"Women Workers' Health and Wellbeing Have Never Been a Concern of Plantation Companies"

Menaha Kandasamy

Menaha Kandasamy is the first woman to serve as the President and General Secretary of the Ceylon Plantation Workers' Union and a Founding Member of the Red Flag Women's Movement. In this interview with ***Hasini Lecamwasam*** *from Polity, Menaha talks about her history of activism within the plantation sector, plantation worker's struggles for fair wages and decent working conditions, and the impact of the current economic crisis on women in the plantation sector.*

HL: Let's begin with a brief description of yourself, your activism, and your work so far?

MK: I come from a very traditional family. In my childhood, I was exposed to all sorts of gender stereotypes which I didn't realise until I attended university. I am a trade union activist; my father was a unionist; and my mother was a tea plucker until she got married. So I come from the tea plantation community and am proud to say that I am from a working class family. I used to go to my father's trade union office, to take food for him. So that awareness, seeing workers coming to see my father, the setting of the union, it stimulated me and taught me many lessons. When I became a trade unionist, the first thing I realised was that the trade union system in the plantation sector was exactly like the plantation sector.

The trade unions are very male centred, and there are no women in any level of decision-making. The executive committee of the Ceylon Plantation ('Red Flag') Workers' Union when I joined had three women workers there. And even those women didn't know that they were part of the executive committee, because they had never attended any meeting! So that's how I started.

Let me give a few examples to illustrate my journey. I remember, those days, the trade union structure had three committees: estate committee, district committee, and central committee. At the estate level they had a *Mathar Sangam*, which was the term used to refer to the women's wing of unions. They had this set up to show that women workers are participating, but it was only token participation as the actual decision making on union issues was mostly done by male leaders.

I understood that women, and even men workers, were not aware of the structure of these unions. The male leaders of the estate committees had a lot of power to negotiate with the estate management, so that was the place to aim at in order to solve the workers' problems. But it was not easy. So, we conducted lots of trainings for women workers – and in fact men workers also, but especially for women workers – to build their confidence. The next step was to give legal recognition. We were able to change the Red Flag Union constitution to recognise that at all levels, women and men – together – had to be the leaders. We thereby got rid of the *Mathar Sangam* system. Now there is only the estate committee and women are involved in decision-making. It's mainstream now, but in that context, it was a radical thing to do. When we talk about mainstreaming gender, it does not happen unless the structures change. Our challenge was to change the mainstream culture and attitudes by going beyond the patriarchal system of thinking. Then we trained the women workers and they started to go and negotiate. In the beginning it was difficult as other workers were not ready to accept this, they feared it; the trade union male representatives started to say that they were going to lose members because of this. Even the male workers were not ready to go with women workers for negotiations.

But today, we have women leaders and are in a position to take up leadership in a very practical way. Because of our constitution, men and women are both expected to hold similar positions and perform similar duties. It's no longer possible to go as an individual for negotiations. This is a milestone as you see. Considering where we began, much change has happened.

There's another, very important story I want to share. At the beginning, when I would go with other representatives for negotiation on behalf of the workers, the management would not look at my face; they'd always look at the men. This happened even at the Department of Labour and many other places. It is because the notion that a woman is not a leader was deeply ingrained in their minds.

I also started to notice how the workers would go to the estate superintendent on the so-called 'labour days', and use the Minute Book there to write their problems. What I noticed was that it was very rarely that a superintendent would offer them a chair, sit down, and talk to them. Trade union leaders, on the other hand, were always invited to sit down and have a proper discussion. Most of the time, there will be sort of a window, where the workers will stand on the outside and the superintendent will be seated inside to talk to each other. We changed that as well. Whenever we went for discussions, the non-worker leaders were asked to sit down and the workers were standing outside. This was a bureaucratic attitude reinforcing upper class mentality that refused to treat workers as human beings with respect. We said: "No, they are our workers, they are coming for the discussion. For all discussions hereafter, our workers will come with us." Then they didn't give them chairs, so we got up and asked the workers to sit down. We said, "It's fine we will stand and talk." Then they had no option but to bring chairs.

One more thing I can add about my journey is that many workers in the plantation sector moved outside during 1992-3. Earlier there was a system where once you turn 14 or 15 years, you can give your 'name' to the plantation and they will recruit you to the labour force. But after privatisation many changes happened. A lot of young people started to move to the cities as domestic workers. When I started to organise them, most of the trade unions said: "No, this is an individual house they are working at. How are you going to organise them? You are very immature."

