

WOMEN IN THE LABOUR MOVEMENT: 'HERSTORY' OF RESISTANCE

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Introduction

The growth of capitalism under the aegis of colonialism changed the old social order and gave birth to new classes and new strata. Under such circumstances, to foreign and local capitalists and landowners, women were the cheapest source of labor for plantations, agriculture and industry.

It was with the development of capitalism in a colonial or semi colonial context, that women were to become available as potentially the largest and cheapest reserve army of labor. Traditions and practices which restricted women's mobility or enforced their seclusion were thus detrimental to capitalism in its search for cheap 'free' labor. Women's labor was also crucial in the plantation sector (tea, rubber, coconut, sugar etc) and in farm and domestic agriculture in these countries. [Jayawardena, 1986: 8-9]

Colonial policy as well as prevailing cultural norms thus resulted in a "separating out" of women in Sri Lanka. Class and ethnic divisions altered what it meant to be a woman and what kind of social expectations guided or compelled work choices.

Women who came from the lower strata did essential if not low status work such as tea plucking. Tamil women in the tea plantation sector have been seen as cheap labor and this perception is compounded by patriarchal assumptions that domestic labor is the exclusive responsibility of women. This has resulted in a sexual division of labor for women in which they occupy the lower paid jobs and bear the brunt of the double burden - caring for their families as well as working outside the home (Foster, 1996).

The inter-relationships of class, gender and ethnicity in the creation of a sub proletariat of women workers has not been adequately studied in the history of women's resistance movements in Sri Lanka. Here I venture out, to 'reread', through the lives of some women activists, the 'herstoriography' of women's labour activism from the position of subalterneity, i. e. history from below.

Struggles of working women

Women who constituted the surplus of labor were those from the underclasses who were deprived of the privilege of education, forming the backbone of the colonial economy. The most exploited group among them worked on tea and rubber plantations with wages the lowest in any economic sector; their literacy and educational levels were the lowest in the country and they also recorded a phenomenally high percentage of maternal and infant mortality. There was a sizeable unskilled

workforce of women employed in factories: coconut fibre mills, tea plucking and graphite sorting. [Jayawardena, 1986: 131]. There was among them also an underpaid and overworked group of domestic servants who worked as semi slaves. Peasant women worked as wage labor, share croppers or family labor in the countryside and were often at the receiving end of exploitative local owners.

Women came to the forefront of trade union activism during the general strike of 1923. A.E Goonesinhe was backed by militant red clad urban working class women in every strike, procession, demonstration and rallies organised by the Ceylon Labour Union. They took an active interest in all working class struggles to win their democratic rights.

Also central to the struggles launched by women were crucial issues of reforms with regard to principles of equality and non discrimination, franchise rights, education, property rights and women's political participation in decision making.

In the face of resistance to granting of universal suffrage to women, vehemently opposed by conservatives, A.E Goonesinhe advocated votes for women on the same basis as for men. He saw the extension of the vote to women as a

natural and inevitable next step to manhood suffrage. His argument was that just as much as illiterate male labourers were intelligent enough to exercise the vote wisely, the women too could be expected to act in the same way. [Wijesekera, 1995: 14]

Militant women in the movement - Isabella Hamy

An early firebrand at the height of Goonesinhe- led worker struggles was Emaliya Hamy of Hunupitiya, a member of the women's volunteer corps. Other pioneer women activists included Pavistina Hamy, who worked at Hayleys and Emmy Nona, a worker at Harrison and Crosfield, both British firms. Little is known of these exceptionally courageous women who stand as largely silent figures in the annals of history. As Kumari Jayawardena writes,

the best known of these working class militants, however was Isabella Hamy of Wanathamulla, Colombo, a woman who fought for the rights of the working class at the height of colonial rule, when trade unions were illegal and exceptional courage was needed to join worker agitations. [Jayawardena, 1986: 132]

Isabella Hamy was an articulate public speaker who participated in the trade union movement of the 1920s. She won the admiration of

Union leader A E Goonesinhe. "During the 1929 Tramcar strike, she organised demonstrations, participated in numerous meetings and processions and was at the forefront of this famous struggle". [Ibid: 133] Tenacious and full of passionate zeal, her rise to popularity was swift, and she was a formidable political persona who rigorously canvassed for A E Goonesinhe during the State Council Elections of 1931.

Ponsinahamy

Ediraweera Arachchige Ponsinahamy was a notable figure in the anti imperialist, anti colonial workers' struggles who fought against oppressive institutional measures adopted during British colonialism. Growing up in Mariyakade, Ponsinahamy became acutely aware of the degrading work conditions women were subjected to and was uncompromising in defending the just demands of the workers to better their living standards. She was daring, tough and aggressive in the face of arbitrary abuse of power. She received no formal education. Ponsinahamy was clear in vision, eloquent in speech and fierce and utterly unafraid in battle. (Personal communication: Kumarasiri, 1996) During the Tramcar strike in 1929, she lay across the path preventing the trams from running. [Dassanayake. 1981: 12] Often alluded to as "Veera" Ponsinahamy, she was held in high esteem and treated with a great deal of dignity and respect.

As a crusader of worker rights, she championed the cause of working class women in their struggles for equal wages and improved working conditions. She took pride in the honor of being the only woman in the delegation sent to Russia to commemorate International Workers Day in 1967. [Ibid: 13] She faced police harassment and violence during the general strike of 1923 and became a victim of state persecution when she was sentenced to three months imprisonment in 1947. On Independence Day, she was granted an amnesty and was freed along with others in the movement and, once again was to enter the political arena.

