

## WORKING WOMEN IN SRI LANKA

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Sandya Hewamanne, 2007. *Stitching Identities in a Free Trade Zone: Gender and Politics in Sri Lanka* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 274 pp + index £39.00 ISBN: 978-0-8122-4045-0

Caitrin Lynch, 2007. *Juki Girls, Gourd Girls: Gender and Cultural Politics in Sri Lanka's Global Garment Industry*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press (2007). 288 pp \$55.00/£29.50 (Hardcover) ISBN: 978-0-8014-4556-9; xxi + 281 pp \$19.95/£9.95 (Paperback) ISBN: 978-0-8014-7362-3

Sri Lanka was a forerunner in implementing non-liberal economic policies in 1977, which led to the setting up a FTZ as early as 1978. Subsequently a country-wide garment industry programme was set-up to extend the "developmental benefits" of the global garment industry into rural communities of Sri Lanka. Yet the ways in which the global garment industry production facilities were adopted and promoted was not merely a response to economic imperatives. There were also political and cultural processes at play, with are brought to our attention through the insightful books by Sandya Hewamanne and Caitrin Lynch. These authors show how the activities of the global garment industry have to be scrutinized for the ways in which they shape and influence the social, gender and cultural politics.

The neo-liberal and open market policies adopted by the Sri Lankan government from 1977 onwards also inadvertently ushered in an era of political turmoil, youth insurrection, violence and an ethnic war. Lynch points out how the political response to this state of affairs was to focus on how modernity could be reconciled with cultural integrity, i.e. "modernity with the cultural turn." Since women are frequently deployed as symbols of the nation, Lynch shows how the Garment Factory Programme (GFP) was promoted as means through which the moral and physical discipline of capitalism could be transmitted to the villages while protecting the good name of working women. This, as the author shows, was crucial for local subjects to make sense of global processes. Hewamanne shows similar processes at play. She underlines how the quest for Sri Lanka's development and modernity is

expressed through moral and cultural tropes of Sinhala-Buddhism even within the FTZs. Many of her respondents, which involved factory managers, parents, factory nurses, government officials, NGO activists, and women workers, hoped for a "development and modernity with moral reins in tact" (Hewamanne 2007, p. 13). Because both authors zone in upon these cultural discourses, they show how they 1) affect the shaping of women's sense of self, and 2) shape the spaces within which their quest for autonomous agency and negotiation of alternative identities in their everyday lives are sometimes circumscribed by these discourses.

Hewamanne and Lynch hone in on multi-scalar sites for their fieldwork, which was carried out for extensive periods of time where both authors were fortunate to access established garment factories during their fieldwork period. For Hewamanne, the shop floor, boarding houses, formal parties, informal social outings, and village homes are the spaces for critical interventions. Lynch similarly zones in on the ways in which production is localized by engaging with the national politics of the GFP, paternalist politics of the workplace and most crucially an understanding the panoptic qualities of village communities as sites of surveillance and control. Consequently, both books are ethnographically rich with many illuminative illustrations showing how women workers creatively twist and subvert their (sometimes) exploitative, sexually fraught and socially stigmatized jobs and living environments.

Through the numerous examples used by these feminist authors, we are shown how women are frequently deployed as symbols of the nation. Lynch shows how the GFP was promoted as means through which the moral and physical discipline of capitalism could be transmitted to the villages while protecting the "good name" of working women. Even as FTZ workers are stigmatized as "loose women", Hewamanne show how they too ironically express loyalty to dominant cultural discourses. Therefore, even though she records the many acts and moments of disruption to middle-class notions of "respectability" and underline how they gain



an oppositional consciousness, they are largely rendered meaningless when in their village spaces. Hence pointing to moments of “ambivalent empowerment” in their working and everyday lives.

The larger point which both authors point to through their research is that by depicting (largely Sinhala-Buddhist culture) as authentically located and morally pure, the class and gender divisions which exist within the country tend to be obscured. The social dynamics which emerge from discourses of purity and authenticity mattered within the factory floor because gendered concerns regarding respectable working girls and norms of femininity get invoked to discipline and instil managerial paternalism, which in turn deploy gendered social hierarchies. Both these thoughtful contributions hence uncover how the stigma of factory women workers needs to be understood for its complexities. By using the prism of cross-cutting social, cultural, economic, and political contexts, both authors shows how the attempt “to make economic globalization consistent with Sri Lankan cultural practices” (Lynch 2007, p. 241-242) ended-up being a crucial attribute of Sri Lanka’s economic modernization process. Yet the working and daily lives of factory working women also highlight how their identities evolve and are discursively constructed into creative subject positions where ambivalences over nation, modernity and globalization get played. As such we are made to understand the complex and uneven ways in which factory working women’s experiences are neither “nimble fingers” nor “powered to choose” – i.e. they are neither passive victims nor necessarily empowered in sustained ways (Elson and Pearson 1981, Kabeer 2000, respectively). Their studies,

therefore, raise important and interesting questions about how we understand the geographies of labour and control.

My only quibble with these thorough and engaging texts was the omission of a historical analysis of Sri Lanka’s labour movement and how this is likely to have borne upon the very issues which that both authors underscores. Jayawardena’s (1972) analysis shows how the country’s labour history was enmeshed in the (cultural) politics of gender, (ethno-) nation and modernity, which is likely to have a bearing many decades later upon the construction of factory working women’s subjectivities, too. Historically situated analysis would of course have implications for general social science debates. Paying more attention to the historico-geographical context may have nuanced these already thorough and illuminating studies even further.

### References

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Kabeer, Naila, 2000 *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka*, London: Verso Books.

Elson, Diane and Ruth Pearson, 1981, “Nimble Fingers Make Cheap Workers: An Analysis of Women’s Employment in Third World Export Manufacturing,” *Feminist Review* 7:87-107.

\* This review is an amended and shorter version of individual book reviews done for *Progress in Human Geography* and *Political Geography* respectively. ■

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