a high possibility that women are employed to jobs which

are not very sensitive to economic changes (for example clerical and service jobs) (Glass 2008: 5). According to this theory, sex segregation in jobs will actually protect women in countries in transitions “because of their structural concentration in less vulnerable sectors of the economy” (Glass 2008: 5).

The second theory, ‘revalued resources’ (Fodor in Glass 2008), argues that in post-state socialist societies women would have structural advantage in the labor market and also the fact that they possessed cultural and human capital would positively predispose them to capitalist employers. This theory argues that during transition periods women’s competitive skills, educational credentials and predominance in service sector would ensure women more security in the labor market, compared to men (Glass 2008: 5).

The third theory, ‘reserve army of labor’ theory, argues that given their perceived or actual status as secondary workers, women will be more exposed to lay-offs and unemployment than men. In post-state socialist societies, this theory argues, employers gain power over the labor process and they have power to hire and fire them whenever they want (Glass 2008: 5).

The fourth theory presented by Glass is the ‘supply side processes’ theory. This theory predicts that in transition periods women will potentially lose their jobs more than men and it adds also the dimension of cultural change and individual preferences (Glass 2008: 6). This theory highlights the importance of the welfare state and state subsidized support like kindergarten and childcares, which significantly influence women’s ability to work. This theory also raises the assumption that cultural preferences might be another factor which influences female labor supply. It is argued that in post-state socialist societies it is observed a revival of traditional gender and family ideologies, which favor women’s return to home and family. Glass also mentions that it is argued that women in post-state socialist contexts reject the “double burden”

imposed by state socialist period by choosing to stay at home instead of going to work, since now they are entitled to such a freedom.

Even though Albania has made the transition from centrally planned economy to open market economy and has become part of the globalized world; a debate over the phenomenon of globalization has not infiltrated the scholarly or political debate in Albania. Fatos Lubonja puts forward some crucial reasons as to why the globalization debate does not predominate in Albania, even though Albania, without being aware, is very much part of the globalized world embracing more its negative aspects than its positive ones (2003).

First, the author argues, the debate on globalization is new in Europe and throughout the world itself therefore it is understandable that it will take time to infiltrate Albanian society. A second argument the author makes as to the reason why globalization debate is not prevalent in Albania is that Albanian political elite has been more inclined to the western theories and models, without looking critically at them. After state-socialism Albania was concentrated in fulfilling those models, the author argues (Lubonja 2003). Thirdly, the author argues that the Albanian political elite and media have been more concentrated on their internal problems and debates, so that's another reason why there has not been so much space for the globalization debate. Finally, the debate on globalization has not become prevalent in Albanian political elite given that the debate on globalization has been generally raised by the left wing in Europe. Albanian political elite has been in opposition to the European left firstly because, this political elite was more inclined to embrace the liberal model of western Europe, and secondly because it was distant and in opposition to the European left. This attitude towards the left is due to the communist past of Albania, which has made people in Albania hostile towards ideals of the left wing (Lubonja 2003).



I would argue that this indifference towards the debate on globalization in society at large and in media explains the indifferent behavior of my interviewees towards capitalism and globalization. However, as it will become clearer in the following chapters, the “indifference” of women workers in textile and footwear industries in Albania towards the international division of labor might be a reflection of ambivalent gains and losses for a location like Albania in this specific historical juncture.

## 1.2 Methodological Considerations

### Methodology and Dilemmas of Fieldwork

The debate over methodological approaches has prevailed among social sciences for a long time. Some scholars have even considered this debate a “double faced ghost” haunting social sciences (Denzin and Lincoln: 2003). Some others have called it “paradigm wars” (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). This debate between positivism and constructivism has mainly been concentrated on epistemology, the relationship between the knower and the known; ontology, the nature of reality; axiology, roles of values and inquiry; generalizations, causal linkages and logic (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). Here I am going to briefly elaborate on the main concerns of the debate.

While positivist science is based on the assumption that there is a “value-free objectivity” of the researcher whose aim should be the discovery of the “facts” and the “truth” (Wolf 1996: 4), constructivism, feminist scholars and other scholars as well, have argued that being objective and value-free is impossible since a researcher, her/his views and interpretations are all shaped by experiences and values (Wolf 1996: 4). Post-structuralist scholars have argued that factors

such as language, gender, race, social class and ethnicity always affect the gaze of people, be that of the researcher or the researched (Denzin and Lincoln 2003).

Another issue of concern for both sides of the debate has been the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Mainstream science has assumed and required a “distant, “rational”, uninvolved, hierarchical and unrelated” researcher (Wolf 1996: 4). Feminist researchers, on the other hand, have tried to break the hierarchical, sometimes exploitative relationship between the researcher and the researched by establishing friendship and close relationships with their informants.

My project represents a modest attempt to apply and make use of self-reflexive, qualitative research methods. I acknowledge that as a researcher, I am located in history and I am shaped by my class position, my education, the place where I grew up and many other factors which have an impact on the way I conduct and interpret my research. I used open-ended, semi-structured interviews and gave space for my informants to speak as much as the environment would allow them to do so, given that some of the interviews took place at their place of work. Since my aim in my research was to discover women’s experiences in these export companies, oral interviews are crucial to better understand women’s perspectives (Anderson and Dana 1991: 11). Expression of women’s unique experience is often muted (Anderson and Dana 1991: 11) which is why it is very important to hear their perspectives carefully (Anderson and Dana 1991: 11). I also tried to be as friendly as I could to these women whom I really appreciate for their willingness to share their work experience with me.

Many scholars have argued that there exist power differentials between the researcher and the researched regarding: positionality of the researcher, power during research process and power in post-fieldwork stages (Wolf 1996: 18). Some scholars have argued that there is no

solution to the issue of exploitation during the research (Wolf 1996: 25) and that the attempts of feminist scholars for building friendship relationships might end up being “manipulative” and might indeed lead to a more severe form of exploitation than the one they have rejected (Wolf 1996: 20).

The main “power differential” during my field research was my level of education. I was doing my research for education in an environment where most of the people did not have high levels of education. Given that there is a growing interest among Albanian society towards education, women and men I interviewed admired the fact that I was educated. They would praise me for being “educated” and this oftentimes made me feel uncomfortable. I tried my best not to make them feel inferior. Therefore, in my field research, even though I was an “insider” in terms of language, nationality and culture, I was an “outsider” in terms of education and career opportunities. The following example demonstrates the importance of this factor during the field research.

In my questions directed to my interviewees I addressed questions that were related to education mainly to young girls. I was interested to know and asked them why they had not continued with education, if they had ever thought of going back to education again and so on. When I asked a sixteen year old if she had ever thought of returning to school, she said that she had never thought about it until at the moment she was talking to me.” Today yes, today I am thinking about it” and she took her eyes from me and went on sewing in the sewing machine. The expression in her face and the way she answered made me think that she started thinking about education after I had told her that I was doing my research for the purposes of education and I was studying abroad. This made me feel uncomfortable and made me rethink the ethical

considerations of research. For instance, had I hurt this young woman's feelings, even though I was trying hard to establish good rapport and be as friendly as possible to her?

