

“IF THEY ALLOW US WE WILL FIGHT”: STRAINS OF CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG WOMEN WORKERS IN THE KATUNAYAKE FREE TRADE ZONE

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The cultural ideologies that had previously prevailed in Sinhala Buddhist society were transformed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Varied and often locally specific bodies of cultural beliefs and practices were incorporated, reworked and transformed. A neo-traditional Sinhala Buddhist ideology developed, which was fashioned under the leadership of a newly emergent Western-educated and male-dominated moral elite. Within this syncretic, but never wholly unified cultural formation, gender stereotypes were constructed through an admixture of local patriarchal values and British Victorian ideals. The emergent middle class, which included not only Buddhists but also Hindus and Christians, began to project an ideal of women as “passive, subordinate and confined to nurturing and servicing roles within and outside the home” (Jayaweera 1990:8). The importation of Victorian ideals also contributed to new expectations that women, elite women in particular, should be protected within the fold of their kinship group and should exhibit “... The same aura of passive ‘feminine’ serenity as women of their class in Britain at the time” (Risseeuw 1988:52). This understanding of the female’s expected role was subsequently disseminated among other sections and classes within Sri Lankan society. By the 1950s, this ideology was widely accepted among the middle class and those who aspired to join it, even though women made up a significant component of the labor force.

The female roles defined and projected in this ideology—which idealized women as full-time housewives, mothers and homemakers—were seriously challenged after 1977, when a new program of economic liberalization replaced the previous socialist, state-controlled economic policies. The United National Party, which came to power at this time, vigorously promoted free-market policies and thereby opened the economy to foreign investment. As a major part of this process of structural adjustment, Sri Lanka established its first Free Trade Zone (FTZ) in Katunayake in 1978. Most of the industries established within this industrial enclave have been garment factories that have recruited large numbers of unmarried young rural women to work as machine operators.

This paper analyzes the conflict and confluence of neo-traditional cultural values and capitalist work culture in the consciousness of these women, in their capacity not only as wage workers but also as young, unmarried women who will eventually return to their native villages. Aihwa Ong (1991:280) has argued that “workers’ struggles and resistances are often not based upon class interests or class solidarity, but comprise individual and even covert acts against various forms of control.” We aim to show that, while some acts of protest are indeed spontaneous and uncoordinated, other actions clearly show the tome of cultural tradition, while others again

contain a strong class dimension. Many of these female garment workers have developed a proletarian consciousness that informs their collective and individual resistance at the work place and in the urban living environment. Our account is based on ethnographic research conducted by Hewamanne in the Katunayake FTZ in 1998. The data derive principally from direct observation and informal interactions with more than 70 working women, and formal interviews conducted with 13 of these women.

The Katunayake Free Trade Zone

The Katunayake Free Trade Zone manufactures products solely for the export market. It has attracted foreign investment with a range of free trade incentives such as tax holidays, use of subsidized land buildings, reduced custom duties, and unrestricted duty-free import of machinery and raw material. By advertising the availability of a 600,000 strong workforce of educated young men and women, free trade has also been promoted. In practice, more than 90 percent of the jobs created have been filled by rural women, who have little opportunity to secure employment elsewhere but whose reputation for being both docile and nimblefingered makes them attractive to employers in the FTZ. As Janice Fine and Matthew Howard (1995:26) describe their situation, these workers are “delivered from the arms of village patriarchy into the waiting embrace of industrial patriarchy... [and] are seen as the ideal work force for Sri Lanka’s low-wage garment and manufacturing industries.” Most of the women are young; 70 percent are between the ages of 17 and 25, and 90 percent are younger than 30 (Fine and Howard 1995:27). According to a survey conducted by the Asia Partnership for Human Development (Rosa 1990), many of the women are also relatively well educated, the majority having reached at least the tenth grade at school.

Garment workers are paid a monthly salary of about Rs. 2500 (\$50). Supplemented by overtime benefits paid at one-and-a-half times the normal hourly rate, most workers are able to earn between Rs. 3000 and 4000 a month. Most manage to send a small amount home to their parents, yet they find it hard to meet their own living expenses. Some say that after paying for their room and board they don’t even have enough left over to make use of public transport. One remedy has been to cut down on consumption, either of food or medicine. Overtime work is often required and, from the women’s perspective, is often a necessity.

