

# Rural Women, Agrarian Capitalism and the Environment in Monaragala

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Rural women's relationship to the environment is bound with the changing nature of their livelihood activities. This, in turn, structures their activist interventions in agrarian communities. The insights in this paper are derived from a long-term engagement with female agrarian activists in the Monaragala District in the Uva Province of Sri Lanka. This includes discussions with activist leaders conducted in 2016, 2018 and 2019, with female farmers in 2018, and fieldwork conducted in December 2018.

## Women and the Environment

Various scholars have studied the connection between women and the environment (Ortner 1974; Warren 1991; Agarwal 1992; Merchant 1996). Feminist debates are particularly articulated across a variety of wide-ranging issues such as environmental justice, global climate change, water, and militarisation. Some feminists define this connection in relation to women's physical and material environment, focusing on different ways in which women and men relate to land and water.

In Monaragala, where agriculture is still the main source of livelihood for majority of its population,<sup>1</sup> female farmers relate more to chena cultivation which does not necessarily require the ownership of land,<sup>2</sup> whereas male farmers associate themselves with paddy cultivation which requires the ownership of land and the distribution of seeds, water, fertiliser, etc. (Molen 2001; Padmasiri and Gunawardana 2018).<sup>3</sup> Thus, the control of the means of production lies mainly with male farmers which is a constraint for women's engagement in paddy cultivation, as noted by Molen.

Not only in terms of access and control, but there is also a visible distinction in the way resources are used by both men and women. As noted by Bina Agarwal, in relation to land, women have more environmentally sound use of resources (Agarwal 1994, pp. 37-38). For example, Agarwal refers to the Chipko Movement in which women protested against the axing of the Dongri-Paintoli oak forest as the protection and the regeneration of the forest had a direct impact on their subsistence economy (*ibid*). Agarwal notes that in the hills of Uttar Pradesh, men were engaged in cultivating fruit trees for cash while women planted trees for subsistence. As such, the forest was a source of fuel, fodder, wood, fibre, and fertiliser for women. Unlike women, men favoured the new development scheme based on its potential cash benefit. However, women feared that the loss of the forest would make their journey for resources harder and that the new schemes of cash benefit would flow to men alone, limiting their access to resources (*ibid*). Using this example, Agarwal stresses that the priorities of men and women significantly affect their patterns of using the land and this gendered division of labour also determines the gendered relationship with the environment and activism (*ibid*).

The pattern in which men focus more on the economic profitability of rural livelihoods is also visible in the Monaragala district, particularly in relation to the methods used by men and women in agriculture. As noted by a prominent activist based in Wellawaya, Monaragala, there is a huge tendency among men to use agrochemicals and pesticides to increase their crop and productivity to derive more profit, whereas women prefer organic farming. She connects this with the fact that women engage in agriculture mainly to provide the

family with produce that is “free of poison and toxins” (*wasawisa nathi*), while men farm cash crops to receive a high income (Interview, 09 December 2018). Another activist from Maligawila in Monaragala noted that female farmers produce first for their household, next for the village, and then for the country, emphasising that they produce mainly for subsistence. Only if there is surplus will it be sold to others in the local community before accessing the larger markets (Interview, 09 December 2018). The same observation was confirmed by female farmers (Interview, 09 December 2018). These farmers were involved in organic home-gardening in a two-acre land which included cultivations such as long bean, black-eyed peas (cowpea) and peanuts. However, it is important to note that the use of agrochemicals and pesticides is also linked with the prevalence of the Chronic Kidney Disease of unknown etiology (CKDu) among men in that area (Interview, 09 December 2018).

## The Sugar Industry and Women’s Agrarian Struggles

With the liberalisation of the economy in 1978, following the UNP government coming to power, women’s struggles in the rural economy took a turn. The government promoted the private sector so that the privatisation of capital became one of the main functions of the state (Shanmugaratnam 1987). Monaragala was one of the main geographic areas subject to these changes with the introduction of Agricultural Promotion Zones (APZ) in the early 1980s. Foreign investment began penetrating the agrarian economy in this area in 1982 with Booker International cultivating sugar cane in Pelwatte, followed by Mehta International’s acquisition of land including the primary forest of 12,000 acres known as Haddawa<sup>4</sup> for the same industry (Abeysekera 1991, p. 6).