Another issue of concern for many scholars, problematized by post-structuralists in particular, is the idea of experience. Post-structuralist school poses the question of 'whether we can write across the divides of race, class and gender about other women's experiences, past or present' (Sangster 1998: 96). The strongest critique from the post-structuralist school comes from Joan Scott. She finds it deeply problematic the fact that social historians have tried to criticize the hegemonic worldviews by the narrations of the experiences of marginalized groups (Stone-Mediatore 2003: 100). Scott argues that the experiences of some groups or people should not be taken as "self evident" and their difference should not be "naturalized" (1999: 81). The studies that do this, Scott argues, locate resistance outside their "discursive construction" and "decontextualize" agency (1999: 81). Scott therefore says that experience is constructed as well. She further argues that experiences that take meaning as transparent "reproduce" instead of "challenging" the hegemonic ideological systems (1999: 82).

Other scholars, however, have criticized the strong critique that post-structuralist school poses to experience. Stone-Mediatore for instance, claims that the resistant experiences are not "prediscursive" or "self-evident" truths; rather they are relatively "discursive logics". She argues that these resistant experiences contain "unofficial" responses to the hegemonic discourses and therefore negate the negative effects of those discourses in the daily lives of individuals (Stone-Mediatore, 2003: 120). She further argues that experience is a complex, internally contradictory phenomenon, and the reason for this complexity is that experiences are in competition with the ideologically formed consciousness. Stone-Mediatore contends that there are elements of experience which exceed "discursive determination", and that introduce alternative discourses

and make those discourses significant for us (2003: 123). According to her, marginal experience narratives should be taken neither as “self-evident” nor as solely “discursive constructions”. Rather, she argues, they should be perceived as “creative responses to socially situated, multilayered, only partly ideologically constituted experiences” (Stone-Mediatore: 123).

For the purposes of my study, I do not take the experiences of my interviewees as “self-evident truths” and I acknowledge the fact that they are located in history and have been shaped by certain discourses evolving around the society they are situated in and that this in turn will affect the way they think. At this point I agree with Mohanty when she says: “My claim is not that all marginalized locations lead crucial knowledge about power and inequity, but that within a tightly integrated capitalist system, the particular standpoint of poor indigenous and Third World/South women provides the most inclusive viewing of systemic power” (2003: 232). Similarly in the Albanian context, women workers in textile and footwear factories give the best inclusive view of the international division of labor, even though they are unaware of it (or do not think about their job in terms of international division of labor strategically for their own identity and personal integrity).

I acknowledge here that the 15 women I interviewed do not represent the experiences of all women workers in textile and footwear factories in Albania. I also do not claim that the conclusions obtained from the sample of my research can be generalized to the whole population of my case study factories. However, I believe that the in-depth discussions I had with these women workers give better insights of how these women experience their work which is part of the global economy in the midst of economic changes that Albania is going through in this particular period. In-depth interviews make it possible for the researcher to catch phrases, facial expressions and emotional sighs which quantitative questionnaires cannot include.

## Field Work

My project is based on fieldwork I conducted in two factories in the capital of Albania Tirana as well as archive research in public institutions and non-profit organizations. Since I was interested in the experiences of women working in export-processing factories in Albania, I chose two factories, which were subcontractors of Italian companies. I deliberately chose two factories in Tirana since that is my home town and it would be easier for me to conduct research given the short period of time allocated for my research. I chose as my case study one footwear factory and one textile factory for the fact that I had acquaintances working in these factories who would help me in getting access to them. (My aim was not to compare and contrast textile and footwear factories, even though I give some small details, which came up during the interviews, in the third chapter).

In the footwear factory I interviewed the main supervisor (male), 8 women, and 2 men. In the textile factory I interviewed the main supervisor (female), two women and one mechanic (male). I interviewed 5 other women working in different textile factories.

The rules in the textile factory were way stricter than in the footwear factory. In the footwear factory I managed to interview women and men during their working hours and during the breaks, while as in the textile factory I was not allowed to do such a thing. Therefore, I managed to find through people I knew 5 other women working in other textile factories. I also interviewed one owner, female, of another textile factory. For practical reasons I give these pseudonyms to the factories: the footwear factory = Quercus, the first textile factory = Ligustrum, the second textile factory= Arundo.<sup>1</sup> In the appendices of this work I provide details

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<sup>1</sup> The names are flower names in Latin and symbolic representation of some minute details which impressed me about these factories. I take for granted the meanings given to these of these flowers as: Quercus= Hospitality, Ligustrum= Prohibition, and Arundo= Music. In the footwear factory the most impressive thing about the workers and the director was their hospitality. In the first textile factory women were hardly allowed to go out and the door

of the women I interviewed and some characteristics of the factories. I also list some of the questions I asked to my interviewees and supervisors.

It is obvious that the sample of my project is a non-random, snowball sample. In Quercus the director allowed me to interview whomever I wanted in the working time and in the breaks, since after the working hour women had to go home and they were not very willing to give me interviews later at that time. Some of women I interviewed were friends of my acquaintances, some of them I just randomly went to their desk and asked permission for the interview. Some of them would come to me and ask me to interview them.

In Ligustrum, I was allowed to observe but not to disturb women during their working time. During the break I saw some girls taking permission to go out and followed them and interviewed them in the cafe' nearby.

I took field notes and kept a diary for my observations. The idea of tape-recorder was impractical first because most of the interviews were either at the work place or at café and second because I had the impression that women would not feel very comfortable to speak while being registered with a tape recorder.

I interviewed both the main supervisors of both factories while they were working. The interviews that took place at the work place may be considered private, since no one was listening. A couple of interviews I had during the break were not private. The friends of the interviewees stayed and listened, and sometimes even made comments. Similarly, the interviews I had with two women working in Ligustrum during the breaks were not private either. I was interviewing a young woman and her friends, two other women and the mechanic of the factory were listening and often times made jokes and comments. These comments did not disturb me;

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was always locked, therefore I call it "prohibition". And in the second textile factory, music was allowed, unlike in the other two factories, therefore I call it "Music". <http://www.earthlypursuits.com/FlwrsPer/FlwrName.htm>

on the contrary I got some interesting insights from them too.

The other interviews with women I reached through my relatives were private interviews, which took place at their homes. I did not record these interviews either.

For official information on foreign enterprise in Albania I visited several state institutions such as Institute of Statistics (INSTAT); Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities; World Bank office in Albania (Tirana) and the Main Labor Office in Tirana. I also visited two women's organizations, "Refleksione" and "Aleanca Gjinore". I managed to gather some reports and articles on the current socio-economic context of women in Albania as well as statistical information on foreign enterprise in Albania.



## **Chapter 2: Albanian Socio-economic Situation and Foreign Enterprise after the State-socialism: Women's situation and the significance of Textile and Footwear Industry in Albania**

I was almost done with my interviews in the Quercus factory and I was preparing to leave when a woman stopped me and asked me to interview her. She said: "Come here you young girl, can you please say some bad words about Sala<sup>2</sup> in your report?" (Marina, 50). I told her that my "report" was not political but a research concerning my studies and that I was interested in her experience in that particular job she was doing. She was a bit disappointed that she did not have a chance to express her resentment towards the democratic regime in Albania, but she went on and told me her life story.

From the interview with her it came out that she had been working as a laboratory technician in a military institution during the state-socialist regime, but with the change of the systems, she had become unemployed and had started working in the footwear industry. She blamed the capitalist system for the high rates of unemployment and poverty and praised the state-socialist system regime for providing employment and equality to almost everybody.

