

## **The Workplace at the Bottom of Global Supply Chains as a Site of Reproduction of Colonial Relations: Reflections on the Cashew-Processing Industry in Mozambique**

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### **Abstract**

In the context of global supply chains, the workplace is a site of realisation of global-local interrelations and materialisation of class, gender and race exploitation. This paper explores these relations in the Mozambican cashew-processing factory, the workplace at the bottom of the cashew global supply chain. The aim is to extend the literature on labour and global production networks by addressing the underexplored dimension of the everyday practices of work organisation and by centring the interdependence of economic and socio-cultural relations. Taking a feminist social reproduction perspective and drawing on insights from Quijano's coloniality of labour, the article conceptualises the workplace at the bottom of global supply chains as a site of reproduction of colonial relations. The workplace is both internally fragmented and embedded within the structures of the local and global economy. Through the internal fragmentation, multiple forms of oppression and exploitation are reproduced. Through the external links with the structures of the local and global economy, the complexity of working lives as well as the colonial relations between employers and workers become visible.

### **1 Introduction**

The restructuring of production on a global scale, driven, in its most recent iteration, by technological advances and capital's expanded search for cheap labour in the periphery, has led to further concentration of capital and the entrenchment of globalised economic neoliberalism. These processes bear profound implications for the organisation of work and underpin the reconfiguration of the international division of labour and the recomposition of the global working classes (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Bair, 2005; Amin, 2015; Bhattacharyya, 2018). Through both inclusion into and exclusion from the processes of global production, the work experiences, working lives and means of social reproduction of the peoples of the Global South have undergone significant transformations (Pattenden, 2016; Cousins et al., 2018; Stevano, 2021).

A growing literature sheds light on labour in global supply chains exploring, for example, questions of social upgrading and gender issues (Dolan and Sutherland, 2002; Barrientos et al., 2011), workers' collective organising (Selwyn, 2013), and labour control regimes (Baglioni, 2017). This literature offers essential insights to understand work dynamics and transformations in the context of global commodity production. At the same time, it is necessary to extend this literature by analysing the structural and everyday practices that underpin the reproduction of labour in global commodity chains. This exercise entails taking a social reproduction lens that allows for a comprehensive understanding of work through its temporal and spatial dynamics over time and in everyday life (Mies, 1986; Federici, 2004; Mezzadri, 2019; Mezzadri et al. 2021; Rao et al., 2021). This approach, for instance, allows Baglioni (2021) to link workplaces and households and document the reproduction of cheap labour in the Senegalese horticulture, where women are not only farm workers but also peasant reproducers. A social reproduction lens allows for exploring how multiple relations of power articulate through work dynamics (e.g. Rao et al., 2021). Thus,

this conceptual framework is necessary to see how work stretches beyond the boundaries of the workplace and how social reproduction dynamics shape the differentiation of the workforce.

Further, analysing work at the bottom of global supply chains requires unpacking the specificities of these sites of production and reproduction. What is the bottom of global supply chains? In simple terms, the bottom, or origin, of global commodity chains is a site of materialisation of global-local interrelations. The point of encounter between foreign investors and local workers is often the workplace, in the form of a farm or a factory. This is where work can be seen not only as stretching between reproduction and production but also an instrument of coloniality (Quijano, 2000; limki, 2018). As put by Quijano (2000), the racial division of labour constructed by European colonialism has been a core mechanism of labour control, historically. The continued differentiation of the labouring classes on grounds of race and gender reflects the perpetuation of colonial relations in contemporary racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya, 2018; limki, 2018). The workplace at the bottom of global supply is, therefore, a key site to analyse how both economic and socio-cultural relations contribute to uphold colonial relations, particularly through the construction of the farm or factory worker as different.

This paper is aimed at exploring how gender, race and class relations articulate in the cashew processing industry in Mozambique, where the factory where primary processing occurs is the workplace at the bottom of the cashew global supply chain. The analysis is guided by a feminist political economy framework centred on social reproduction and combined with a coloniality lens for the reasons outlined above. In particular, it is argued that the investigation of multiple forms of oppression and exploitation work alongside the ideological and sociological dimensions that shape the relations between workers and employers.