A significant transformation took place in the socio-economic structure of the Monaragala district,<sup>5</sup> altering the access to resources, labour geography, and the status of the peasant farmer. This included the introduction of sugar cane, a new cash crop cultivated with intense use of agrochemicals. Former independent farmers thus became wage-labourers in plots of land allocated to them by the company which owns the sugar factory. The farmers had to sell their produce back to the same company at a price determined by the company. These contributed to changes in the traditional lifestyle of the people based on chena and paddy cultivation

(Interview, 09 December 2018; Abeysekera 1991; Gunewardena 2010). The repercussions of these changes continue to affect the livelihoods of agrarian communities in the area even today. Gunewardena has argued that, before introducing the agrarian reforms in the mid-1980s, there was greater gender parity among subsistence communities in Monaragala (2010). However, following the introduction of commercial sugar production, the role and agency of women, both within the household and society, were undermined. Most women became landless because of the Pelwatte Sugar Company (PSC) taking over the state land where they cultivated chena crops.<sup>6</sup>

The introduction of commercial sugar production further led to a new wave of the commodification of labour which in turn modified social structures and paved the way for the emergence of new forms of gender disparities and dispossession of land and labour. From 1984 onwards, people had protested against this proposed project and land acquisition (Abeysekera, 1991, p. 6). The impact on women began when Mehta International, without prior notification, demarcated the boundaries of the allocated land which led to the destruction of coconut, lime, banana, mango, papaya, breadfruit, and jackfruit trees and plants which contributed to the subsistence economy (Interview, 09 December 2018; Abeysekera 1991: p. 6; Gunewardena 2010).

With breadfruit and jackfruit trees in the garden, we had no issue in feeding children... The land-grab affected women because men were not at home. They went to work in the sugar cane plantation as workers and it was women who were at home. Children were asking for food and books for school from their mothers. Mothers could not provide a nutritious meal for children (Interview, 09 December 2018).

Abeysekera notes that the destruction of the home garden had another element. That is, it was women who had planted and tended these trees. Women utilised the money earned from selling the produce in local markets. She notes that this income supported the household economy. The loss of this income marked not only the loss of cash but also the social independence which they enjoyed as an extension of that income (1991, p. 6).

Further, focusing more on chena cultivation, Gunewardena notes that these women not only lost the means of livelihood and land as a result of not having title deeds, but they were also drawn into the

field labour force of the Pelwatte Sugar Cane (PSC) company. This was mainly because of household poverty and indebtedness. This new commodification of labour has also created new gender-stratified labour hierarchies which led to the creation of new forms of gender disparities. Though crucial to the PSC Company, women's labour was categorised as unskilled, unproductive, and secondary as well as subject to male supervision. These labour processes have also affected the power dynamics of the local social context (2010).

It is in response to these changes in access to resources and labour geography that the activism of the villagers was manifested in the form of political confrontation with the state. The Community Education Centre in Malabe worked with the Uva Wellassa Farmer Women's Organisation to mobilise mainly female farmers in the mid-1980s against the land grab (Interview, 09 December 2018). Organisations such as the Progressive Women's Front had also worked with women in Monaragala. Female farmers have directly challenged the workmen who came to survey and demarcate the land by standing for hours in the sun and rain and obstructing them from carrying out their tasks. They challenged the police by refusing to move from the project site. They had also been part of local delegations that met state officials and were vocal in these meetings (Abeysekera 1991).

By the time the Pelwatte Sugar Company was established, over 17,600 acres of land which included 100 water tanks in the area had been acquired for sugar production (Gunawardena 2010, p. 378; Interview, 09 December 2018). Women had protested in 1986, taking their children along with them, demanding proper compensation for their land, higher wages for their labour and a good price for their produce (sugar cane). There had been several intimidating tactics used, particularly against female activists and the peasant community in general. For example, the office of the Uva Wellassa Women's Organisation in Buttala was torched in retaliation (Interview, 09 December 2018).