During my interviews, comments about the two systems would come mostly from the older generation, from 34 years old and above. Younger women I interviewed did not enter into comparisons between the two systems, simply because they have not experienced one of them, or were too young to be able to compare. But not all of them whom I interviewed had the same opinion about the open-market, capitalist system in Albania. Suzana 35, my main informant working in the footwear factory said that even though there were higher inequalities in the new system, it allowed for mobility and there was more space for individual choices. "Under the

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<sup>2</sup> Sala, Sali Berisha is the current Prime Minister of Albania, the leader of the Democratic Party. He is seen as symbolizing Democracy and system change in Albania since he was the first President from 1991 to 1997. Then he

socialist regime I would be working in the cooperative since I graduated from a high school with agricultural profile. But now, I can choose and go working wherever I can find a job.” Further, she did not blame the system about the job she was doing. She considered it as what she deserved for what she had done in life. She said “Some people invested when they had money, and they became rich. I didn’t invest, and now I am working here.”

Another informant, the mechanic of the textile factory labeled himself as a “fervent democrat”. He said that capitalism is cruel and harsh but considered it way better than the old communist regime. For him, if the Albanian government and politicians had not been corrupted, the country would have developed. “Capitalism is the harshest but the purest regime” – said he (Agim 60).

Some people strongly reject the capitalist regime in Albania, some strongly accept it, and some are ambivalent about it. To understand the mixed feelings that people have towards the new regime in post-state socialist Albania, it is important to give a brief introduction to the socio-economic situation of the country. What is women’s employment situation and what is the significance of foreign enterprise in Albania after the 1990s? What is the regional background of women working in apparel and footwear industry in Albania and why is it significant? A contextual analysis of Albania and foreign enterprises in this country is crucial for the understanding of women’s experience in the textile and shoe factories.

In this chapter I put forward a detailed analysis of women’s employment in Albania, the rural/urban division and the foreign enterprise in Albania after the 1990s. I also incorporate examples and instances from my case study as well as from my interviews to demonstrate my arguments. The main argument I propose in this chapter is: Given the country’s economic

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was the major figure of opposition from 1997 to 2005. From 2005- present he is the Prime Minister of Albania. [http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en\\_GB/infoBios/setimes/resource\\_centre/bios/berisha\\_sali](http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/infoBios/setimes/resource_centre/bios/berisha_sali)

situation, working in the apparel and footwear industry does not stand out as a very exploitative job. First, because formally at least, people working in textile and footwear factories are provided with social insurance as well as wages not lower than the minimum wage of Albania. Second, because it provides employment to groups of women who for different reasons would not be able to work somewhere else. Therefore, the factory work among women workers is seen both as a job opportunity in the midst of unemployment, but also as frustrating due to hard work and low wages.

## 2.1 People, Work and Education in Albania after the Collapse of State- Socialism

One of the most severe consequences of the regime change in Albania in the 1990s was the loss of work for many people in urban areas as a result of industry closures and rural areas due to cooperative closures. According to many national and international reports about women in Albania, women as a group experienced the transformation years in more severe terms than men and their employment rate is lower than that of men (National Report, 1999; Helsinki Report 2000, CEDAW Report 2008).

If in 1989 employment rates were high for both sexes, 94% for men and 85 % for women, during the initial years of the transition period the employment rate decreased to 50 % for men and 60% for women (Women Entrepreneurs in Albania: 2). However, this trend appears to have reversed in 2003-2004 when women's employment rate in Albania is low, 42, 7 % (CEDAW Report 2008, INSTAT 2006a, Gender Analysis Report 2008) compared to men's employment rate 70% (Gender Analysis Report 2008). The low employment in women's employment is an indicator of high level of informal sector (CEDAW Report 2008, Gender Analysis Report). In the post-state socialist period, the Gender Analysis report argues that in the

labor market gender inequalities have increased. The report provides data from 1999 data, according to which 70% of women and girls working in the private sector did not have a legal contract therefore no social insurance (Gender Analysis Report 2008).

Before making my field research, I had hypothesized that a very high number of women working in the apparel and footwear industry would be uninsured, informal laborers. However, after my interviews it turned out that most of them were insured. The main supervisor of the footwear factory claimed that all women were insured and did not receive a salary lower than the minimum wage in Albania. All but one of the women and men I interviewed told me that they received social insurance from their job. However, they were not insured from the very start of their job. Most of my interviewees reported that the owner of the factory does not ensure employers from the beginning of the job. This means that when they are hired, they do not sign a contract.

For a better statistical analysis of the percentage of people insured in the factories, it would have been ideal to analyze in depth official documents from the Ministry of Finance of Albania. However, due to high levels of bureaucracy and indifference to people without connections (like me in this case), it was impossible to obtain such information. Moreover, from my interviews it came out that owners and supervisors of the factory hid young girls and the uninsured workers when state inspectors from relevant institutions came to inspect the factories. When asked how it was possible for them to know that their factory would be inspected, the interviewees speculated about corruption in the state institutions. For these and other reasons women in Albania and people in general, feel unprotected by the state (Calloni 2002: 5) and do not trust the state.

The general observation concerning women's situation in Albania is that although legally women enjoy equal rights to men and the Albanian constitution recognizes women's rights (Calloni 2002; Albanian National Report 1999; Helsinki Report 2000), the conditions of women are not equal to the conditions of men (Calloni 2002: 4). According to several reports on women in Albania there is a discrepancy between the de jure and de facto equality of women in Albania (Helsinki Report 2000, CEDAW Report 2008, Gender Analysis Report 2008). Even though the Penal Code, the Civil Code, the Labor Code and the Family Code all provide gender equality, it is argued that in reality women do not enjoy equal rights to men regarding access to employment, businesses, credit institutions, health care and social services (INSTAT (c) 2004: 25).

Women in Albania are not legally discriminated in the area of education either (National report 1999) and it can be observed a trend of increase in girls' participation in higher levels of education. According to 2006 report from the Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), in the first year of tertiary level education in 2005 there were 52,1% females in contrast to 49,7% males (a 2006: 8). Women achieved high levels of education during the communist regime too, and if we were to follow Fodor's theory: 'revalued resources' theory, women's level of unemployment would not have been so high in Albania during the transformation years, given their educational credentials and human capital (see chapter 1). Glass's theory of 'supply side process' which predicts that women in transition periods will potentially lose jobs more than men seems to provide a better explanation for women's low employment level in the Albanian context. As I explain in the first chapter, Glass's theory predicts that in transformation periods women lose jobs more than men not only because they are perceived as secondary workers in the family and owners hire and fire them whenever they want (Glass 2008), but also as a result of the lack of welfare state to provide

institutions for childcare and kindergartens in countries during transformation period (Glass 2008). This theory suggests that the constraints and preferences of individual women should be taken into consideration to fully understand women's employment in post state-socialist contexts.

A deeper sociological study should be undertaken to understand the preferences of Albanian women to go to work or stay home, however, Albanian sociologist Zyhdi Dervishi has argued that women in Albania have experienced unemployment in a dramatic way, since Albanian women consider job to be a source of "affirmation of their prestige in society" (Dervishi 2003: 13). Based on Dervishi's work on Albanian women, I suggest that such a wish to stay home as a response to the "double burden" of communist regime, is not prevalent among Albanian women. In the third chapter of this thesis I lay out the importance of work for Albanian women.

In the CEDAW report, the chapter on employment, it is stated that the reasons for the considerable amount of women searching for jobs is a result of women's job leaves a) due to child raising or family administration, b) the closing down of industrial enterprises specialized for women's employment. Also, CEDAW report states that according to undertaken studies, this labor force, i.e. women have shown difficulties in adapting to the new labor market in the country (CEDAW Report 2008: 63). More or less this explanation is in line with Glass' theory, which highlights the cultural individual preferences of female labor supply in transition countries. While this report does not mention the role that welfare state plays in women's decision to work, like Glass' theory predicts, other situational reports raise the lack of kindergartens and child cares as significant problem which inhibit women's participation in the labor market in Albania (Gender Analysis Report 2008).