The main contribution of the paper is the conceptualisation of the workplace at the bottom of global supply chains as a site of perpetuation of colonial relations. The paper discusses three key aspects that underpin such conceptualisation in the context of the Mozambican cashew processing industry. First, the workplace is *fuzzy* because workers do not only engage in wage work in the factory but also with multiple forms of productive and reproductive work; therefore the workplace has no discrete boundaries and stretches across space. Second, the workforce in the cashew processing industry is differentiated on various grounds, including gender, ethnicity and migration-status, which shape the organisation of work and how workers engage with wage work in the factory. Third, the workforce is infantilised and dehumanised through managerial practices. The overarching argument is that the conditions of production at the bottom of the global supply chain make it imperative for capital to have access to cheap labour and such access is obtained through forms of racism and sexism that perpetuate colonial relations and dehumanise the workforce. By implication, workers are assumed to be able to cope with harsh working conditions. Thus, the workplace socially reproduces and is socially reproduced through colonial relations. In this sense, the arguments made in this paper seek to add evidence to the literature that documents the nature of labour regimes in contemporary Mozambique (e.g. Pérez-Niño, 2017; Ali, 2020; O’Laughlin, 2021) and, specifically, the persistence of colonial structures in current work organisation and labour management practices (Lazzarini, 2017).

The paper is structured as follows. The next section discusses the notion of the *fuzzy* workplace in light of the seminal literature on capitalist development in southern Africa and capital’s reliance on non-capitalist production. Section 3 discusses the differentiation of the workforce by gender, age, ethnicity, migrant/local status and education. Section 4 articulates the argument that the workplace is a site of reproduction of colonial relations. The last section concludes by

conceptualising the workplace as a site that is internally fragmented and linked to the local and global economy.

## 2 Methodology

This paper is based on qualitative primary research conducted in Mozambique in 2018-19. The empirical analysis draws primarily on data gathered through speaking to workers: three focus groups and 30 individual unstructured and semi-structured interviews with workers, five of whom were interviewed twice (once in November 2018 and once in April/May 2019). The focus groups were deployed as an exploratory tool at the beginning of fieldwork to gather an initial understanding of key dimensions in the organisation of work in the factory, other types of paid and unpaid work performed by workers and key challenges they face. The individual interviews contributed a deeper insight on the workers' experience of work in the factory and the organisation of their everyday lives. Basic socio-demographic information on the workers interviewed individually is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic socio-demographic on workers interviewed in individual interviews

		<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	Sub-total
<b>Age</b>	18-24	5	1	6
	25-39	8	3	11
	40-55	3	-	3
	Not known	2	3	5
<b>Education</b>	Not completed primary	6	1	7
	Completed primary	5	-	5
	Completed secondary	5	4	9
	Completed tertiary	-	1	1
	Not known	2	1	3
<b>Children</b>	Yes	16	4	20
	No	2	3	5
<b>Other paid work*</b>	Yes	6	3	9
	No	12	4	16
<b>Domestic work</b>	Yes	18	1	19
	No	-	6	6
<b>Access to land</b>	Yes	16	3	19
	No	-	2	2
	Not known	2	2	4
Sub-total		18	7	<b>25</b>

\*It refers to factory workers reporting doing other types of paid work in addition to their factory job

Source: Compiled by the author

It was critically important for us to be able to spend several hours in the factory over a week in the first phase of fieldwork to observe directly the organisation of production and the dynamics of the workplace. We also conducted a dozen interviews with employers (managers) and other stakeholders, including trade unions and public officials. Access to the factory was granted to us by the factory owner and managers, who engaged constructively with us throughout fieldwork. However selective, the employers' openness was vital for our research and reflects how (foreign) investors do not dislike opportunities to portray themselves as contributors to the local and national economy. In the factory, our observation focused on the structure of the chain of production (e.g. to map the phases of production, what type of work each phase requires, what

machinery is used) and interviews with employers took place in their office, away from the workers. Instead, interviews with the workers were arranged through informal word of mouth in the community and were conducted at the workers' homes, a crucial step to gain the workers' trust. All researcher activities were carried out by the author and Rosimina Ali, who is a researcher at the Institute of Social and Economic Studies in Mozambique. While the empirical material derives entirely from this recent fieldwork, the analysis of the organisation of work in the Mozambican cashew processing industry is informed by the author's long-standing research engagement in Mozambique, including a previous study conducted in 2012 and based on a set of interviews with workers and managers in a different cashew factory located in the North of the country (see Stevano, 2015).

