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*‘There are no alternatives  
here, and they know it’*  
Work in the cashew-  
processing factories in  
Mozambique

# Gendered working lives in global production

- Agro-processing industry in Mozambique, cashew-nut global commodity chain
  - Rehabilitation since mid-2000s driven by public-private partnerships, labour-intensive, female-dominated industry
- Who are the workers? How is work organised? How are gendered working lives shaped?

**Social reproduction (Katz, Federici) and political economy of time** framework to analyse

- i) Interrelations of work in the factory and outside
- ii) Social differentiation in the workforce

**Analysis of power in the global production network (Mezzadri, Selwyn)** to explore the role of state, private sector and NGOs (and their interactions) in shaping organisation of work, practices of labour control, and labour organising

# Focus of the paper

***'There are no alternatives here, and they know it'***

- Captures a worker's feeling of exploitation (comparing factory work to conditions of slavery)
- Context in which employers can offer poor working conditions and treat workers as disposable because they operate under the assumption of 'abundance of labour'

Investigation of dynamics of **absenteeism, workforce turnover** and **conditions of labour supply**



# Absenteeism

- High rates of absenteeism (50-60% of the workforce) (Technoserve, 2016)
- Seasonal absenteeism linked to agricultural work (Paul, 2008; Stevano, 2013)
- Workers engage in agricultural work and other forms of paid work alongside the work in the factory

## ■ Why?

### 1) Work choices and lack of 'work culture'

*'Here work choices are viewed as casual, transitory, and a complement, not a substitute, to agricultural labour'* (Paul 2008: 15)

Colonial and post-colonial visions of rural residents as farmers

→ Incentives: crèches and meals at work

### 2) Poor working conditions

Workers' actual wages lower than minimum wages

Long work hours

Weak contractual arrangements (only 5-10% on permanent contracts)

### 3) Form of resistance to proletarianisation (O'Laughlin, 2002)

# Study setting & methods

- New factory in the province of Gaza (Macia)
- Factory owned by largest investor in cashew sector in Mozambique, Portuguese capital
- Opened in July 2018, two phases of fieldwork: November 2018, May 2019
- ~400 workers (November 2018), ~750 workers (May 2019) – 70% women
- Parts of the process are mechanised, others remain labour-intensive



- Qualitative interviews with stakeholders: Incaju, Ministry of Work and Social Security, trade unions (SINTIACAF), ILO, local government
- Qualitative interviews with company managers
- Exploratory focus groups with workers (Nov 2018)
- Qualitative interviews with 20 workers in Nov 2018 and May 2019

# Recruitment practices

- **Local recruitment** (Macia and nearby areas)

At first workers had to provide CV, ID but then this practice was abandoned – shift to completely informal recruitment

- **Transfer of workers with experience from the North** (Nampula)

Practice justified by the need to train other workers

- **Capillary system of bribes for people to get jobs in the factory**

First Head of HR sacked for this; many accounts of bribes to supervisors to get jobs; around a month's salary

→ Does this create patterns of exclusion?

- **People from the same household working in the factory**

→ Linked to possibility to pay bribe? Social relations? Insufficiency of one wage?

# Working conditions

- **System of payment**

Workers paid by production targets (mostly women) and workers paid by number of days worked (mostly men)

Attainment of minimum wage impossible because i) targets difficult to achieve, ii) Sundays/Bank Holidays not paid

- **Length of the working day**

Some workers have fixed working hours (mostly men) and others leave late to attempt to meet the daily targets (mostly women)

9-11/12 hours per day

- **Work equipment**

Inadequate equipment (gloves, uniforms)

- **Breaks**

20mins for breakfast, 30mins for lunch (same meal repeated every day)

- **Weak contracts**

Casual contracts with probation period of 15 days but no duration specified, 8h per day and minimum wage (but time/payment are not complied with)



# Mechanisms of resistance

- **Sabotaging production**

E.g. Cheating mechanisms (at the expense of managers or colleagues), favouritism and bribing

- **Absenteeism**

Driven by i) tiredness and need to take a rest, ii) illness, iii) children's illness, iv) other paid and unpaid work, v) lack of money to pay for transport, vi) getting to work after the gate's closure, vii) funerals

- **Quitting the factory job**

Many workers left the factory job between November 2018 and May 2019, various reasons – e.g. having another job/business activity, having other responsibilities/commitments

Non-permanent decisions, fluid character of the workforce, hybrid status of worker/ex-worker

Factory has +1,000 employees on its registers but only around 700 are at work on a given day

- **Weak trade union**

Ineffectiveness of trade union representatives, weak bargaining power



# Centrality of social differentiation

- Social differentiation processes shape who gets to work in the factory, how they experience work and can enact resistance mechanisms while they work in the factory as well as their possibility to quit
- What shapes processes of social differentiation?

Financial responsibilities for relatives and others

Sources of income and types of work performed in the household + migration of family members

Responsibilities for care and housework, and substituting practices

Age and health conditions – majority of workforce are young people (e.g. walking long distances, working long hours)

Education – e.g. gendered division of labour in the factory based on education qualifications

Access to alternative wage work + history of wage work

Having debts

Access to land and ability to hire workers

→ Significant gender, age, ethnicity relations of power cutting across

# Concluding thoughts

- Absenteeism to be conceptualised as a form of resistance to poor working conditions, alongside sabotaging mechanism and transient/permanent quitting
  - It is crucial to analyse processes of social differentiation to understand patterns of recruitment, experiences of work as well as ability to enact forms of resistance
  - Despite employers' complaints about absenteeism and high turnover, their employment strategy is reliant on the creation of a fluid workforce for two key reasons:
    - 1) Continuous generation of a reserve labour army
    - 2) Placing the costs of social reproduction on the workers and their families
- The implication is the exacerbation of fragmentation of livelihoods

*Thank you*