The Albanian sociologist Dervishi predicts that in the near future women's employment in the trade sector in Albania will significantly increase as a result of three main factors (2001: 32). First, he argues that Albanian government and state will ameliorate its legislation, which gradually will decrease corruption. A second reason for a future increase in women's participation in the trade sector, according to Dervishi, will be due to high numbers of females graduating from departments with an economic profile. Third, he argues that being "professionally capable, with high dignity and developed personality"; many Albanian women will become self-entrepreneurs instead of being employed in private companies (Dervishi 2001: 32).

Building from information from these reports, I can conclude that since unemployment is very high for women in Albania, working in the apparel or footwear industry is a good job opportunity provided to women and girls who do not have other job opportunities. However, in this particular historical period in Albania when education is highly appreciated and women consider it as an "affirmation of their prestige in society" (Dervishi 2001), what is the educational situation of women workers in apparel and footwear industries in Albania?

I was not allowed to conduct a survey concerning demographic data, due to the strict job schedule in both factories; I rely on supervisor's information concerning the level of education in women in the factories. According to the main supervisor of the shoe factory, many women working in the factory were illiterate. He did not provide me with numbers, though. Most of them had finished only 8-year secondary education and a few of them had finished high school. Similarly in the textile factory, the main supervisor claimed that most of women working in the factory had finished only the secondary school.

The eagerness and desire for education was visible among women I interviewed too.

They would admire and praise me for the fact that I was educated, which made me feel at unease as a researcher; this phenomenon I explain in detail in the methodological section of my thesis. But what are the factors that have inhibited these girls' participation in education? The following section on rural/urban divide in Albania provides a modest explanation to the reasons why the level of education of women working in the textile and shoe industry is low in Albania.

In other contexts, factory work might be the only means to attend education for girls coming from rural areas. In South Korean context, for example, export-zone factories provided the only possibility for many girls to attend high schools (Kim 1997: 32). Kim demonstrates that one-third of women she interviewed from Masan Free Export Zone, started factory work in order to attend high school (Kim 1997: 32.). She also shows that a major reason for South-Korean women to depart from rural areas to urban areas for factory work was education. From my interviews with women workers in the export factories in Tirana, it turned out that women working there had lost hope or desire for education. In my case study factories, it is impossible to attend high school at the same time with factory work due to the coinciding hours of factory work and school schedule.

Here I suggest that given the low level of education they had attained, most women workers in my case study, consider factory work as a good job opportunity, since according to them when one doesn't possess education credentials, one cannot find a better job. Most of the young women I interviewed also claimed that working in the textile factory was good because they learn a skill, a profession, which might serve them for the future.



## 2.2 Where does labor come from? Urban/ Rural Division after State-Socialism in Albania

Like with the education variable, I rely on supervisor's words about the regional background of women working in my case study factories. They claimed that most of women working in footwear and textile factory were from rural areas or migrants from rural areas who now live in the capital of Albania, Tirana.

With the regime change in the early 1990s, the internal and external migration increased drastically. There was a huge exodus of people migrating from rural areas and small towns to the capital of Albania, Tirana and other major cities (INSTAT ( c) 2004: 16). The report by INSTAT on "Gender Perspectives in Albania: Population and Housing Census 2001" (2004) attributes a sociocultural transformation to this internal migration in Albania. During this period, the report states, the internal migration was highly uncontrolled by government policies and the movement was massive, chaotic and accompanied with "disproportional development of the urban zones in comparison to the rural area" (2004: 20).

The report further lists some "undesired effects" that come out as a result of rural population's migration to the cities such as: "the development of illegal settlements, the emergence of slums, the failure to maintain sufficient sanitary conditions for housing, the lack of schools, high unemployment rates, high instances of crime, the dissolution of family ties and social control, as well as increased levels of prostitution and domestic violence" (INSTAT ( c) 2004: 20). It goes on by describing mountainous areas as being characterized by strong clan-based traditions and patrilineally and patrilocally organized. In central and south Albania this tradition is less strong; the report claims (INSTAT ( c) 2004: 25).

"Not only did the population move from the villages to the towns, but also from the mountainous regions

to the hillside areas, from the more remote areas to urban countryside, and from rural areas with a cold climate and little arable land to villages with a milder climate and more cultivation opportunities.” (Gender Perspectives 2004: 20).

The stereotypical attitudes towards rural and highlander people in Albania are not prevalent only among certain groups of people in Albania (such as people living in urban areas in certain cities in Albania) but are also reflected in reports like this. How do these stereotypical attitudes affect the lives of women working in footwear and textile factories, is a question which I didn’t address to my interviewees. They have their own pride, self-esteem and dignity and through the conversations with them, it was understandable that they had created their own friendship, their own spaces of entertainment (Even though, as I explain in the following chapter, they do not go out every afternoon in the cafe’s like most adolescent and young girls in Tirana, do).

As in other countries elsewhere, Albanian footwear and garment factories rely mostly on vulnerable cheap labor. According to supervisors, a considerable amount of supply labor comes from rural areas. When I asked the supervisors how they find the workers, they said that sometimes they announced vacancies in magazines; sometimes women would come and ask if they were vacancies. Most of the women I interviewed, when asked how they find the job they were currently doing, they told me that they had found it through their relatives or acquaintances working there.

One of my informants told me that sometimes the owner of the factory is seen as “benevolent”. Members of a girl’s family for instance, come to her and beg her to hire their daughter to her factory. Sometimes, she said, they are young and the owner is reluctant since she

is not allowed to hire girls under the age 18.<sup>3</sup> “But then they insist so much that she has no other choice but to hire these young girls” (Suzana).

I would suggest that for most migrant families, employing their daughters to the footwear or textile factory may be appealing for certain reasons. Firstly, in terms of economic gains. Secondly in terms of security. Many families might think that their daughters are safe inside the factory, with strict schedules and no permission to go out. Many families, especially during the transition years, when many social changes occurred, have had the fear that their children might face certain problems: such as drugs, “bad friendship” and all other issues related to values and morals, which are now altered by the system change. The fear that adolescents or youth might become “problematic” is comparatively higher in the context of Tirana, the capital, where it is believed that there is a higher “degeneration”<sup>4</sup> of values and norms. Therefore, it might be argued that women working in the factory in the eyes of these families are as safe as they would have been if they were at home.

This safety issue might be a crucial factor, which might affect the rural migrant’s families’ decision to take their children to high school or not. The public high schools (gymnasiums) are believed to be very problematic and the families might be afraid that their daughters might “go out of control”. Therefore, they might take the decision to keep their daughters at home instead of sending them to public high schools.

It might also be argued that the rural migrant girls do not go on with high school because they are not fully integrated in classrooms and school and as a result may not be good students to continue with high school. The stereotypical attitudes I lay out above might have an impact in

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<sup>3</sup>Albania has ratified 33 conventions of International Labor Organization, ILO, one of which is, Minimum Age Convention, article 138, ratified in 16 February 1998. In both factories there were working girls under the age 18, according to the supervisors they were allowed to work under certain circumstances.

this integration. However, this is just an untested hypothesis of mine, which might be subject to later research.

