

# WOMEN AND WORK IN SRI LANKA

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The present process of development in Sri Lanka continues on an unequal gender power relationship. Women have experienced violence within the economic sphere as labour/workers. What is the basis for gender discrimination in the workforce? The need to address the issue of women in development was publicly acknowledged in the 1960s - however it was not until 1967 that the UN Declaration on the Elimination of the Discrimination Against Women highlighted the need to tackle women's vulnerability at an international level.<sup>1</sup> Yet as the World Development Report 1995 indicates gender inequalities in the labour force are still common. The study of gender and development as an academic discipline and the elaboration of theoretical models for the study of women's roles both in shaping and in being shaped by development date back to the 1970s.

Between 1972 and 1995 new and different approaches have developed, ranging from the orthodox to neo-liberal to socialist feminist analyses. This paper examines some of these approaches but recognises that despite policy initiatives the feminization of poverty is increasing. This paper is an attempt to evaluate why rewards are divided for men and women. This is lacking in the World Development Report 1995. In the latter, women's occupational segmentation and vulnerability is conceded but is seen as "tenacious", "due to their education levels or lack of access to the market". I would argue that inequality is *not* about lack of skills but is connected to the fact that women do not control the distribution of resources. To elaborate on gender inequality we need an interdisciplinary approach and a recognition that the sexual division of labour can **not** be isolated from women's lives as a whole.

Societies differ in how labour is divided between the sexes. There are also differences in wealth, differences in rights and the position of women. The colonial experience had a profound impact on employment opportunities for women and gender stereotyping. Colonial policy as well as prevailing cultural norms resulted in a "separating out" of women in Sri Lanka. Some women benefitted from the privileges of their class/caste and obtained higher education and professional work (e.g the early Burgher doctors).<sup>2</sup> Others were less fortunate and did essential if low status work such as tea plucking. Class and ethnic divisions altered what it meant to be a

woman and what kind of social expectations guided or compelled work choice. This necessitates a recognition of the importance of class and ethnicity in theoretical studies.

Upper/middle class women employ women from lower income groups as domestic servants. This strategy enables these women to circumvent the problem of combining a living with raising children and domestic work. This also demonstrates that some women accept and make use of established hierarchies of race and class even though it places other women in an inferior position, thus reinforcing certain patterns of bias. This means that we must now incorporate an analysis of difference within our work to analyse how women are fractured along the lines of class, caste and ethnicity.

Within countries there are significant differences between men and women. In most societies women work more hours for lower pay. Women are engaged disproportionately in the home, looking after children and maintaining the household - activities that fall outside the market....These differences may flow from cultural norms but they lead to gender inequality and to inefficient use of a society's human resources.

*World Development Report 1995, p12*

Women make up about a third of the workforce of almost six million but most are confined to low-income, time consuming activities and labour intensive activities.

*Men & Women in Sri Lanka, the Census Department*

The case of the Tamil plantation workers is a good example of the need to analyse difference. Their ethnicity and a different national identity compounded their marginalisation. In the areas of reproduction, production and the community, women have often been adversely affected by the development process. This is true of Tamil women's position in the plantation sector. They have been seen as cheap labour and this perception is compounded by patriarchal assumptions that domestic labour is the exclusive responsibility of women. This has resulted in a sexual division of labour for women in which they occupy the lower paid jobs and bear the brunt of a double burden - caring for their families as well as working outside the home. This is a common problem and is compounded by an unequal distribution of resources within the household. Even though women are often part of families and both men and women may be breadwinners the resources are not shared. Men use money for personal needs whilst women use their income for household needs. Women's involvement in the reproduction of the community however is not valued. Research done on Tamil women workers highlights that issues such as education, health and well-being are adversely affected by women's reproductive role and its undervaluation. Referred to as 'reproductive' work in the Marxist Feminist literature, the term relates the area of sexuality with the reproduction of human life and is used to distinguish gender relations from those of class. In Sri Lanka, the participation of women in the generative maintenance of the population has relegated them to the realm of the

household. Thus it is useful to expand on the relationship between production and reproduction to understand why women have been marginalised by the process of economic development.

To evaluate the position of Tamil women in the plantations we need to situate their work historically. A plantation system was started by British colonialists. First coffee was introduced in the 1820s. Due to the reluctance of local workers, labour was brought in by the British from South India by the 1830s. It is important to note that the reason women were employed was that they were perceived as cheaper labour. Captain Graham, the first agent in India for the Commission, said that women workers were "more steady and regular labourers" who were also lesser paid.<sup>3</sup>

In the light of capitalist development we need to remember that there do not exist universal reasons alone for women's marginalisation. Whilst the undervaluation of household labour is crucial, when we consider various theoretical debates we need to remember that the patterns of wage-labour, the development of the agrarian structure (influenced by unequal landholdings) and the types of jobs available (creation of a plantation sector under colonialism/emergence of the 'new international division of labour' NIDL) all affect the possibilities of work for women in Sri Lanka and also help explain the predominance of the informal sector. A conceptual framework for analysing gender power relations is useful since it helps us understand the institutionalisation of female marginalisation which is common across Sri Lanka.

