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GLOBALIST

Globalization's Reality: The Wheel That Turns

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HO CHI MINH CITY You wander into a Disney store in the United States or an IKEA outlet in Europe and, seeing stuffed furry animals for kids, you don't immediately imagine close to 2,000 young Vietnamese women in light blue uniforms hand-stitching an eye to Kermit the Frog, attaching a leg to Winnie the Pooh, or a head to a baby lion.

Nor, of course, do you necessarily consider the fact that the price of the toy - perhaps \$12 - represents about 20 percent of the monthly wage of an 18-year-old girl from the Mekong Delta who grew up in a rice paddy, made her way to this booming city, and now works a six-day week hoping she won't also dream of Mickey Mouse once she's done stitching on those outsized ears.

Nor, with the kids saying they want this and that, do you have time to imagine these young women sleeping three to a room, spending their Sundays off watching TV, getting water from a well in the poorer quarters, dreaming that some guy from the furniture company opposite - only men are employed there - might take an interest and so offset repetition with romance.

You don't see these crates full of multicolored giraffes, turtles and frogs, IKEA labels attached, awaiting shipment from Vietnam, or imagine tables arrayed in lines across the vast factory floor of the Danu Vina company, where these young women, laboring beneath ceiling fans, are bent over their work for 48 hours a week, excluding overtime.

But the reality of the global economy is precisely this. The line that stretches from Wal-Mart or IKEA or Nike to a restless girl whose father labors and has always labored in a field of rice or sugar cane may seem remote, but the Asian economies exploding into the world market have brought them together. A young woman who would once have stayed in her village now sews Disney toys like the appropriately named Stitch.

Whether that is seen as exploitation or opportunity depends on where you sit, how you look at the world, and what you make of globalization. I'm on the opportunity side of that debate, but the exploitation school is vigorous.

In European countries like France and Italy, where the "precariousness" of jobs has become a persistent complaint, and a six-day, 48-hour week sounds like an outrage, the migration of these young women from village to factory jobs is essentially threatening. They are seen as abetting a "race to the bottom" in the

labor market that, for example, makes the 35-hour French workweek look untenable.

In several American states, not least those with surviving textile industries like North Carolina, Vietnam's booming export-led growth, second only to China's at 8.4 percent last year, can also look menacing.

Although Vietnam's admission to the [World Trade Organization](#) has now been approved, a bill to grant "permanent normal trading relations" to the country failed to pass in the [U.S. House of Representatives](#) this month.

That's a temporary setback for Vietnam, but in the image of the thousands of cellphone-clutching young people on motorbikes threading through its city streets daily (this place has gone from a bicycle to a motorbike economy in a decade), the country looks to have a sinuous momentum.

Vrida Oktavianti, the Indonesian sales chief of the Korean-owned Danu Vina company that ships those millions of stuffed animals a year to Disney and IKEA, has pondered the exploitation-or-opportunity conundrum. Here's her answer:

"We see things from a different angle," she said. "These women were working in the fields and now they're in a building. That's good enough, that's O.K. for us. So, there's no air-conditioning, but there are fans. They see an improvement where you may see something that is below standard."

She continued: "The global economy is a wheel. South Korea was once good for making these toys. Now they make cars. Perhaps in the future the toy business will move to another country, because Vietnam will be developed, and developed countries don't manufacture toys."

From her point on the wheel, Nguyen Hien, a 19-year-old factory worker, sees a mixed picture. She misses her family, but village life was boring and there were no jobs. She's tired of the furry animals - "We know them too well" - but she's happy to be in the city. She's heard of Mickey Mouse, but not Disney; she's heard of "cowboys" but not "Hollywood." She's inching into the world.

"I'll stay here until some lover finds me," she said, poking her chopsticks into a pale green plastic bowl of fish and rice in the company canteen.

After lunch, many workers stretch out under the table for a quick nap. It's hot in southern Vietnam; the siesta resists the pressures of globalization.

Can those pressures be cruel? Yes. International capital has abruptly found hundreds of millions of new potential workers at its disposal with the emergence of China, India, Russia, Vietnam and the like into the global economy.

Is globalization therefore to be decried? No, because it has delivered the chance of a better life to a wider swath of humanity than at any other single time in history.

Earlier this year, Danu Vina experienced its first strike. Prompted by rumors the government would raise

the minimum wage, it lasted five days.

The company had to raise wages about 40 percent to a starting level of \$60 a month, said Choi Moo Rim, the director.

"Our margins have been cut," said Andy Kim, the business manager. But the company plans to raise prices on new products, and the Vietnamese minimum wage remains more than a third lower than in China.

Wages will rise in Vietnam over time, as they have in China. Nguyen, the factory worker, will have more in her pocket. She may meet the right furniture worker; they'll stay in the city, make their way.

And so the wheel turns. Wars on terror notwithstanding, we live in a time of hope.

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