### 2.3 Apparel and Footwear Industry in Albania after the 1990s

A major aspect of open-market economy that characterized Albania after the collapse of State-Socialism was the privatization of land and enterprises in both urban and rural areas. The neoliberal policies that Albanian politics followed and is following during the transformation years encourage privatization and foreign investment.

Albanian government is working hard to boost foreign direct investment. According to the World Bank Report for poverty reduction strategy, foreign direct investment has increased by 84% in 2007 given governments measures taken to improve business climate, the privatization process of some public enterprises, the extension of public private partnerships and so on (World Bank 2008). Similarly, in a report issued in 2004, *Strategies of Employment, Social Services and Social Insurance*, in the chapter “Development of Enterprise and Creation of Employment” states that foreign enterprise is crucial for the Albanian economy. The whole chapter lays out the strategies that the Albanian government should employ to create the necessary conditions for foreign enterprise. It also states that the government “has declared the encouragement of exports” and clothing and shoes are part of “export sectorial priorities” among others (Strategies of Employment Report 2004: 42).

Kim observes similar trends in South Korea where “the government sought to attract foreign investors by offering tax incentives, simplified administrative procedures, waivers of the free trade union organization law and other inducements” (Kim 1997: 23).

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<sup>4</sup> This is the word used in Albania to describe the deterioration or alteration of norms and values in the

Relying on INSTAT's statistics, the number of textile and footwear factories in Albania is 606. The total number of employed people is 10 995, 9195 of which are females. Again according to INSTAT the number of leather and shoe factories is 99 with a total number of 9277 employed, 6657 of whom are females. From the given data it is clear that like world wide, in the Albanian context the predominant labor in apparel and footwear industry is female labor.

According to Gender Analysis report on employment policies in Albania, the Albanian employment market does not offer many possibilities for the unemployed people with low qualifications. The report contends that these unemployed need special professional trainings for specific jobs (Gender Analysis Report 2005 : 29). Therefore the Albanian Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, has opened special trainings for skill learning in different cities in Albania. Women and girls are prioritized through reducing the costs of the professional trainings in the Public Centers for Professional Trainings (PCPT<sup>5</sup> in Albanian QFP: Qendrat e Formimit Profesional). According to Gender Analysis Report, in 2004 there were 733 people<sup>6</sup> who obtained a certificate in training centers for sewing (tailor) in all Albania (31).

It is clear that the groups of people who are targeted by these policies are those with fewer qualifications. However, the report does not provide statistical information on the regional background of the women attending these trainings.

Given the information I present above, there is a favorable climate for foreign export processing sector of clothing not only in terms of business conditions, but also in terms of labor supply. I am not arguing that all women who get training from these training centers go to work in export-processing factories. Some of them might become self-employed. However, some of them definitely look for jobs in these export-oriented factories. Two of the women I interviewed

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transformation period.

<sup>5</sup> My abbreviation.

who were working in textile factories said that they had attended training centers before starting the actual jobs. The other young women I interviewed, working in textile factories, claimed that they had learned the skill in the job place.

From the data presented above one can reach to several conclusions. First, for many women in Albania, working in the textile and footwear factories is a solution to unemployment. Second, this sector of employment is also best possible solutions for groups of women with “low qualifications” (Gender Analysis Report 2005), meaning with no certain professional skills and with low levels of education. Third, being employed for most of women brings them not only economic gains but also enables them to go out from homes, a factor which is highly emphasized by the women and girls I interviewed during my research. In the following chapter I lay out some of the implications of “going out from homes” are for the lives of these women and girls.

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<sup>6</sup> The report does not provide segregated data according to gender.

### **Chapter 3: Factory Women Workers in Albania trapped between Albanian Cruel Reality and the Harshness of Capitalism: Localized Spaces of Escape**

“...many have struggled not to be crushed by bitter hardship, but maintain their self-respect and dignity. They celebrate the zest of life, the human spirit, earth, sky, wind, waves, and all that lies between and beyond” (Louie 2001. *Sweatshop Warriors: Immigrant Women Workers Take on the Global Factory* p. 247).

After having presented an analysis of the economic, political and social situation of Albania during the transformation period and the importance of foreign enterprise for Albania, and after having situated the factory women workers' position in the larger picture of the country, my aim in this chapter is to provide a closer look to women's experience in the factory work in Albania. Building from the interviews I gathered during my field research, I lay out here the complex feelings of my interviewees concerning the working conditions of the factories, and their personal and country's economic situation.

As I discuss in further detail in my theoretical chapter, it is argued that there are three perspectives on women in development and their relation to capitalist production: the *integrationist*, the *marginalization* and the *exploitation* theses (Tiano 1994; 37). Here I argue that in the Albanian context it is impossible to argue for one of the above trends as the thesis which explains the international division of labor and women's work in sweatshop factories in Albania. Based on how women expressed themselves during the interviews, I propose that Albanian factory women workers do not look at their jobs in terms of international division of labor, (i.e. we the poor Albanian women working for rich Italian customers), rather, they look at it as a job they have to do in their lives.

I also argue that given the country's current socio-economic situation, women's attitudes towards the factory work are ambiguous: On the one hand they see it as an opportunity to escape home and earn money; on the other hand they are frustrated by the harsh working conditions.

Facial expressions and voice intonations were elements, which demonstrated the ambivalent feelings of women during the conversations better than words.

Another feature, which I consider as contributing to the ambiguous feelings of women about their job, is the fact that through that job, many women workers find space for the creation of a self-identity and self-realization. Likewise, related to my first argument, in the Albanian context one cannot claim that women workers in export-oriented factories feel “exploited” since as I deduct from my observations and conversations with women, they find spaces for escape and resistance, both in the work place and outside of it. But for a better understanding of “resistance”, let me first briefly elaborate on the notion of agency.

The liberal model of agency has been criticized for being limited (Mahmood, 2002). Saba Mahmood invites us to think of agency not as being synonymous to resistance, but rather “as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (2002). The idea that power as a set of relations does not simply dominate the subject but it also forms the conditions for its possibility, is called by Foucault and Judith Butler, as mentioned in Mahmood, the paradox of *subjectivation* (Mahmood, 2002 emphasis original). Mahmood argues that for Butler agency is measured with the extent it can “subvert” norms (2002: 211).

Similarly, in the ethnography conducted in China by Pjun Ngai, analyzed by Fernandez-Kelly, it is demonstrated how women factory workers in China’s Shenzhen district use their feminized bodies as an opposition to high intensity of the work (Fernandez-Kelly, 2006: 7). Ngai, in Fernandez-Kelly, describes menstrual and back pain, fainting and other similar reactions as daily responses which strengthen sexualized stereotypes, but most importantly “reflect the appropriation of negative portrayals for subversive ends” (Fernandez-Kelly, 2006: 7-8). The short period of time I spent in the two factories did not allow me to observe similar trends among



women, however, other small details I encountered were definitely “minor genre of resistance” (Fernandez-Kelly, 2006) and in the Albanian sweatshop context too power as a set of relations not only dominates the subject but forms conditions for its possibility.

As Freeman argues “culture and workers” gendered subjectivities must be taken into account in conceptualizing labor markets, labor processes and the macro-picture of globalization. The movement and the impact of multinational corporations around the world does not take a uniform and monolithic form” (2001: 3). The form that it takes in the Albanian context is influenced by the state-socialist legacy of the country as well as the current socio-economic situation. The following sections will be a modest demonstration of this.