That is what they say about women who try to do trade unionism. If you say you are going to form a trade union, they say you can't do that. But today, I like to say that there is a domestic workers' union – the first such union in Sri Lanka, and its run by workers, women workers, and that is my laboratory. Even though it is the informal sector, women can organise. If the ideology is there and your heart is there, you can do it.

HL: What made you focus on gender in the workers' movement? Is it because you are a woman and because of your personal experience of discrimination and patriarchy?

MK: As I said before, the plantation sector is a feminised sector, meaning to say there are more women than male workers here. Trade unions are part and parcel of workers in the plantation. Even for domestic violence they will go to the union. But I saw that

women workers' problems are left out. Increasing the basic wage, EPF, ETF, everything they do, but women's issues are not discussed. It is a feminised sector, but the decisions made do not reflect the concerns of women. Nor do the women have any representative there. I am also a woman and I also went through the same journey, and I thought to myself: "until you take this on, it is not going to change." Trade unionism doesn't only mean issues of terms and conditions of work. It is also about workers' issue and because there are more women in this sector, it includes women's issues too. The normal practice is for TUs to talk about workers' issues but not be very sensitive to women workers' issues.

HL: Can you comment on the kind of work that women do in the plantations – both the waged work and the unpaid care work; the kind of contribution they make to the plantation sector both in terms of paid and unpaid work?

MK: The plantation workers contribute immensely to this country, and the economy. Tea used to be the number one income of Sri Lanka. But when you compare that with what the workers get as wages, it's negligible. More than 200 years after plantations were established, there are no toilets or eating-places at work. These are basic rights. You need a toilet. Any human, rich or poor, cannot stay eight hours without going to the toilet. But how do they get away with this? They cheat and control the women to keep it that way. It is like a captive labour system, one of semi- bondage. As women have traditionally been kept away from trade union activism and generally been discouraged from participating in winning their rights, it is easier for the management to have more of them participating as workers; because they are not aware. This is how you increase your profit margins – by reducing your costs: where do you reduce? You don't reduce from your company's expenses or your staff expenses. You reduce what you spend on the workers. So it is easy if women are there; you do whatever you want.

Today what is happening in the plantations—this started in the South but it's now spreading everywhere—is that they are trying to make it into an informal sector. Now, having more women makes it easier to do that. I want to very clearly state my analysis here. If you take the companies, and I'm mostly talking about companies in the plantation sector, they are dominated by men; men who are upper class and rich. And among the workers, it's mostly women. So the companies are using power over the workers based on their class, as well as gender. It is easy for men to use their power over women, in a negative way. So when they talk about 'feminising a sector' by getting more women into it, it really means that the place becomes easier to control and to exploit. They will respond saying "no no no, it's not like that, we are really thinking about women workers." But are you paying equal wages? Equal wages for equal work? In the plantation sector, I want to ask so many other things. Why are there no toilets, no eating place even in 2023? The women workers' personal hygiene/occupational health has never been a concern for the management/companies. The women are eating where they are plucking, and they also pass urine there. How can you ensure the worker's dignity like this? So women are misused, and that drives profits higher. That is the hidden agenda.

I want to ask, if you are concerned about the workers in the plantation sector, where is health and safety in the plantations? For how long have they been working in the hills? There are pregnant women, feeding mothers – it's a risky workplace especially for them. But none of the companies think about health and safety, none of the companies think about a uniform for them. You need to give safety gloves or else they cannot pluck tea safely. When they go to tea bushes, which are up to their chest level, early in the morning, there's water, so most plantation workers get asthma problems. Why? Because of the unhealthy work place. So it's totally misguided to simply say that you have to get more women. I am not against getting more women workers. More women coming is good, but at the same time, you have to ensure fair wages, and job and even physical security. So if you're concerned about doing everything equally, I believe you should really be thinking about women.

HL: To revert to the second part of the question, what about the unpaid kind of work that women contribute towards the plantation that's all about sustaining the plantation economy, the household – everything?