### **3 The *fuzzy* workplace: The factory and beyond**

The reality of work in Mozambique is multi-layered, precarious and highly fragmented. Mozambique is no exception among low-income countries in the Global South, where poor households often rely on several sources of income to make a living (Ng'weno and Porteous, 2018). A rich literature on colonial and post-colonial trajectories of development in Africa has documented how patterns of capital accumulation have not led to dualistic class formations, such as a landless rural proletariat and commercial farmers, but rather to *classes of labour* (Bernstein, 2010) engaging with combinations of wage, unwage work and cash-earning activities (O'Laughlin, 2002). Precipitated by the expansion of the cash economy and commodity production during the colonial time, the necessity to carry out various forms of work continued to grow in the context of the fragmentation of the means of social reproduction, where household production persists but it can no longer by itself ensure social reproduction (Cousins et al., 2018; Ossome, 2021). Thus, the practice of small-scale agricultural production alongside petty trade, casual and regular wage work and informal cash-earning activities is a common feature of everyday life for African workers. In this context, workers do not have a specific workplace, such as a factory, a farm or an office, where they go to work every day. Workers engage in multiple forms of work and therefore perform their labour in multiple workplaces, at times following varying temporal patterns. Therefore, the workplace, understood as the site where remunerated work takes place, has no discrete boundaries, stretches across space and is shaped by varying temporal dynamics of work.

Further, the artificial separation between the sites of production and reproduction tends to be highly blurred, exposing the intimate interrelation of production and reproduction in everyday life practices. The mutual constitution and tension among productive and reproductive work (Katz, 2001) is further exacerbated by the concentration of reproductive responsibility in the hands of households and families, with little or no public provision. For example, data suggest that women tend to engage more often than men in simultaneous activities, due to child care and housework (Blackden and Wodon, 2006). In addition, African countries are among those with the highest share of women in the workforce who also have significant caring duties (ILO, 2018). However, the argument goes beyond the distinction between women and men and encompasses all the power dynamics that shape everyday working lives. Once the fragmentation of work and the dialectical relation between production and reproduction is recognised through a social reproduction lens, it becomes evident that the analysis of work organisation in any workplace, even those with more identifiable physical boundaries, such as the factory, cannot be isolated from the work practices that unfold outside of the factory.

An important dimension of being a factory worker in the Mozambican agro-industry is that the factory job is unlikely to be an exclusive or long-term occupation. Studies on the cashew processing

factories located in rural areas document that high levels of absenteeism are recorded during the rainy season, when agricultural work is at its cyclical peak (Paul, 2008; Stevano, 2015). More generally, absenteeism, reaching up to 50-60 per cent of workforce, is considered to be a significant problem in the sector (Mishra and Martin, 2016). Based on the qualitative data collected in 2018-2019, it appears that absenteeism is not necessarily linked to the farming cycle when the factory is located in a quasi-urban area or in a region with a more consolidated history of wage employment, which may have eroded the centrality of farming own or family's land (Cramer and Pontara, 1998). Nonetheless, absenteeism persists and, if it follows a temporal pattern, it tends to be more pronounced on Saturdays and on the days following the receipt of the monthly wage. For example, in the factory where we conducted fieldwork in November 2018, the day before pay day, 349 workers out of approximately 400 employed were at work and the day after receiving the salary only 241 workers were present at work.

The dominant explanations offered by employers and some public officials tend to be culturalist and reliant on racist and classist tropes that portray Mozambicans, especially the poor and rural residents, as culturally unsuited for wage work in factories and naturally predisposed for farming. A factory manager attributed the different patterns of absenteeism observed in the North and South of the country to ethno-cultural differences between the Macua from the North and the Shangana from the South. According to him, the former do not mind working long hours but are absent from work more often, and the latter have a more formal approach to work and expect fixed working hours (manager interview, 6<sup>th</sup> November 2018). These arguments are reproduced in a variety of declinations and have in common the construction of the Mozambican workers as having some inherent cultural features, where culture is all-encompassing, and rather unchangeable. These cultural differences are attributed to belonging to a different ethnic or racial social formation (see Lazzarini, 2017 for a critical analysis of these arguments in the sugar plantations of southern Mozambique). These ideas reinforce the belief that in Mozambique there is a problem of 'lack of work culture' (for a critique see O'Laughlin, 2016) and entrench employment relations in the notion of coloniality (Quijano, 2000), where Mozambican workers are not considered to be apt (wage) workers from a Eurocentric perspective.

Contrary to these culturalist perspectives, the workers' accounts reveal a starkly different picture in that they find little time to engage in reproductive labour on their own terms and so leave paid work behind on days that seem arbitrary to employers. All the workers we interviewed confirmed that the number of workers fluctuates as it is inevitable that workers do not go to the factory every day; to put it in the words of one interviewee:

'It is not possible to work without ever taking a day off, nobody manages this. On Saturdays, especially, there are many absent workers because they need to carry out house work and take care of children.' Interviewee 12, woman, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2019.