### 3.1 Women trapped between the Four Walls of Home and the “Prison” of Work: which one to choose?

When asked about work in general, the women I interviewed at first answered that they were satisfied with the job. More than anything else, they appreciated the friendship they had created in the work place. Most of them highlighted the fact that they went together with colleagues to visit different cities or celebrate certain feasts. Marina 50, a woman worker in the shoe factory told me that they were like a family in the sweatshop. They visit each other “in good and in bad”. “Even when we cannot go all to one person’s place, we collect money and send her a present. We have a very good time with each other”. For Marina this aspect of the work place was very important and one of the reasons, which made her like the job. Marina was the woman who stopped me to tell me her anger about the current political system in Albania. But what made Marina that furious about the political system and the political change from state-socialism to capitalism? A possible reason might be the fact that she lost the job, which had a higher

prestige (a laboratory technician) than the current job she was doing at the moment. However, she claimed that she liked the job a lot, especially for the above mentioned reasons.

Marina was not the only one who had had a profession during the state-socialist regime. Katrina (36) had been a kindergarten teacher and with the collapse of the regime she had lost the job. While Marina put more emphasis on the friendship and solidarity they had established in the work place, Katrina expressed strong disliking about the work with words like: “You should go out from here as soon as possible. There is an extraordinary stress, frustration and filth”. During our conversation, while she was having her breakfast, her friend said: “Tell the girl why you have glasses now. Did you have glasses before?” Then in the midst of laughter she added: “I am waiting to get married first, and then I will put on the glasses. I am afraid I cannot find a husband if I put them on now”. Then the bell rang and women had to go on with their work.

These women’s working day was a combination of frustration and laughter. In Quercus factory, where all the above mentioned women worked, women and men would talk a lot during the working hours. They would tell jokes, make fun of each other, and when the director’s attention was absent they would move from their sewing machine and pay a quick visit to their friends. However, as they told me, they had to finish the required norm at the end of the day; otherwise, they had to work extra hours. And from their accounts, there had been cases when they had had to work over time to fulfill the required norm of the day or the week.

Even though at first they would answer that they were generally satisfied with the work and working conditions, later in the conversations women would express discontent in very strong terms. Some of them would say, “This work is a torture”. One of the interviewees, a twenty year old girl who had worked in a textile factory when she was 17 recalls her job by saying that

“We were tortured. We were treated like slaves. We had to load and unload the cars. When the job was unfinished we had to stay at work until late. Until we conformed to the norm. There would be cases when we were fasting during Ramadan<sup>7</sup> and we would be the whole day without eating and work overtime because the norm had to be accomplished. The owner would say “why do you fast? Don’t fast while working! (Elona)”.

Besides the eye problems that the harsh working conditions caused to the factory women, both the textile and the shoe factory, women in the shoe factory mentioned several other health implications that the working conditions had had for them. They mentioned poisons, which come from leather processing, as well as dust; back and kidney problems. One of the interviewees in the shoe factory, Bardha 42, was constantly complaining about the poor condition of her family and how little money she got from this job. When she told me that her daughter was 19, I asked her if she had ever thought of taking her to work at the factory. The sarcastic answer of the women, who was gently mocked by other women in the factory for her constant complaints, was that she did not have money to take her daughter to the hospital “after she gets all kinds of infections and diseases in that kind of job”.

If the working conditions are alienating, why do these women continue to work in these factories? Tiano argues that women’s employment in developing countries is not a result of their own desire for work but a result of their families’ demand for work. This fact, she continues, is a reflection of family patriarchal relations and, presupposedly explains why these women keep on working in assembly factories even though the working conditions are alienating (Tiano 1994; 45).

This trend was reflected somehow in my interviews too. As a reason to why they would

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<sup>7</sup> The religious Muslim Month of fasting

go on working in the hard conditions that this job offered, many women highlighted the fact that the poor conditions of Albania do not offer other possibilities. Work in Albania, for many people is the only source of income (Dervishi 2001) and since there are not many job opportunities, especially after the collapse of communism, women are constrained to continue to work, despite the harsh conditions.

When I asked them if they had ever thought of changing the job they were doing for a different kind of job, other than shoe or textile factory, most of them answered yes. The common answer would be “yes, but where to go?”. The common alternative thought by these women if they had in mind to change the job would be sales assistant in boutiques. But then most of them told me that they preferred the shoe or textile factory for the social insurance that it provided. One of my informants, Elsa 31, working in the shoe factory, said:

“I have thought of changing this job and what I could do is to become a sales assistant. But you know old age comes very soon and one has to think of that. This job here provides me with social insurance, while the owner of the boutique will not provide me with one. Therefore, I prefer to stay here for the moment...”

Many other women would be confused and pessimistic about the future. Their simple answer would be: “Who knows what I am going to do? God Knows.”

In addition to blaming the current economic situation of the country for not being able to find other jobs, women claimed that they worked in the textile or shoe factory because they did not want to stay home. They considered the work they did as a possibility for escaping ‘the four walls’ of home. Two 17 year old girls, Ana and Klara, claimed that they were working not out of need but because they did not want to stay home. They both mentioned that they had learned about this job through friends working in the factories and both their families did not agree with their decision to work in a factory at the beginning. They said that the reasons for their families’

resistance were the bad working conditions, especially for Ana who worked at the shoe factory.<sup>8</sup> But the two girls told me that they had convinced their families and start working. “When you don’t go to school, there is no other thing you can do. Going to work is much better then staying at home” said Ana. Ana was upset that she could not go to school. She told me that she had spent her childhood in Greece, where her family was working, and went to school there. When she came back, she told me, she could hardly write in Albanian and had difficulties in adapting to school because of this reason. As a result, she did not continue with education. She said that she felt underestimated with the job she did, and was considering to look for another job. However, staying at home for her clearly was not a solution.

For the older generation, over 34 years old, home was not a solution since, in their terms, “it doesn’t give money”. Younger women I interviewed stressed more the boredom and the limited mobility they would have if they had stayed home. The young girls I interviewed in particular in addition to mentioning the fact that they support their families by giving them their monthly salaries, they would see the factory work as a means of escaping their homes, even though some considered their work place like a prison with tight schedules and locked doors. During my conversations with Klara, one of her friends interrupted me and said “...How can she be happy? She is spending most of her life locked in the factory. She spends the eight most important hours of her day locked in the factory...”.

While it is common for adolescent and youth in Tirana to go out in the afternoons with friends, the young women I interviewed, even though they were living in Tirana, claimed that they didn’t go out with friends, apart from certain occasions and celebrations they attended with

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<sup>8</sup> There was a common sense in women working in textile factory, shoe factory and other people to whom I talked about my project, that textile work is “cleaner” than the shoe work. They all had the idea that there are more poisons and dust in the shoe factory. However, Klara who worked in the textile factory, said at the beginning she had breathing problems because of the dust, but later she got used to it.

their work colleagues. They never said anything about their families giving or not permission to go out, they said that they were either not integrated with friends, or simply they didn't like it. The young women who were engaged mentioned that they go out with their fiancés.

Taking into consideration that most of the young women I interviewed were living in the capital but had migrated from different rural parts of Albania, some would arrive to the conclusion that these young girls are not allowed mobility outside home, since patriarchal relations and backward mentality are stronger among rural families than among urban ones. Such stereotypes are existent among society in general, and as I suggest in the second chapter, it can be detected from several reports on gender analysis concerning Albanian women. To be able to arrive to such conclusions, I propose that there should be conducted deeper sociological studies which would trace the sociological, economic and historical factors which lead to presumably "more backward and patriarchal" attitudes among rural families. However, one factor that might make these families be restrictive to their children is the suggestion I make in the second chapter; that during the transitional period, many families in Albania are afraid that their children become "problematic" due to all the social changes going on.