The women all agree that the work itself is difficult and demanding. Operating the machines is taxing to both mind and body, and is endured only for the sake of the wage it brings. Work in the assembly lines is felt to be damaging to the eyes, ears and lungs, and

many workers suffer from ache and pains as a result of continuously standing or sitting at machines for ten hours a day. Industrial safety standards set by the Sri Lankan Board of Investment are often ignored which leads to complaints of overcrowding, poor lighting and problems with temperature and ventilation.

Women usually have to sign a contract of employment containing terms that clearly violate labour laws as well a human, civil and constitutional rights. The following are some of the terms commonly found in these contracts: "When you are requested for overtime work, you shall agree with it"; "You shall not form or join any group in this establishment without written approval of the management"; "If you engage in moral/sexual misconduct with any of your companions you and he/she shall agree to leave"; "If you are a female employee, you shall agree to resign when and if you get married" (Fine and Howard 1995:26). The use of language that implies both capitalist and patriarchal constraints display the prevailing attitude among both government officials and factory managers, most of whom are men. It is expected that women should be grateful for their jobs, whatever the conditions under which they are required to work.

Many of the women's complaints are linked to the high constraints imposed on them by managers who are striving to meet production targets. They are given little time to make use of the restrooms, and are subjected to both physical and verbal abuse when they fail to reach their assigned targets. Threats of public humiliation induce some of them to forego their lunch or tea breaks in order to maintain the required production rate. Purportedly for the sake of discipline and productivity, the women are forbidden to talk to one another during working hours, and those who are caught in conversation are severely reprimanded. The only time they get to talk freely is during their half-hour lunch break, but even then frequent rotations impede the formation of long-term friendships.

It is not only working conditions but also housing conditions that make the lives of working women in Katunayake difficult. There are no state facilities and very few factory facilities to house the women who flock to the FTZ each year. The inhabitants of villages in the area around the FTZ have built makeshift lines of rooms that they rent to the women but these don't conform to any health or sanitation standards. The boarding houses are often overcrowded, with six to eight women sharing the same room. Clean water, sanitation and cooking facilities are scarce. Women frequently complain about the high rent their landlords charge for such places.

In addition, the women have to suffer the stigma attached to working in the FTZ and living away from their natal families. Although the neo-traditional ideal of gender roles was seriously challenged in its practical application by the introduction of economic liberalization, its moral code has been maintained and even intensified. The FTZ has necessitated the congregation of large numbers of unsupervised young women in a relatively small area. This new scenario shocked people who were deeply attached to neo-traditional cultural ideals. Since women working in the FTZ were clearly not under the moral authority of any kinsmen and seemed to be moving freely about in an unregulated environment, many people believed that they must be women of "easy virtue." The area came to be known as "*ganika*

puraya" (city of prostitutes). This characterization led to frequent sexual harassment and the formation of exploitative sexual relationships, both of which contributed to the further oppression of women workers.

Production in the FTZ imposes fundamental changes on the ways these new factory workers live their lives. Working and living in a space "colonized by capitalist production relations" (Wolf 1997:x) they undergo rapid changes in their social, moral and cognitive circumstances and attitudes. It is the changes in their consciousness, and the interaction among the various factors that bring about those changes, that provide the central themes of our analysis.

As stated earlier, on the one hand, working conditions that allow very little friendships among workers at the work place itself. On the other hand, conditions in the boarding houses do provide them an opportunity to reflect upon their circumstances, and this has helped them to forge lasting bonds with one another. Living away from family control and enjoying extensive peer contacts, they become aware of the irrelevance of caste and other social differences when collectively confronted with capital industrial relations. Conversations at the boarding houses often address such topics as shopping and beauty concerns, but also range over issues of economic inequality, labor exploitation, political resistance, injustice and how to achieve a more egalitarian society. The constrained atmosphere at the workplace, contrasted with the potential of boarding houses to become an open forum where new ideals can be discussed, made this a primary site for ethnographic research.