MK: Actually this is what no one realises. Most of the women in the plantations are working, right? Then they come back home and even though they are working outside equally or more than their husbands, once they come back home, the stereotype is there. They have to cook, they have to clean the house, they have to bring water, they have to look after the children, their husbands, and their in-laws. You can't say "no, it's not like that." What people don't realise, particularly men, is that it's not magic. If men want to go to work tomorrow, today they have to sleep in a clean place, they have to eat, have to take a bath, change clothes; it's not all just happening, who is doing it? And "tomorrow I have

to go work and earn" means that salary includes this also. The men's salary, what they are getting paid, half of that wage is this, which is the women's contribution to earning that. So, they are directly and indirectly contributing to the economy, which is a household task, and is performed for free. They do not get paid, but they are contributing. All these tasks are usually dismissed with "okay, you are married to a man, you got your children, and this is your personal life." What you do may have nothing directly to do with the plantation company, nothing to do with production or economy or whatever. But if the woman does not do housework/ chores, the man will have to get another person to do that work, and that labour will have to be paid for. People need to eat, sleep, and come back to work the next day. So that is contributing to the next day's work and the work of the day after. I particularly see this among the working class more than the middle or any other class: they equally work in the fields, come back, and then do all the domestic chores also by themselves. Most of the time it's a small room, small house, all the dependents are there. You can't afford to get new houses for the mother or father, so mostly they stay together and the woman has to look after everything. It's a big household and women are contributing to that.

HL: In your 2014 SSA publication* From Plantation to Domestic Labour: The New Form of Exploitation and Political Marginalization of Women*, you had argued that the women who might migrate to the Middle East are taking up what you call a 'captive' kind of labour, which is as exploitative as what happens in the plantations. After COVID19 and in the context of an economic crisis, what other kinds of employment are women taking up? Does this argument of women moving from one kind of captive labour to another hold, or would you revise or refine it in any way? What are your thoughts on that?

MK: Yes, actually it's the moving from one to another – I have to be very clear here that I see plantation work as a skilled job. You can give it different definitions, but I can't go and pluck tea. I don't know how to pluck tea. When you see it, you may think "oh it's easy! I know how to pluck!" But you can't pluck all the leaves. It is a skill. But plantation workers, they don't have much choice to move on. For years and years, they have been working there. The only other choice available to them is domestic work – inside the country or outside the country. Inside the country, most young people started to go out of the estates as domestic workers in the 90s. They would study up to about grade eight or ten and after that they wouldn't want to work in the plantation sector. They thought this is the next best thing, and that this would be upward mobility. But it wasn't like that. The transition was from a captive kind of labour to –I can use the word – a feudal mentality. It hasn't stopped to this day.

But after this pandemic period, what happened? Lots of domestic workers lost their jobs. Among domestic workers, you have resident workers who go and stay with one family and visit their home about once a month; then you have the daily workers who go to work and come back home in the evening. But what happened during the COVID period? The daily workers – who make up a large amount of workers inside the country – had to stop because they couldn't travel every day. Their families were also reluctant to take them in after so much exposure. And also, lots of people, teachers or business people, started staying at home. Since this allowed them time to cook, they didn't need additional help. If you take the lower middle or middle class who will typically have a domestic worker, when they are not engaged in a job, they will manage. So then there are so many reasons they lost their jobs. And what happened with the resident worker was, they wanted to go back and safeguard their children; they thought that everyone was going to die. So, they all went back. So, lots of domestic workers lost their jobs during that period, and slowly when they restarted and everything went okay, the financial crisis came.

When this crisis started, prices went up along with the cost of living. Domestic workers couldn't manage with their wages. Then the fuel and food shortages came about, and again many started to lose their jobs. After the pandemic I see that there are a lot of local domestic workers trying to come and join the plantations because they think it is safe – "we can stay there and work." But it won't happen, it's temporary. They're planning to informalise the sector. Even the male workers who came from Colombo will go back once the situation returns to normal.

As a result, these women will move as migrant workers to other countries. In some estates you can see so many workers applying and going; they get cheated and they come back. So my analysis is this: wherever these workers go, they have no security there; they will only get exploited. So even if they change their work or they go abroad, there is no upward mobility; we are still here. But the problems are more and more, compared to before the pandemic: the quality of life has got worse; before corona we were talking about how the workers' poverty was on the increase and everything, but now if you compare, it has doubled. So they are going backward, not forward.

HL: In the context of the current economic crisis, are there any other kinds of employment women take up outside the estate, and are they any more or less empowered because of those choices? For instance, are women taking up employment in garment factories or rural agriculture? Are there any other kinds of work that they take up than domestic employment, particularly now?