In this struggle, the relationship of women to the environment and its reformulation is connected with protecting the subsistence economy and ensuring of a viable home economy for their households, including the protection of livelihood activities of men. Women perceived the environment as a means of providing a livelihood, hence the entry of corporate capital and its commodification of the land was a threat to this. In this sense, it is similar to the Chipko Movement in that women's activist interventions intended to

protect and preserve both subsistence economy and the environment. However, what is different is that in the Chipko Movement, women succeeded in their struggle, whereas women in Monaragala did not. On the contrary, the sugar industry changed the political economy and labour geography of the area (Gunawardena 2010). Women who became wage workers now had to use agrochemicals (Interview, 09 December 2018) and engage in an industry that was deforesting the land.

Even today, the struggles of women in the area are still directed at mitigating the impact of the establishment of the sugar industry. As noted earlier, one of the major problems faced by the agrarian community in Monaragala today is the spread of CKDu (Interview, 09 December 2018). This disease is a serious public health problem in Sri Lanka and visible mainly among the rural, male farmers in poverty driven areas with hot climates (WHO, 2016, p. 7). The activists associate the use of agrochemicals by men for increased productivity with the spread of CKDu among them. Further, both activists who were interviewed linked the CKDu to the sugar industry established in the 1980s.

Pelwatte has the highest number of CKDu patients of the area. The sugar factory has been here for thirty-odd years. Agrochemicals have been used indiscriminately by farmers [men], without regulation, for thirty-odd years to increase the produce (Interview, 09 December 2018).

The activities of the Uva Wellassa Women's Organisation and Vikalpani Women's Federation promote organic farming and home-gardening among women in Monaragala to expand their livelihood options and healthy lifestyle. This is also conducted as a means of fighting against the spread of CKDu. Further, women are also still re-negotiating and re-establishing their role as wage-workers and home-gardeners as a result of the loss of chena land and home gardens because of the establishment of the Pelwatte Sugar Company (Interview, 09 December 2018). These have also led to changes in women's relationship to the environment and activism which will be discussed next.

## **New Forms of Agrarian Capital and Reformulation of Women and the Environment**

Even today, agrarian capital is a significant presence in Monaragala in the form of multinational companies such as Dole and local companies such as Nelna.

These are large-scale agricultural companies producing fruits for both the local and foreign market. Other than these companies, the Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project has also exerted a negative impact on the livelihood activities of the villages. As noted by an activist, even though the area is green and lush, the locals do not enjoy the fruit of the soil. “It is this big business which has come from outside and invested in this land which reaps the benefits. This is also a reason this is the poorest region of the country” (Interview, 09 December 2018).

The presence of companies such as Dole and Nelna have created many issues in relation to land grabbing and ownership. Both companies have also been charged with encroaching on forest land (Bandara 2018). If they do not own or have access to land, women are compelled to sell their labour as a means of livelihood. This is a common scenario in Monaragala at the moment. There are also reports of labour rights issues and irregularities in payments as most workers are in precarious contexts, such as agency-hired employment. For example, there are reports of a lack of worker protection at the Dole company (Sanjeeva 2016c; Sanjeeva 2016a). Yet, women work in this company because of poverty and lack of many job opportunities in the area.

A female worker states that, “I went to Dole to make ends meet for my children” (Sanjeeva, 2016c). Especially after reaching 55 years of age, women’s waged work is made casual as that of agency-hired employees (Interview, 09 December 2018). Padma, a widow with three children, further described the strenuousness of the work with few breaks and harsh conditions such as the availability of a single toilet for five hectares of land, and lunch break being 15 minutes in one of the multinational farms. This work was in addition to her household work which requires her to be up at 3 a.m. to cook food, be ready for pickup by the company transport at 5 a.m. to begin work at 6.30 a.m.

There are reports which indicate that the use of large amounts of agrochemicals in the Dole farm causes even banana leaves to feel different in the morning because of the spraying of agrochemicals at night (Sanjeeva, 2016c). There are also reports of female workers having health complications due to the unsafe use of agrochemicals and fertilisers on these farms. One female worker had to amputate a toe due to an adverse reaction to toxins:

Initially there was a blister on my second toe of the right leg. The next day I could not move the foot

and it had swelled... In the hospital, they did not amputate the toe at first but the following day, as the next toe became blue, they did. The doctors told me it was due to toxins entered my body. There are toxins everywhere in the farm. On the banana tree leaves, banana stalks everywhere (Sanjeeva, 2016c).