Particularly for women, the need to carry out domestic work and care for children was often described as an important reason for having to miss some days of work in the factory. Women reported to miss from work to carry out the accumulated house chores they could not do previously, in their six-day work week. As shown in Table 1 above, all women we interviewed are responsible for domestic work. This issue was particularly acute for women who could not rely on the help of family members with house and care work. In addition, workers mentioned that the long work hours in the factory, which can easily go up to 10 or 12 per day, lead to tiredness and the need to occasionally take time off to recuperate. Finally, illness and taking care of sick family members emerged as another important reason for being absent from work. This motivation

cannot be disregarded in the context of limited health care provision and family-centred social reproduction. The imperatives of social reproduction shape how workers can engage with wage work in the factory.

The analysis of absenteeism and, more generally, engagement with wage work in the factory needs to be embedded in the understanding of the articulations of the modes of production. Wolpe's (1972a) analysis of the capitalist mode of production in South Africa highlights how capital's reliance on non-capitalist production (e.g. subsistence production) created the opportunity for capitalists to pay low wages to workers, in particular wages below the cost of social reproduction. It is the planned impoverishment of the African reserves in South Africa and the neighbouring countries that sustained the development of the mining sector in South Africa through the supply of cheap African labour. The workforce's segregation into different forms of production requires racial ideology and policy (*Ibid.*). O'Laughlin (2013: 178) describes this as an 'experiment of social engineering' to decouple a process of capital accumulation from the creation of a politically powerful working class. With the deepening of capitalist development, the dual economy is eroded as the non-capitalist production tends to disappear resulting in important changes in the nature of exploitation, which moves from *between* modes of production to *within* capitalist production (Wolpe, 1972b).

The articulation of capitalist and non-capitalist production is contingent to specific historical conditions and at the root of classed and racial exploitation, which in turn it sustains. Crucially, non-capitalist production includes not only agricultural production for own consumption but also the reproductive work that maintains households and families alive, as it is clearly evidenced by the workers' accounts on absenteeism in the factory. Feminist scholarship has provided a crucial corrective to understand the relationship between capitalist and non-capitalist production by exposing capital's reliance on unwaged reproductive work carried out overwhelmingly by women. Women's work is made invisible, segregated in the 'private' realm and ultimately devalued (Mies, 1986; Federici, 2004). The integration of gender dynamics with those of class and race captures how classes of labour are historically both gendered and racialised (see Hart, 2002; Samson, 2010). Even when subsistence agriculture becomes less prominent, the work of social reproduction continues and shapes the terms of engagement with the labour markets, work burdens and living conditions. In fact, Ossome and Naidu (2021) contend, today's rural populations in the Global South may never receive a wage sufficient to make a living and, therefore, reliance on unremunerated gendered labour is increasing, a fact that should shift our focus from exploitation to survival. In this sense, the gendered labour that sustains non-capitalist production is not simply a subsidy to capitalist production (*Ibid.*). This argument is important in the context of this paper to interrogate the nature and relative (un)importance of wage work in the cashew factory in contemporary Mozambique.

What are the key implications for the conceptualisation of work in the Mozambican factory presented above? First, within-class differences among factory workers structure the organisational practice of work. In this study, classes of labourers are characterised by dimensions of gender, ethnic, age and migrant-status difference, which reflect material living conditions and distribution of reproductive work, but also socio-cultural connotations reinforcing, in turn, dynamics of disadvantage and exploitation. I will discuss within-class differences in the next section. Second, the articulation of forms of capitalist and non-capitalist production underpin the existence of geographically blurred and multiple workplaces. The work realities of the Mozambican factory workers cannot be fully understood if observed only through the prism and boundaries of wage work in the factory. The notion of *fuzzy workplace* highlights the interconnections between various

forms of work, attached to capitalist and non-capitalist production, and urges us to look beyond the boundaries of an ideal, clearly-defined workplace to study working conditions and working lives.

In the factory we studied, over a third of the workers we interviewed individually told us that they carry out a cash-earning activity or casual wage work alongside working in the factory because their salary is not sufficient to make a living. A practice common among female workers is to use a part of their salary to finance a small business activity (*negócio*), such as selling charcoal and home-processed cashew nuts or trading clothes and beauty products. At times, other sources of household income allow workers to hire a worker who can take care of the business activity or agricultural work, but this is a rare circumstance. As explained above, the burden of reproductive work adds to the constraints that women in particular face. The gendered structure of the labour market means that men have much greater access to casual piece-rate wage work than women. In the interviews with male workers, we came across the practice of skipping one day of work in the factory to take up a better-paid casual wage work opportunity elsewhere, for instance to transport goods, load and unload lorries. The dynamics of livelihood diversification are central to the social reproduction, however precarious and fragile, of households relying on scarce, burdensome and poorly-paid wage work. The performance of other forms of paid work determines whether a worker, both female and male, goes to work in the factory regularly or not.