The dilemma of women workers in factories in Tirana in my study clearly shows the ambiguous feelings they have concerning their jobs. It may be argued that women are trapped between the factory work, which in their terms is like a "prison", and the "four walls of home" and among two frustrating circumstances, they choose the less frustrating one. However, as the following section demonstrates, women workers in factories manage to find spaces for resistance.

### 3.2 The Importance of Work for the Albanian Woman: a Way to escape Poverty and achieve Self-esteem

According to Dervishi, after the collapse of state socialism, unemployment hit women harder than men (2001). This unemployment “epidemy” positioned women in very hard situation constraining them to restructure the whole relational system with the others, relatives and the whole society (Dervishi 2001: 12). Dervishi doesn’t elaborate on what it means for women to “restructure the relational system with others, relatives and society”. I assume that becoming unemployed meant for these women losing prestige in society and becoming dependent on their husbands or relatives. This relates to Dervishi’s further argument, that women in Albania live the unemployment tragically not only when they compare themselves to other women who are in a better position from other industrialized and developed countries, but also because Albanian women consider job to be a source of “affirmation of their prestige in society”(Dervishi 2001: 13).

From the conversations with women working in both factories, it became clear that work was a very important factor for them too. Economic reasons and going out of home were clearly prominent factors which stood out to their decision to go to work. However, I suggest that women in my study should not be seen as victims subordinated either to the hard working conditions or to patriarchal homes. If we reconsider agency and resistance in the terms that Mahmood suggests, within these sets of power relations they find spaces for resistance.

By resistance, I refer here to the strength that these women have to go on with their lives and not to feel exploited or victimized by the job they do. I suggest that talking or gossiping during the working hours, laughing and making jokes is a subversion of the capitalist norms of the assembly line work which expects people to perform the repetitive dull work like robots without talking or in Marxian terms, “alienating” them (Schmitt 1987). Friendship, solidarity in

the workplace, the jokes and the talks in the breaks, and in the way from home to work, are elements of resistance to both existing patriarchal and capitalist relations.

Many women I interviewed would emphasize the friendship they had created in the work place. For them that short period of time from home to job, the 30 minutes break they had and snatched conversations during the working time were the most precious element which gave them strength and continue to enjoy their youth. Even though they were not allowed to talk during the working hours, women would constantly chat with each other or as some young girls confessed, they sent written messages to each other, when the supervisor was not looking at them. They also mentioned that they celebrated feasts or go out for trips with the working colleagues, a possibility to celebrate with friends, which they would not have had if they had not been working.

In such a context, there are details which make the question of going or not going to work more complicated than just choosing between home and work. I argue that there are little spaces for resistance, a resistance which cannot be captured by the capitalist relations and in some ways even reverts them.

As I can derive from my interviews, women see work as an achievement of self-esteem too. Their ambiguous feelings towards the job they are employed in is very interesting in itself. Even though one of the women mentioned that shoe factory work is “a lowly job”, most of the women are interviewed saw this job as just another kind of job. During my informal talk with my informant, when I was telling her that this kind of job can be observed in many other places of the world, such as Caribbean, Taiwan, she said: “Oh no, but we are not that bad. It’s just a job we have to go to. Every job has its own difficulties; I see it as a job I have to do”.



The statement of this woman clearly shows that she does not want to consider herself as a third world woman: poor and exploited. Without me mentioning the word “exploitation” she herself claimed that they were not exploited. She said her job was just something she had to do. This relates to my earlier argument, where I state that women working in export-factories in Albania do not see their jobs from the perspective of the international division of labor. In simpler terms, they do not consider themselves as the poor Albanian women, working for the rich Italian customer. This can be traced even to the indifference they show concerning the prices of the shoes or garments they produce. When I asked them if they knew how much the products they work for are sold in Italy, since both Quercus and Ligustrum worked for the Italian market, no one of them but one, knew and was interested to know how much they cost. This indifference might show that they might be too busy or too concentrated to their own problems that they do not want to think further.

However, it might also be a conscious decision these women make in order to be psychologically at ease with themselves. By putting themselves in a higher position than women in “the third world” and by ignoring the fact that the product they work for is sold to richer people in Italy, they make a strategical move for the maintenance of their self-dignity.

### 3.3 “Learning to labor”: Dealing with the Punctuality of Capitalism and Gendered Factory Work

Especially the older generation, women and some men I interviewed, who had experienced the communist regime and later the “transformation” period, put a lot of emphasis on how the private sector is very strict and not tolerant to flexible working schedules. The expression they used to describe their job and in a way legitimize its tight schedule and overwork hours was “The private does not forgive”.

Many interviewed women expressed a desire to work in the public sector but their hopes would fade during the discussion by saying that “it is impossible to enter the public sector when you do not have networks”. The desire to work in the public sector, which is basically any kind of job in state owned institutions, coincides with the results of country scale research on women undertaken in Albania in 1999. According to this study, most of women in Albania want to be hired in the public sector for several reasons. An important reason is the fact that the public sector provides longer guaranteed job then the private one. Another highly significant reason is social insurance payment. While public sector provides social insurance in all cases, the private sector does not provide it always. One of my informants said that she would prefer to be employed as a cleaning lady in the public sector rather than a tailor in the textile factory, even though sewing was her profession and she had been doing it for more than 30 years.

This woman put much emphasis on the holidays that the public sector granted to people, unlike the factory work. Even though employers of both factories, Quercus and Ligustrum, had 1 day off per week and 28 days holiday during the summer, often times they had to work extra days. It coincided that there were two holidays during my research period. One of them was the Orthodox Easter and the other was May 1<sup>st</sup>, the workers day. For the first feast the shoe factory did not have a day off. When I asked an orthodox girl how she felt that she did not have a holiday on the Monday after Easter she replied by saying that they don’t have holidays in Mondays after Bayram either and since most of them, who are Muslim, do not complain, why would she complain. In the May 1<sup>st</sup> both factories were given a day off, but then both factories demanded workers to go to work on Sunday to compensate for the work they lost on the holiday day.

Some women rebelled against this attitude; others accepted it with passivity saying that that was the way the private sector works. Here again one can see the way people try to accept and “get used” to the capitalist regime, whose relations are very different from what the older generations workers were used to before the collapse of state-socialist regime.

Women I interviewed did not show any interest in unionizing. Only one of them I interviewed recalled some instances of rebelling.

“Once we were supposed to have the Sunday off but they told us that we had to come to work. We came on Sunday, and me and a group of some other people told to the whole collective that we would not come to work on the following Monday. And no body went to work actually. When we went to work on Tuesday, the main supervisor came at the gate and told us that the owner does not allow anybody to work. In a sign of protest, the owner wanted to fire us all. And we said, “Ok, we are going home”. They thought that we would beg to her to give us permission to work. And as soon as we prepared to leave, both the main supervisor and the owner told us to come back and start working. In this case we were organized the whole group. But when we do not support each other, when there are only 4-5 people rebelling, they are ostracized” (Suzana).

After the 1<sup>st</sup> of May I asked the women I interviewed if they did any protests for the raising of their wages or the ameliorating of the working conditions. All of them told me that they had celebrated in the 1<sup>st</sup> of May. The 1<sup>st</sup> of May was always celebrated during the communist regime; therefore especially the older generation in Albania, still celebrates it as a feast.