MK: Actually garment work has always been there; it's mostly for youngsters. But it's challenging too, because factories are far away from their households and line rooms. Even other job opportunities are not very accessible, given that towns and cities are far from them. Agriculture is actually an area where they can work. But how many workers can they take? We are not talking about 10 or 20; it's a huge sector we are talking about. I remember earlier a lot of people would leave the plantations and go to the North East for the harvesting period, to work extra. But after this crisis it has stopped. If you go to Vavuniya you will see that lots of plantation workers are there. That's because they went and settled there. But now you can't see much, as opportunities have thinned after COVID and the economic crisis.

But there is an alternative. If you ask, as a trade unionist I will say, instead of thinking of another sector, the plantation sector itself can be improved to have better conditions where women can engage in decent work, be paid a salary, with all the gaps in labour laws filled.

You see, whenever you go to a supermarket or any such place, there are a lot of workers of plantation origin who are working and are highly exploited. Everyone has that mentality that it's easy to cheat plantation women because they are used to the labouring mentality. It's a highly exploitative mentality.

HL: You are an activist, you have a view of the world, and you are struggling for a certain kind of world where women live a certain kind of life. What is that ideal? What is that vision? What would be the ideal conditions in which women make employment choices that are empowering for them? Particularly for women in the estate sector, what are the ideal conditions in which they make employment choices that are empowering for them? Where they're not really 'pushed into' things, but rather 'choose' what they want to do? In short, what does the ideal world look like, for you?

MK: It's a big question. To make a choice, you need to explore. If you ask me, "do you like banana or mango?" I should know what bananas taste like and mangoes taste like. Then I can make a choice saying I want this. I am a person who doesn't like to choose for the workers, they have to select but they don't have much choice. As a trade unionist I can see where they are now. I've talked about all their problems – they are not treated as workers, and their dignity is not respected. Workers are very important to any country. One example is the IMF package. You need to make money inside the country, and the plantation sector is one of the sectors that they are going to target to do so. When you say make money, it again goes back to reducing the cost. So, we are again going backwards.

The way I see it, the plantation sector needs to be given a lot of choice; that environment should be created, without separating them, where all their children can go to school. It's not just about starting a free government school and going: "Now a government school is there, we have given opportunities." The unequal development policies and unequal distribution of resources have led to unfair access to resources and opportunities especially for the marginalised plantation sector. Resource sharing is very important. When you think to develop a sector, you have to think about where they are coming from. We have to think about how to bring them up. The entire system has to be changed. They can't stay in this system. They should have a voice to raise for their own issues.

There is a lot of workplace violence against women, which no one is realising. It has become so normal. So, job security and the work environment should change totally. And I cannot emphasise enough the importance of an increase in the wage. The wage has to be able to meet the cost of living. After all, their labour is so very important to this country. In this sector I can't see any upward mobility. The women will always be tea pluckers. No one can say "they are plantation workers, they have to be here." If women need to move on to the garment sector or agriculture, that is fine, but those sectors should also then include whatever I talked about before. Their wages and their dignity is most important. A decent workplace cannot be limited to a catchphrase, it needs to actually exist wherever they go. Their basic human rights have to be protected and ensured as they are denied these in this system of semi-bondage.

HL: Any concluding thoughts?

MK: I am really concerned that trade unions must understand apart from other things, a trade union means that we need to guide the workers, we need to help the workers, and with the workers we have to mobilise and make change happen. Unless trade unions work together, this won't happen. This context is also very important because of the IMF and the economic crisis. Regarding the IMF funds, the workers have to be clear, they need to understand what the IMF is, how they will give this loan, and all that. Around 80% of the workers in our union know that they are the people repaying the IMF loan. Every citizen will repay. They are aware of that. This is not good for the plantation workers. Not only the plantation workers, but since I am talking about the plantation workers, this is going to put them in a worse place than before. That is the danger. Therefore, trade unions and whoever works with workers should understand and come together to find a way to stop these changes being introduced. Empowerment is empty without the power, i.e. workers' power to push for structural change.

HL: Thank you very much for your time and thoughts, Menaha!

Menaha Kandasamy *currently serves as an advisor to the Ceylon Plantation Workers' Union. She is also a trade union activist and researcher.*