In sum, the spatial and temporal dynamics of work are fuzzy because they are not contained in a clearly-defined space where workers spend regular amounts of time. The places of work are multiple and interconnected, weaving together reproductive and productive work, where the latter is itself constituted by multiple forms of labour. The factory workers work in a fuzzy workplace and they are not only, or primarily, wage labourers – not because of their culture but because of an economic structure that forces workers to spread themselves over multiple wage and non-wage forms of work. The cultural arguments are not only wrong, they are harmful because they serve to strengthen the employers', as well as local governments', ability to discipline and control workers.

#### **4 Differentiation in the labour force**

The workforce in the Mozambican cashew-processing factories is dominated by women. It is estimated that the industry employs around 13,000-14,000 workers, of whom 65-70 per cent are women (Mishra and Martin, 2016; Mozacaju, 2017).<sup>1</sup> In the interviews conducted with factory managers in 2012 and in 2018-2019, the explanation offered for hiring women is that they are more patient and have the manual dexterity required for the job. Feminist political economy literature has shown that the 'nimble fingers' argument is a pretext for ensuring access to cheap labour as well as the competitiveness of export-oriented industries (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Seguíno, 1997; Berik, 2017). In the case of the cashew factories, the fragility of the managers' narratives on women's work is further exposed by the existence of informal home-based cashew processing, which is much more lucrative than wage work in the factory and overwhelmingly performed by men.<sup>2</sup> When greater earnings are possible, it appears that gender norms on who is best at manual cashew processing are reversed. Potentially revealing dimensions of the gendered

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<sup>1</sup> Exact numbers are not available because factories keep on their registers workers who might not go to work on a regular basis and those who have stopped working altogether. Accurate registers do not matter because workers are paid by day of work or daily production.

<sup>2</sup> Informal cashew processing is visible because the processors sell their product in the local markets and, for those based in the South of Mozambique, in South Africa. This discrepancy between the gender norms governing the same type of work in the factory and at home emerged in an interview with local government representatives.

division of labour in cashew processing, both at home and in the factory, could emerge with further research on this theme.

Gender is a key dimension of *inequality regimes* in organisations (Acker, 2006). Gender is an organising principle to establish hierarchies and reproduce inequalities in the workplace. In the cashew processing factory, there is a clear gender division of labour that bears implications for wage payments and duration of the workday for women and men. Men are concentrated in the storage space (where raw cashew nuts arrive and are classified by size), in the mechanical shelling sector, and in the heating sector. They also work across sectors as mechanics and in most sectors as supervisors and heads. For some of the roles covered by men, it is necessary to have certain education qualifications, such as completion of secondary and/or technical schools. On the other hand, women are concentrated in the sectors where manual work is performed. These sectors are first selection, scooping, peeling and final selection. A very significant difference is not only that men occupy positions of power in the factory's organisational structure, but that they work in roles where the wage is determined by the number of days worked in a month and have fixed work hours. Instead, women work predominantly in sections with production targets and their pay depends on how much they produce. Therefore, although by contract the salary is the same for most workers in the factory<sup>3</sup> – 4,300 MZN per month, equivalent to 52 GBP – women's wages are *de facto* lower due to the pay deductions incurred for not meeting the production targets. This also relates to the length of the working day, which is longer for women because they work as long as possible seeking to meet the daily production target. The absence of an 'exit time', as put by workers, was one of the most common complaints made by female workers in the interviews.

Forms of complaint and resistance are also gendered.<sup>4</sup> Men's forms of resistance are more overt and can encompass a wider terrain. For example, in the mechanical shelling sector, the factory management decided to impose a change from a system based on fixed hours to one based on production targets, a shift that led to overt contestation. Although the complaints did not suffice to change or reverse management's decision, the workers did voice their dissatisfaction and acted on their consciousness of collective agency. We also conducted interviews with a few workers from this sector who had left the factory for other jobs following the system change. Quitting the job is the resistance mechanism of last resort and one that we encountered among women too. Having interviewed some workers both in November 2018 and in April/May 2019, we discovered that many had quit the factory job for a host of reasons, including going back to their previous occupation(s), finding the work too tiring, making time to continue to study. Through their own experiences and those of former colleagues, they expressed profound dissatisfaction with the working conditions in the factory. Despite the general feeling of overwork and exploitation resulting in high turnover, women's contestation over the prohibitive production targets are not as overt as men's. We found that women engaged in more concealed forms of resistance, such as hiding cashew nut to reduce the amount of work and stealing from colleagues to attempt to reach the production targets. Thus, women do resist, complain and subvert, but in less visible ways.