In the summer of 1998, Sandya Hewamanne focused her research on two boarding houses, one located very close to the FTZ at Amandoluwa and the other in Seeduwa. At the time of the research, approximately 60 to 70 women were living at the Amandoluwa boarding house. The Seeduwa boarding house was much smaller, with only 11 women, all of whom were related to the owner, staying there. The bulk of the material on which our analysis is based comes from conversations with the Amandoluwa women. Interviews with volunteers working at the Dabindu (Sweat Drops) collective, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) active at the FTZ area, were also used, as well as some material from its monthly newspaper. In addition, the research Hewamanne conducted in 1994-95 is cited.

Strains of Consciousness: A Case of Clashing Cultures

[The following is Hewamanne's account.] During my two months of participant observation in the summer of 1998, I came into close contact with more than 70 residents of the two boarding houses. While I joined in general discussions conducted in the bedrooms, kitchens and at the wells, I also engaged in focused conversations with my six roommates and a number of other working women with whom I became friendly. When discussing their working and living conditions, these women displayed a firm grasp of the forms of exploitation and disparagement to which they were subjected, not only by the factory and boarding house owners, but also by the leftist parties and various charitable and social work organizations. They had a clear understanding of the interconnected

levels of domination that led from their immediate supervisors to the Sri Lankan government, and beyond that to the capitalist world system. Many of them also recognized a need to organize as FTZ workers and to get together with other working people in order to work towards a society in which wealth is more equally distributed. At the same time, however, their everyday discussions of oppression, exploitation, resistance and accommodation demonstrated a conflict between the ideas fostered by their direct economic and political experience and other popular beliefs and dispositions they had acquired earlier.

On two separate occasions, workers expressed concern that the foreign bosses might not be aware of the forms of slavery to which working women were subjected by middle-level managers and supervisors. As Devika described it, "Whenever they visit the shop floor, the two foreign (English) women will bring us toffee or something. They are very kind. Our own people work us to death to get promotions. If they knew what was going on here I'm sure they would stop it." Or, as Mani mused, "If only I knew English, then I would have written everything to the white man." It is important to notice that both these statements were made at the boarding house in Seeduwa, where all eleven residents come from the same village, and all are related, not only to one another, but also to their landlady, who had found them their jobs in the FTZ. Compared to workers who live independently of their families and kinfolk, these women have little chance of being exposed to the philosophical and political currents that enter into the lives of workers living in the bigger boarding houses. Still living under the moral authority of their families, it is understandable that they meekly accept, and even idealize, the hierarchical relations of traditional patronage.

When I discussed these statements at the Amandoluwa boarding house, workers talked about a conscious effort on the part of some high factory officials to act as if they did not know what was going on, or even just to order the supervisors to reach the production target by any means possible and not to worry about the details of how it was done. In the course of this discussion, two workers who usually led the call for collective action became very critical of workers who failed to see clearly the relations of domination to which they were subject.

When I asked the women their opinion on how workers newly arrived from the villages, who were used to subordination, should be educated, many of them seized the opportunity to denounce the leftist political parties for their failure to undertake any work at the grassroots. Priyanthi told me, "They come here when an election is near and tell us that we're exploited and that we should organize against it. We don't need anybody to tell us we're being exploited. What we want them to tell us is how to organize when there are so many restrictions." Priyanthi's statement distills a critique of leftist parties that many workers expressed. It was apparent that the women workers look to outside forces, namely to leftist parties and specifically to the male members of those parties, to provide them leadership. This contradictory situation suggests that class consciousness can exist in different forms, varying with the terrain of common sense on which it has to fight mastery (cf. Hall 1986, Brow 1990).

I asked Priyanthi and Kumudhini, both of whom possessed a firm sense of class consciousness and an inclination to struggle for class interests, why they did not organize under a woman leader within the working population and then join hands with broader movements as an equal partner, rather than wait for leaders from those movements to come and organize them. "Do you think the political parties will fight for your specific rights?" I asked. Priyanthi retorted, "We will fight if they [the bosses] allow us. As it is, even if we just answer back to a supervisor they have a right to fire us. They invent some reason to fire you if you're too active or have too many friends. What are you fighting for if you don't have a job tomorrow? Then you're not a 'working person' anymore."