Women are also forced to take part in non-environmentally friendly activities along with these exploitative labour conditions and the intensity of work. In this form of agriculture, women use agrochemicals which further harms the ecology of the area. This seems to deviate from the standpoint of their initial activism in the 1980s, in which sustainability of the environment was significantly linked to their livelihoods. Not working in these farms is not an option to them with the limited job opportunities and high level of poverty in the area (Sanjeeva, 2016c). The absence of other options has restricted environmentally friendly farming methods and traditional ecological practices.

According to an interviewee, there are reports of women going back to work in the Pelwatte Sugar Company even after the death of their husbands due to CKDu (Interview, 3 May 2016). The connection women in Monaragala had with the environment has changed and there is a reformulation of their engagement with the environment. In such instances, the interventions of the women’s organisations have also changed. The same organisations that mobilised women against the sugar industry cannot now ask women to not work for corporates. These companies provide job opportunities for women throughout the year which are unavailable elsewhere. What these women’s organisations do now is to organise workers as best as they can, forming them into small groups and mobilising them to lobby with the company for better and safer employment conditions and wages (Interview, 22 February 2019).

However, the situation is different for women who own land. They have the option of transitioning from wage labour to a subsistence economy in which they engage in home gardening. Padma has worked at a commercial farm in Monaragala for three years. She has given up the job to cultivate her home-garden. Now she does organic farming and produces for her own use. She is able to sell the surplus from which she makes a fair income and is content with her work. Padma states that, “now I have freedom. I work at my will” (Interview, 09 December 2018).

Cases such as Padma’s illustrate another side of

how women re-negotiate their relationship with the environment. This shows a more ecological approach to the political activism by women like Padma who promote organic and traditional farming methods which do not require the use of agrochemicals. This contributes to the larger framework of activism against the neoliberal, profit-oriented agriculture industry which is monopolised by a handful of multinational companies.

A pragmatic use of resources leading to sustainability and protection of the environment is the main stance promoted by the two activists interviewed, who represent two organisations working with women in agrarian communities in the Monaragala district. Further, as organisations, they lobby against corporate capital flowing into the area as they believe these companies are driven by profit at the expense of people and the environment (Interview, 09 December 2018) which also shapes the relationship women have with the environment.

## Notes

- \* Buddhima Padmasiri is a Lecturer in the Department of Social Studies, Open University of Sri Lanka
- 1 In 2019, it was reported that 48.6% of the population in the district engaged in agricultural activities (Department of Census and Statistics, 2019).
  - 2 A method of cultivation where shifting cultivation is used by clearing the fields through 'slash-and-burn'. Hence this is also known as 'slash-and-burn' or 'shifting cultivation'. Chena cultivation in many instances is conducted by clearing state land (Molen, 2001).
  - 3 In Sri Lankan agrarian communities, the relationship between women and land is complex as the Land Development Ordinance and the Land Grants (Special Provisions) Act contain an order of succession that

## Conclusion

The most significant negotiation with the environment by the rural women in Monaragala took place following the agrarian reforms introduced in the mid-1980s. The impact of those reforms still affects the livelihood activities and decisions taken by women in Monaragala. Later, other corporate capital in the area contributed to women's renegotiation of their relationship with the environment. It is evident that the changes of agrarian capital and means of livelihood contributed to women's reformulation of their relationship with the environment. This was based on the economic standing of the family and the availability of other resources such as land.

- prefers male over female relatives. The land is a primary issue for women in agriculture in terms of equality, income, and decision-making power.
- 4 Environmentalists were alarmed that denuding of the Haddawa forest would affect the groundwater supply of the region and would have grave ecological consequences (Abeysekara 1991, p. 6).
  - 5 Abeysekara notes that around 625 families in 23 villages were estimated to be affected by the proposed reforms (1991, p. 6).
  - 6 On the importance of land to women, in relation to women's equality, livelihood, agency, social status etc., see Agarwal 1994; Padmasiri and Gunawardana 2018.

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