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<sup>3</sup> Most workers are paid the national sectoral minimum wage, for the agro-industry, except for those paid higher salaries due to their higher positions (these workers are overwhelmingly men).

<sup>4</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the role of trade unions in shaping action of resistance to poor working conditions. As the studied factory is quite new, the trade union was not well-established and was in fact quite weak at the time of fieldwork. A first representative was nominated by the factory manager and quit the job within a few months of employment. Subsequent representatives emerged as essentially ineffective in the accounts of the workers we interviewed.



The cashew factories are concentrated in the North of the country, where cashew production is higher and processors can have easier access to the raw input (Mozacaju, 2017). However, the sector has been expanding slowly but steadily, driven by a public-private partnership between the government and USAID-funded Technoserve to support cashew production and processing. The affirmation of a few private investors in the sector is leading to the emergence of new factories located in closer proximity to urban centres and seeking to develop links with cashew producing areas in the South of the country. This means that workers in new factories need to be trained. The ethno-culturalist narratives mentioned in the previous section are also means to justify the importance of employing Macua experienced workers, from the North, ‘to show the Southern workers that it is possible [to meet the production targets]’ (manager interview, 6<sup>th</sup> November 2018). In the factory we studied, the company brought a few workers from the North of the country, historically poorer but nowadays considered to be the capitalist core of the country (Castel-Branco and Ossemame, 2010), to train local workers and assigned them to supervisory roles. The workers from the North, characterised as different due to their ethnicity, are elevated to a position of relative authority and instructed to train and discipline other workers. These power relations play out through workers’ different degrees of proximity to the managers and feed into sentiments of division and suspicion among workers. However unjustified and unwarranted, the interviews with local workers revealed a sense of mistrust towards the supervisors from the North that shapes work and human interactions in the factory and beyond.

Beyond ethnic difference, it is important to consider how the local (‘natural of the place’, if translated literally from Mozambican Portuguese) workers are not all *local* in the same way. Working lives are shaped by where people live, whether they are close to family members, if they need to rent a house and the means of transport they can use to go to work. There is no data on the share of migrant workers in the cashew processing industry but, what emerged in our study is that patterns of short-distance migration exist and are important to workers’ living conditions. Interviews with workers who come from other villages in the region revealed that these workers face a triple whammy: having to rent a house, absent or limited family support, and the obligation to travel to visit their families. These workers are often young men and women with no children. For instance, the one young male worker who told us he is responsible for domestic work lives in a shared house with other male colleagues. Those living far away from the factory and with no possibility to pay for daily transport see their work day extended, which encompasses tiredness and the safety risks of having to walk home in the dark. The gender, income, age and migrant-status dimensions of these forms of differentiation of the workforce are very visible and shape people’s everyday lives both materially and emotionally. Observation conducted in the factory makes it very clear that workers are predominantly young,<sup>5</sup> a fact confirmed by the age range of our interviewees, and an interview conducted with a 52-year old worker revealed that she is one of the eldest workers (interviewee 16, woman, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2019). The working conditions, determined by pay and work organisation in the factory, but also by all the necessary corollary dimensions of the worker’s life contribute to the exclusion of older people from the factory work.

The gendered structure of the broader labour market context also matters in shaping the social fabric of the workforce. As mentioned, some of the men employed in the factory have secondary school or professional education as it is required by the job while the other men and all women, which represent the majority of the workforce, do not have any specific education requirement. The only requirement to be admitted to the factory is the identity card. However, due to the lack

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<sup>5</sup> The factory management did not share information on workers’ age with us due to the administrative work it would have entailed.

of wage employment opportunities, which is particularly striking for women, many young educated women work in the factory. Educational and socio-economic differences place some workers in a better position to meet production targets and move up the hierarchical structure of the factory, which deepens power relation among the workforce.

The multidimensional differentiation of the workforce underpins managerial decisions and organisational practices in ways that discipline and divide the workforce, and contribute to deepening hierarchies and inequalities among workers. Gender, age, ethnic, migrant-status and education differentiation shapes workers' daily experiences of work as well as mechanisms of contestation and collective action. The severity of these impacts is greater in contexts of minimal public provision, scarce transport infrastructure and widespread poverty. Under these conditions, the playing field remains highly uneven and the differentiation of classes of workers starker.