Even though the women believed that educational work by leftist parties was needed to transform the new workers' rudimentary awareness of exploitation into a developed class consciousness, it became apparent that the more experienced workers engaged daily in a process of consciousness-raising. Kumudhini described her activities this way:

I think it is very important to keep our jobs. Since we know this slave camp very well, we can at least tell the new "girls" that they should not be deceived into thinking that employers are gods dispensing charity. I always tell them: "whatever bickerings you have between yourselves, always take another girl's side when she's in trouble. Never betray your own kind... If a supervisor touches you in the wrong place, spit in his face. If a man [*vanacharaya*] says a bad word to you, hit him with your umbrella... Always have a brick in your hand and if anybody harasses you on the road, hit and run.

While no other worker spelled it out quite as clearly as Kumudhini, it became apparent that the senior residents of a boarding house play a significant part in socializing new workers into the work culture. This invariably involves recognition of the side to which they belong and the side that they should oppose.

The workers never used the Sinhalese term for class consciousness (*Vinyana*—a rarely used term that has strong religious connotations), in their discussions, but they frequently used the term "class struggle" (*Panthi satana, aragalaya*). Due to their fear that any unsuccessful collective action would result in their being fired, the more socially aware workers generally chose to keep quiet at the workplace, sharpening their consciousness, until conditions ripen for a mass movement. Their situation is made precarious by the lack of alternative employment opportunities and by the ready availability of new workers to replace them. In addition, they are vulnerable to the lax enforcement of FTZ rules regarding job security. Nevertheless, it is not altogether uncommon to hear about strikes called to protest day-to-day problems within individual factories.

Flexible Feminism: Ideology and Practice

As stated earlier, women workers (especially those living in the same boarding house) often forge long-lasting bonds with one another. Many said that the only reason they did not run back home when conditions at work became unbearable was the

support and encouragement of their friends. They derived strength from each other to survive the harsh conditions both at work and at the boarding houses. Conversations at the boarding houses not only focused on the general conditions of life, but also on how to respond to specific situations. Even though there was talk of women workers on the lookout for material rewards who would spy for the managers, workers at both boarding houses argued that it would only be by means of a united front that they would achieve anything. They were very critical of workers who betrayed their own kind, a fault they attributed to the ignorance and weak character of the offending women. Few of them had much faith that male members of political parties or NGOs would be able to understand their suffering. "What do they know of what we, only women, will suffer?" asked Kumudhini rhetorically, while the usually not-so-eloquent Anoja said, "Every time I see a man trying to say something to us, I feel this is not democratic. Our leader should be a woman." This comment sparked a discussion about the stories they had heard of widespread disturbances that had taken place in 1994, when several women leaders had emerged among the workers. The People's Alliance government that came to power that year had promised to improve conditions in the FTZ. The workers believed an ideal situation could only be achieved when most of the different factions in society had come together against a particular government. However, the unsuccessful outcome of the 1994 struggles also demonstrated to them that accomplishments in this regard were likely to be limited, as the People's Alliance government was constrained by Sri Lanka's unfavorable location within the capitalist world system.

All the women with whom I spoke favored feminist ideas and had already incorporated many feminist terms into their vocabulary, such as *kantha vimukthiya*, *peedanaya*, and *purushadhipatthiya* (women's liberation, oppression, patriarchy). At the same time, they denounced the kind of feminism practiced by the bourgeois members of the feminist groups they had heard of or come into contact with. One woman said, "Those women don't understand our sufferings even as much as a male worker does. They come to give us classes on contraceptive methods because they have nothing else to do in their leisure time." "Big fat women" (*Tharabaru Genu*) is a popular term women workers use to refer to feminist activists who come to conduct workshops on health or to pass out leaflets on feminist issues. This animosity seems to be based on the workers' understanding of the feminist's stance as one of "looking down on them as ignorant fools," and trying to educate them on matters they "fully understand but have no power to deal with." They also resent the fact that the feminists advocate a wholesale assault on the structures of village patriarchy and traditional moral values, without giving due recognition to the complexities involved in such an endeavor.

All the women workers I talked to held very liberal ideas on love, sex and marriage. According to them, although they had always had some idea that there were double standards in gender relations, it was only after coming to the FTZ that they were able to fully comprehend the extent of sexual oppression. They were very eloquent in their criticism of traditional expectations regarding virginity and purity in young women, yet it was clear that they still found it very difficult to discuss their own relationships with men.