In this chapter my aim was to put forward the idea that in the Albanian context the factory work should be seen not only from the narrow landscape of the international division of labor, although this is a very important factor which should be taken into account. It is also

reductive to analyze factory work only in terms of women in developing countries, in this case Albania, being exploited by the entrepreneurs from the developed countries. I rather argue that the picture is very complicated, as the ambiguous feelings of women towards the job demonstrate. My aim is to highlight the importance of small elements in these women's lives, which I see as spaces for escape from both the work place capitalist relations and home patriarchal relations.

## Conclusions

Many scholars have debated the impacts that globalization, neoliberal policies and as a result the international division of labor have had for the lives of many women world-wide. Debates have also evolved around the export-oriented factories, whose existence has been very much dependent on and related to the above mentioned factors, and the impact that they have had for women in various contexts. Some have argued that working in the garment and footwear industry has positive affects for women, some have argued that it has negative aspects, some have studied the gendered aspects of the factory work (Freeman 2000; Salzinger 2003). There have also been scholars who have emphasised “minor genre of resistances” that women working in export-oriented factories demonstrate (Ngai in Fernandez-Kelly 2006).

My research with women workers in Albania makes a modest contribution to the literature on the international division of labor, by bringing perspectives and insights of some of women workers in export-oriented factories in Tirana, Albania. Based on field research in two factories in Tirana and archival research about the socio- economic situation of women in Albania, I argued that women workers in textile and footwear factories in Tirana show ambiguous perceptions about their work. They see the work as a good opportunity for their lives in economic and social terms, but they are also frustrated by the hard working conditions of the factory work. I also argued that, given the country’s socio-economic situation in the transformation period, working in the factory does not stand out as a very exploitative job. It is rather perceived for many women as a job opportunity in the midst of unemployment.

Further, I argued that working in the textile and foot wear factory, for some women has not only economic gains but also social gains. They see job as a means and tool to go out from home and socialize and solidarize in the work place. I also suggested that there were elements of

this job, which do not totally dominate the subject, but make possible it's existence (Mahmood 2002). The talks and the jokes in the work place, the conversations they have with each other from the way home to work, are spaces, which can not be dominated by neither capitalist, nor patriarchal relations.

There are many aspects of the factory work in the Albanian context, which can be further researched. The gendered aspect of the work and how it has changed in the 17 years of the transformation period can be an interesting area to study. While the image of a shoemaker has always been that of the man in the Albanian context, how come that in the 1990s most of the footwear factories are dominated by female labor? The question to be raised here is that of why the traditionally "natural" ability of women to use the sewing machine stands above the traditionally "natural" ability of man to make shoes in these footwear factories.

Furthermore, I suggest that an immediate topic of research in the export-oriented factories in the Albanian context is the issue of unionization. Given that the Albanian government is attracting foreign investment and preparing appropriate "business climate" for foreign investment, it is important to analyze and research extensively the ability of the workers to unionize and create syndicates in such an environment. In addition, it is also crucial to research the possibilities and challenges that the Albanian context might pose to the unions of the export-oriented factories (once they are created) in the process of collaboration with international sweatshop unions worldwide.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Questions**

Here are some of the questions I asked to women and men working in the textile and shoe factories. The interviews were semi-structured so the conversation with the interviewees went often times beyond these questions.

1. How did you learn about this job?
2. Who offered you the opportunity?
3. How old were you?
4. What was your family's opinion about the job?
5. I am interested to know how do you feel about your job. Can you tell me something about it?
6. Do you think the working conditions are satisfying?
7. What are the most positive aspects of this job?
8. What about the most negative?
9. In general, are you satisfied with your job?
10. Do you think this job is an important opportunity for your life? Why?
11. How do you feel at the work place?
12. What do you do during the breaks?
13. Do you chat during the working hours?
14. Do you have vacations? How long are they? Where do you spend them?
15. Does your job provide social insurance?
16. Tell me about your free time after you go home?
17. What do you think, how does society view your job?

18. What are your ambitions in life?
19. Until what level did you attend school?
20. If you weren't working in this job, where would you like to work?
21. Do you know how much are the products you produce here sold in Italy?
22. Where do you go for shopping? When you go for shopping, do you pay attention to brands?  
Do you spend more on your family, or on yourself? Or on furnishing the house?

**Questions directed to supervisors**

1. When did you start working in this factory?
2. Who chooses the workers?
3. According to what characteristics do you select them?
4. Why do you hire mostly women?
5. How do you find workers? Who recommends them to you?

## **Appendix B**

### Interviewees from the footwear factory: “Quercus”

	Name	M/ F	Age	Marital status	Years employed at the present job	Job position	Profession	Education	Regional Background
1	Agron	M	50	Married	17	Director	-	High School	Tirana(city)
2	Katrina	F	36	Married	14	Worker	Kindergart en teacher	High School	Tirana(city)
3	Elsa	F	31	Single	11	Worker	-	High School	Tirana(city)
4	Ana	F	17	Single	3	Worker	-	Secondary School	Tirana(rural migrant)
5	Genti	M	30	Single	1	Mechanic	Mechanic	High School	Tirana (city)
6	Silva	F	18	Engaged	3	Worker	-	Secondary school	Tirana (countryside)
7	Bardha	F	42	Married	4	Worker	-	Secondary school	Tirana(rural migrant)
8	Olsi	M	27	Married	7	worker	mechanic	High school	Tirana (city)
9	Marina	F	50	Married	14	Worker	Laboratory Technician	High School	Tirana (city)
10	Suzana	F	35	Single	14	Worker/ supervisor	-	High School(agri culture)	Tirana (countryside)
11	Moza	F	22	Single	7	Worker	-	Secondary School	Tirana(rural migrant)

### Interviewees from the textile factory: “Ligustrum”

	Name	M/ F	Age	Marital status	Years employed at the present job	Job position	Profession	Education	Regional Backgrou nd
1	Marjeta	F	38	-	5	Main supervisor	-	High School	Tirana (city)
2	Klara	F	17	Single	5 months	worker	-	Secondary school	Tirana (rural migrant)
3	Larida	F	27	Married	12 years	Worker	-	Secondary School	Tirana (city)
4	Agim	M	60	Married	5 years	Mechanic	Mechanic	High school	Tirana (city)

### Interviewees from other textile factories

	Name	M/ F	Age	Marital Status	Years employed at the present job	Job Position	Profession	Education	Regional Backgrou nd
1	Jeta	F	50	Married	3	worker	Tailor	High school	Tirana (city)
2	Drita	F	48	Married	10	Supervisor	Tailor	High School	Tirana (city)
3	Daniela	F	20	Engaged	3	Worker	-	Secondary school	Tirana (rural migrant)
4	Elona	F	20	Single	1	worker	-	Secondary school	Tirana (rural migrant)
5	Selma	F	17	Single	1	Worker	-	Secondary school	Tirana (migrant from another city).

The owner of the textile factory: “Arundo”

	Name	M/ F	Age	Marital Status	Years employed at the present job	Job Position	Professi on	Education	Regional Backgrou nd
1	Elena	F	50	Married	10	Owner (Entrepreneur)	Econom ist	University degree	Tirana (city)

### Factories

	Name	Years of functioning	Nationality of the owner	Gender of the owner	Number of people employed
1	Quercus	17	Italian & Albanian	Male(Italia n) Female (Albanian)	160
2	Ligustrum	-	Albanian	Male	100
3	Arundo	10	Albanian	Female	60