Maimoon

Lean yet dynamic and daring, Maimoon was an active Muslim woman who developed ideological leanings towards the Communist Party. At the height of the volatile issue of the "Sinhala Policy" espoused by the nationalist SLFP, the Communist Party, organised a series of meetings against the proposed Act. As opposed to the "Sinhala Only" slogan, Communist Party and LSSP strongly advocated "parity of status". Maimoon had by then become a staunch Communist Party loyalist who stood in the audience with others where a meeting in support of the CP stand was being held. H G S Ratnaweera was addressing the crowd, when a Buddhist monk, obviously provoked, started heckling the speaker. Maimoon walked upto him, held him by his robe and pulled him down admonishing him to remain silent. Outraged by this provocation, and humiliated by this offensive behavior, angry hostile mobs stormed the meeting, assaulting the activists and supporters of the CP. [Personal Communication, Kumarasiri: 1996] Originally from Wekanda, Slave Island, Maimoon displayed a

penchant for fearlessness, aggressiveness and eloquence in speech. As a regular platform speaker, she attracted large crowds. She had received no education but developed oratorical skills and thrilled the crowds with wit and humour. Many women like Maimoon had no formal training in schools.

Catherine Perera

A militant socialist of the fiery type, Catherine Perera began her trade union activism at the Wellawatte Weaving Mill. Creating social awareness of the degrading working conditions and pushing for remedies was the primary task undertaken by more politically committed women like Catherine Perera. Mounting pressure from worker agitations culminated in the United Front take over of the Wellawatte Weaving Mill. She was an ardent LSSP activist who actively took part in several protest marches and pickets to garner support not only for localised worker demands but international solidarity. Women of Catherine's mettle fiercely resisted the police repression at the "Hands off Cuba" protest staged outside the American Embassy in 1967. [Dassanayake: 1988] Attractive in her youth, Catherine was dispassionate about family ties and bonding. Her ideals always came first. She held to her convictions with courage and defiance.

Graphite mine workers

Women were initially recruited into the graphite industry for 'soft' job categories as they were perceived as physically 'weak' and therefore possessing an inherent inability for performing such tasks. [Weerasinghe, 1988: 5] Here too, traditional gender ideology has penetrated into existing structures. The women in the mining sector, however, were a highly politically conscious group radicalised by left activism in the early 1950s and politicised through their involvement in worker agitations and class struggles. They were among the best organised groups in the 1953 Hartal and displayed courage and militancy in the face of repression and frontal attack. [Ibid: 7] Their committed involvement in the successive campaigns paid dividends when the industry was nationalised in 1970, [Ibid: 7]; when they formed the Sri Lanka Graphite Workers Union. The subsequent seething labour discontent, with the opening of the market economy in the late seventies, burst forth in a series of disturbances, sudden work stoppages, strikes and pickets, against the soaring cost of living, closing down of factories and privatisation. They formed a network of unions and extended their solidarity and support for just demands. The 1986 nurses strike was strongly backed by the graphite workers union. [Ibid: 7]

Plantations

Women constitute over 50% of the workforce in the plantations, the biggest recorded in any sector. Women have been especially encouraged for lower paid jobs as tea pluckers because they were seen as an unintelligent and abundant source of cheap labor.

Even today women are not given an equal wage for the same

work that man is given. While the margin had narrowed from a 25% wage difference 150 years ago to 10% in the 1980s, blatant discrimination still exists. The wage is also dependent on the number of days worked during the month". [Atkin, 1995: 8]

Female illiteracy in the plantations is the highest for any sector and compares unfavorably with the literacy rates for other women. Moreover, men, as brothers, husbands and fathers exercise control over plantation women's income,

since the plantation runs as a system of social control:

The colonists designed the plantations on the basis of hierarchies which made use of other patterns of social control embedded at different levels of the social field, such as caste".

[Foster.1996: 4]

Women workers often do not have time to liaise with trade unions; the hegemonic CWC is basically a male enclave where women continue to serve male interests. Given the dynamics of the oversupply of labor, women's resistance to change gender power relations, transform existing hierarchies and develop alternative equitable development model will echo through their union activism. All in all, the social construction of gender, sexual division of labor and unequal power relations have been significant contributory factors to the low participation of women in unions.

Conclusion

The quest for class liberation historically had filtered through the existing patriarchal social structures. The workers movement could not move away from its essentialist focus on political economy to the larger issues of social marginalisation, violence, sexuality and exploitation.

The right to unionise and engage in organised democratic action has been the most contentious and intractable issue facing the trade union movement today. The democratic right to participate in worker agitations and make representations at the national level is

not seen in three most vital sectors of the economy - migrant workers, the agriculture sector and women in Industrial Zones. Migrant and peasant women have been worse affected as often their relative powerlessness has been perceived as a drawback which deterred them from addressing issues specific to them; from issues of sexual violence, to worker employer relations, the right to minimum wages, payment of cash at regular intervals, maximum hours of work and social security and welfare benefits. While the state proclaims itself as the moral protector and guardian of the citizens, its commitment to upholding domestic legislation and constitutional safeguards in conformity with international norms has been discriminatory. What is indeed necessary is progressive legislation that enjoys wide legitimacy and acceptability among workers, that can radically transform work relations, a reality that still eludes women.

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JAIL FOR PICKETTING

Comrade Ponsinahamy, a leading militant worker from Suduwella who has been in the forefront of many a working class struggle, goes to jail this week for three months. She was charged in connection with the last June strikes when she was picketing outside Liptons Ltd.

And this is not the first time either that she is going to jail. One year ago she was imprisoned for three months for a similar offence in connection with a strike at Brown & Co. Speaking at a Galle Face Rally held to greet her and 32 other comrades going to jail, she exhorted the workers not to be down-hearted but to strengthen their class organisations still further so that when the working class leaders came out of jail, they would be greeted by a powerful and united trade union movement in this country.

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