When discussing the sexual conduct of other women, however, they showed solidarity with women who went against the prevailing moral standards.

This ambiguity and uncertainty was also evident in worker's submissions to the Dabindu newspaper; many short stories, poems and journal writings appeared that explored conflicts between deeply embedded cultural values and women's new understandings of self-worth and sexual liberty. In their fictional writings, however, the heroines unfailingly overcome the pressures of outside forces to uphold established moral values. By contrast, the other women featured in their stories (those who give in to their impulses) get into all kinds of trouble, frequently leading them to end their lives. Reports of exploitative sexual relations, unwanted pregnancies, abortions and even suicides may contribute to the moral conflict expressed in these stories. It is also important to note that women rarely work in the FTZ for more than five years, and that they typically return to their natal villages after that. It could be that some of the writings are addressed to a general readership in an attempt to convey the message that there are "moral heroines" within the FTZ. The writings may thus represent an effort to ease the women's transition back to village life.

Despite all the feminist rhetoric, one of the main goals of many women working in the FTZ is to accumulate the jewelry, furniture and money needed for their dowry. During my research among FTZ workers in a southern village in 1995, it became apparent that the women maintained a front of innocence and timidity in order not to be regarded as unsuitable marriage partners. Social, economic and cultural conditions in rural Sri Lanka do not provide circumstances in which it is feasible for women returning from the FTZ to act according to their new feminist consciousness. While they did express to me thoughts closely resembling those disseminated by middle-class feminist groups (doubtless in part because they perceived that to be what I wanted to hear), the chances are remote that any former worker would directly and publicly challenge patriarchal values and power relations. However, it would be a mistake to disregard the feminist awareness they acquired in the FTZ simply because they are concerned for their social survival. Inevitably, their participation in village life as respectable married women will bring about changes, but only very slowly. Consider the words of Nayani, a soon-to-be former worker, whose parents are trying to arrange a marriage for her: "If you are an unmarried woman who has a tarnished reputation simply because you tried to tell them what is 'right and good,' you will have no power in the village at all. It will be like being dead. But at least I can bring up my children to believe in what I do."

Conclusion

Our account has described some of the insights and ambiguities that resulted from the encounter between the emergent feminist and class consciousness of the FTZ women workers and their previously formed cultural understanding of the world. Among the latter, we have emphasized only the patriarchal assumptions that are both central and pervasive within the dominant ideology. A fully comprehensive analysis would also have to address other, equally

value-laden bases of social differentiation, such as religion, language, caste and ethnicity. Nevertheless, we hope at least to have demonstrated the creative flexibility with which many of the women manage to adjust their conduct to the specific social conditions they confront while still holding on to their newly acquired feminist and class consciousness. There are, course, significant differences in this regard which, on the basis of an unsystematic survey, appear to be linked more to the length of time spent in the FTZ than to levels of education. Other influential factors include the size and type of boarding house in which the women reside and the degree of exposure to feminist and leftist political rhetoric.

It seems clear that the FTZ women's entanglement with popular cultural beliefs has constrained their understanding of the structures of subordination to which they are subjected and has inhibited that understanding from developing into an organized and determined collective will. In Gramscian terms, the critical acuity of their "good sense," formed both by their experience at work and by consciousness-raising discussions in the boarding houses, cannot attain its full potential as long as it remains immersed in the large unquestioned and taken-for-granted assumptions of the "common sense" (Gramsci 1971: 323-343, 419-445; cf. Ha 1986). They are nevertheless, thoroughly engaged in what Ong (1991:304) refers to as "cultural struggles," using the term to describe how workers battle "against new and varied forms of domination and seek new ways of grappling with social realities." In the course of their resistance, the women workers of the Katunayake FTZ have acquired some of the same sensibility that Ong described in her review of other accounts of new female factory workers. Most fundamentally this involves the development of "a new sense of self and community, potentially challenging the constitution of civil society" (1990:304). By examining some aspects of how that sensibility is formed in the factories and boarding houses of the FTZ, we hope to enhance an understanding of how the potential challenge to which Ong refers might be made reality.

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