## **5 The workplace as a site of reproduction of colonial relations**

Underlying the layers of complexity and differentiation, the fundamental relations between managers and workers, or capital and labour, need to be examined from both an economic and a socio-cultural perspective and through an approach that captures the power imbalances between Global North investors and workers in the Global South. The configuration of global trade relations in the post-colonial world embodies the legacy of colonialism and maintains countries in the Global South, in particular African countries, in the role of providers of primary (agricultural) commodities (Amin, 1972; Rodney, 1972; UNCTAD, 2019). Through the colonial rule, African countries and workers were turned into producers of cheap exports for the colonisers (Amin, 1972). With the end of the colonial rule and the acceleration of processes of global integration driven by trade liberalisation, the flow of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into the agricultural sector and primary processing in low-income countries increased substantially from the 1960s and more than tripled between 1990 and the early 2000s (Hawkes and Murphy, 2010). The historical ties between colonisers and colonies underpin the flow of foreign investment from the former coloniser to the former colonised, in ways that may result in forms of neo-colonialism (Nkrumah, 1965). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse these investment flows and hence to assess the nature of these relations at the macro level, these power dynamics structure everyday relations in the workplace – the site of encounter between capital, the former coloniser, and labour, the former colonised people. In the workplace, the social and geographical concentration of capital is articulated and becomes an instrument for the 'coloniality of labour control' (Quijano, 2000: 539).

Capital's ability to pay workers below the cost of social reproduction is enabled and reinforced by the sociological and cultural construction of African workers as *different* and somehow able to cope with low pay and harsh working and living conditions. Workers are seen as having a smaller set of human needs, smaller than their bosses' needs. The construction of the African worker as having limited human needs detracts humanity and dignity from African people in ways that upholds racist and colonial relations. Who the workers are and what their needs are is determined by the employers, with the latter also constituting the benchmark against which work attitude, economic and human needs are measured, which perpetuates the hegemonic control over the characterisation of the colonised (Quijano, 2000). A Eurocentric perspective dictates how work is organised and how workers should fit into this imposed structure.

Most of the workers interviewed explained to us that, beyond the unfairness of receiving very low pay and working long hours alongside other deficient material conditions of work, they are treated with no *respect* by their managers. Workers are concerned not only with the material conditions of

work but also with the loss of humanity and dignity they experience at work. A range of illustrations based on interviews with workers and managers as well as observations in the factory provide the pieces of a larger puzzle that makes it clear that the workers are treated as disposable and, in essence, as lesser ‘others’. I will describe the most salient illustrations in turn.

The factory provides breakfast and lunch to workers on every day of work. This practice, which is common in the sector, has been praised for providing an additional benefit to workers and an incentive to go to work regularly. It is a sign of the employers’ good will and corroborates the culturalist narrative that Mozambican workers are not suited for wage work in the factory (see section 2) – not even a free meal encourages workers to go to work regularly. However, in the factory we studied, workers are given the same food every day: bread and tea for breakfast, beans or cabbage and rice for lunch. Putting aside the nutrition and health implications of poorly-diversified diets (Arimond and Ruel, 2004), from the employers’ perspective, this is a favour to the workers who, as poor people, should simply be grateful that a meal is given to them as a bonus. This narrative is revealing of the profound misunderstanding of human life in conditions of poverty. Some workers appreciate being given the meal but, at the same time, they complained about the repetition of meals, the scarce quality of food and the unmet need to be adequately nourished to sustain a very long working day. The workers’ concerns are either unheard or dismissed as unimportant, it does not matter if food is always the same because the managers assume that workers eat worse food at home.<sup>6</sup> But the workers’ complaints are illuminating to understand that living in poverty does not mean that any type of food is to be accepted as good; to assume so is to erase the histories of food traditions, the centrality of food to social relations and the cultural practices that revolve around food. To workers, being fed the same bad quality food every day is to be treated with no respect. The managers’ attitudes are not only harmful, they also reproduce classist, racist and colonialist connotations of African people and erase the humanity, the emotions and the concerns of people living in poverty.

On the one hand, workers are considered to be able to cope because they are used to harsh living conditions. It is of no concern for the employers that the length of the working day means that many workers, mostly women, have to walk back home in the dark. But workers mentioned this as an important safety concern, which they have to take because they need to work. Again, this lack of care on the part of employers denotes their failure to understand the reality of everyday life of their workers and the disregard for workers’ safety. At the same time, workers are infantilised and reprimanded for all sorts of things. They are literally addressed as if they were children, not allowed to speak their language (the local language, as opposed to Portuguese) in front of the managers, and constantly treated with contempt, told off for not being apt workers and threatened to be dismissed.

‘In this factory, managers fail to nurture workers.’ (Interviewee 10, man, 30<sup>th</sup> April 2019).

Another worker compared the work in the factory to slavery and stressed that the company can do so because there no alternative employment opportunities in the area (interviewee 4, woman, 9<sup>th</sup> November 2018). This lucid analysis highlights the treatment of workers as disposable in a context where the scarce employment opportunities and the necessity to work places workers in a position of profound disadvantage and exploitation.

