



Sewing Women: Immigrants and the New York City Garment Industry (Columbia Comparative Studies on Ethnicity and Race)

Margaret M. Chin

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Many Latino and Chinese women who immigrated to New York City over the past several decades found work in the garment industry—an industry well known for both hiring immigrants and its harsh working conditions. In the 1990s, the garment industry was one of the largest immigrant employers in New York City and workers in Chinese- and Korean-owned factories produced 70 percent of all manufactured clothing in New York City. Based on extensive interviews with workers and employers, Margaret M. Chin offers a detailed and complex portrait of the work lives of Chinese and Latino garment workers. Chin, whose mother and aunts worked in Chinatown's garment industry, also explores how immigration status, family circumstances, ethnic relations, and gender affect the garment industry workplace. In turn, she analyzes how these factors affect whom employers hire and what wages and benefits are given to the employees.

Chin's study contrasts the working conditions and hiring practices of Korean- and Chinese-owned factories. Her comparison of the two practices illuminates how ethnic ties both improve and hinder opportunities for immigrants. While both sectors take advantage of workers and are characterized by low wages and lax enforcement of safety regulations—there are crucial differences. In the Chinese sector, owners encourage employees, almost entirely female, to recruit new workers, especially friends and family. Though Chinese workers tend to be documented and unionized, this work arrangement allows owners to maintain a more paternalistic relationship with their employees. Gender also plays a major role in channeling women into the garment industry, as Chinese immigrants, particularly those with children, tend to maintain traditional gender roles in the workplace. Korean-owned shops, however, hire mostly undocumented Mexican and Ecuadorian workers, both male and female. These workers tend not to have children and are thus less tied to traditional gender roles. Unlike their Chinese counterparts, Korean employers hire workers on their own terms and would rather not allow current employees to influence their decisions.

Chin's work also provides an overview of the history of the garment industry, examines immigration strategies, and concludes with a discussion of changes in the industry in the aftermath of 9/11.

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