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<sup>6</sup> Based on interview with interviewee 11, woman, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2019. She described an exchange with the factory manager following her complaint on the quality of food in the factory canteen that she considered to be extremely offensive.

Amidst the opaqueness on worker's rights, such as the lack of certainty over whether sick pay is ensured or not, across many interviews it emerged that workers are not entitled to take paid leave to attend funerals. Although the Mozambican law entitles workers to five days of paid leave in case of the loss of a close relative, the workers' accounts suggest that this legal entitlement is not complied with on a systematic basis; it appears that the employer has a high discretion in making these decisions. Although the importance of attending funerals might appear trivial to the foreign employers, it is instead crucial to the maintenance of social relations, the fulfilment of familial responsibilities and a condition for family membership (Stevano, 2021). The disregard for such an important aspect of social life for Mozambican communities exposes the wilful ignorance of employers, who do not give importance to understand workers' organisation of life. A worker underlined that the managers do not realise that some women working in the factory have a university degree, they are educated and can see the injustices they suffer (worker interview, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2019).

The deprivation of humanity and dignity is not simply an unpleasant dimension of working in a factory at the bottom of global supply chains, but a central mechanism that ensures workers can continue to receive low wages and work in poor working conditions. It perpetuates and reinforces the power imbalances between bosses and workers, between (foreign) investors and African classes of labour, with significant implications for the reproduction of racist, sexist and colonial relations through the workplace. This is an important aspect to consider when examining work in global supply chains and one that exposes the interconnections between economic, social and cultural relations.

## 6 Conclusions

This paper explored the class, race and gender relations that materialise in the workplace located at the bottom of global supply chains, the Mozambican cashew processing factory in this study. The key purpose is to extend the literature on labour and global production networks by addressing the underexplored dimension of the everyday practices of work organisation and centring the interdependence of economic and socio-cultural relations. A feminist political economy framework centred on social reproduction was deployed to see the social reproduction dynamics underpinning everyday labour processes and the differentiation of the workforce. But, in addition, through the lens of coloniality, the workplace is seen through the power relations operating within it and those linking it to global systems of production.

The analysis presented in this paper is based on primary research in the Mozambican cashew processing industry however insights can be drawn to analyse other workplaces at the origin of global commodity chains. In this respect, the paper makes a conceptual contribution by theorising the workplace at the bottom of the global supply chain as a site of reproduction of colonial relations. To build this argument, I begin with a discussion of the *fuzzy* workplace. The workplace is *fuzzy* because the low wages paid to factory workers at the bottom of supply chains and the erosion of the means of social reproduction force workers and their families to engage in combinations of casual wage work, unwaged work and (survivalist) self-employment. Thus, to understand work in the factory it is necessary to analyse work dynamics beyond the factory and capture the gendered and racialised mechanisms that assign workers to specific types of work and forms of production. The notion of the *fuzzy* workplace sheds light on the specific historical conditions that make specific forms of gendered and racialised exploitation instrumental to capital accumulation. For this reason, the analysis of the differentiation of the workforce is central. The factory workers are classes of labour differentiated by gender, age, education, ethnicity,

migrant/local status. Their material conditions of life and work are shaped by these dimensions of differentiation, as these are also used by the employers to organise work and establish hierarchies of workers in the factory. Finally, as the factory at the bottom of the global supply chain is also the place where global-local relations shaped by the legacy of colonialism unfold, the everyday interactions between employers and workers embody and reproduce colonial relations. The socio-cultural characterisation of workers as inferior ‘others’ is much more than an unpleasant dimension of working in these factories: it is central to the maintenance of an economic model that pays workers poverty wages and to the reproduction of racist and colonial relations. Against the regime of exploitation, workers enact various forms of resistance that tend to be gendered.

The workplace at the bottom of the global supply chain is a site that is both internally fragmented and embedded within the structures of the local and global economy. Through the internal fragmentation, multiple forms of oppression and exploitation are reproduced. Through the external links with the structures of the economy, factory workers’ complex working lives and the colonial relations between employers and workers become visible. The severity of these inequalities is heightened by the power imbalance between national governments and private investors, where the latter are hailed as employment creators and granted the freedom to pay low wages, offer poor working conditions and treat workers as disposable. The literature examining the power relations at the institutional level is a necessary companion to this analysis (e.g. Baglioni, 2017; Mezzadri, 2017; Hardy and Hauge, 2019). This study relied on a qualitative investigation of economic and socio-cultural relations in the workplace, but more research is needed to explore the economic legacy of colonialism in the context of global supply chains.

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