## Relationship Between Production and Reproduction.

In its most immediate sense reproduction involves the 'production' of people, which consists of not just biological reproduction but also the care and socialisation of children, and the maintenance of adult individuals so that they participate in extra-household social relations. Domestic work in agricultural activities such as food transformation, wood gathering, water fetching,—productive activities that centre on generating use-values for the consumption of the family—extends itself frequently into agricultural production making the distinction between productive and reproductive roles artificial. Beneria and Sen point out that, the two systems of human production fuse when, for example, a woman carries her baby with her when working on the farm or when marketing her produce, or when meals cooked at home are transported to the fields. Nonetheless, in Sri Lanka, the interpretation of women's social role predefines her as economically inactive in that her remunerated activities are seen as complementary to her household duties. On the plantations "women were kept under male domination not only because of their husbands, fathers and brothers....they worked on the fields for 9 to 11 hours a day and did all the household tasks as well; they continually served the interests of men in their lives."<sup>4</sup>

In the plantation sector we can see that the discursive production of sexuality is an important factor in women's subordination. This is re-inforced at work and impacts on the possibilities and type of

employment available. This construction continues today: "Patriarchal ideologies which place women secondary to men are still largely held in the plantation sector. Women have been "taught to respect" men at all levels, at all times and be willingly subject to their control. Therefore the women are faced with domination from their husbands, fathers and brothers, and even their male overseers, kanganies and planters in the field".<sup>4</sup>

Both Marxist theory and neo-classical economics have allowed for only one kind of historically significant or "valuable" activity, that of public production centred on the quantitative relations of commodity exchange, androcentrically excluding from the purview of social theory and history women's unpaid childbearing activity and its related tasks. It is ironic that Marx's theory, despite its purported project of illuminating the persistent interactions of state, family and the economy in the context of their historic separation, stopped short of the domestic threshold in his criticism of political economy. Thus while acknowledging the importance of the maintenance and reproduction of the working class for the reproduction of capital, neither Marx nor Engels extended his analysis to explore the inner dynamics of use-value production. The assumption was that the elimination of private property and the full-scale participation of women in commodity production would set the preconditions for women's emancipation. The powerful analytical primacy of production in Marxist thought *cannot* be integrated internally and thus relate to two distinct systems of oppression: patriarchy and capitalism (Hartmann, 1981). Nonetheless Marxist-Feminists have attempted to integrate the two systems by looking at the household as the site of material production and seeing how it fits into the wider structure. This involves stretching the category of "production" to include the role of domestic labour in subsidising capital accumulation, without challenging the analytical primacy of production (Beechey, 1977; Deere, 1976). The problem with this theory is that it does not explore the link between patriarchy and capitalism.

This approach is analytically similar to the Marxist "articulating modes" approach to explain the persistence of certain non-capitalist, non-waged forms of production in terms of their function in cheapening the reproduction costs of labour for the capitalist sector (De Janvry, 1982). The focus is on explaining non-class social cleavages with reference to systems of surplus extraction which were articulated between modes of production as opposed to simply within one or another mode, thereby subordinating one mode to another. This approach is problematic since it treats modes of production as structural entities rather than historical conjunctures of material conditions and social relations, thereby rendering it inadequate to explain social transformation and the ways in which certain modes of pre-capitalist production are responses to changing conditions. This theory requires that even non-wage relations be shown to contribute to the accumulation of capital. The formulation "even non-wage relations" betrays, in implicitly assigning a peripherality to subsistence activities, another shortcoming in this approach stemming from the limits imposed by the canonical wage-labour relationship which is peripheral in many developing societies, whose etiolated industrial sectors are vastly overshadowed by subsistence and informal sectors. This same problem of underestimation and implicit devaluation is evident in the attempts to sub-

sume reproductive activities to production, along with a reluctance in theories to analyse so pervasive a phenomenon as reproduction as a system on its own terms.

The articulating modes approach was adapted by Marxist-feminists to become the basic premise of the domestic-labour debates of the 70s (Dalla Costa and James, 1972), wherein the domestic labour of women was understood as another subordinate unwaged mode of production articulated in a direct and necessary way to the demands of capitalist accumulation. What is needed is the modification of the Marxist theory of valuation such that it treats domestic labour as commodity production. Thus the use-value of domestic labour is converted—sometimes after a considerable time-lag—into exchange value at the moment that labour power, produced and reproduced in the household is sold. For Bennholdt-Thomsen,.... "The laws of accumulation themselves reproduce capitalist production relations which do not adopt the wage form"; in other words it is the unpaid nature of domestic labour which has disguised the fact that domestic labour is part of the extended reproduction of capital. **But simply to analyse the benefits of use-value production for capital is not sufficient to explain why women predominate in particular areas of work, nor why such work is persistently devalued.** Studies of egalitarian societies have shown that the sexual division of labour into different spheres of activity and segregated roles need not necessarily entail subordination or hierarchy (Leacock, 1978). In most societies segregated roles fill complementary functions for the benefit of the collectivity; the difficulty for women arises when these roles become an instrument to perpetuate gender inequality. By concentration on the subsumption of subsistence production within the logic of capitalism, Bennholdt-Thomsen ignores questions which concern the actual social forms associated with different types of production and reproduction, such as the relation of household labour to cross-cultural norms and values concerning the sexual division of labour, nor can she accommodate the fact that women's subordination has existed across different modes of production.

Following the initial exigencies of capitalism in Sri Lanka, women and children were required to enter into wage-labour relations, ideological, economic and pragmatic imperatives which turned towards the re-invention of a family structure which provided a relatively finely tuned mechanism of social control and increased the exploitation of both men and women. The colonialists did not hesitate to build on this paternalism in their treatment of women on plantations. Women were allocated the lowest paid and more seasonal work. Historically, women received lower wages on the plantation estates even for similar work. How can theory help us understand this? Especially as it is the issue of unequal wages for equal work which is one of the major stumbling blocks holding back women's economic liberation.

Attempts to squeeze the sexual division of labour into Marxist categories of political economy entirely avoid questioning the nature of the connection between the perpetuation of social and sexual inequality. We also need to remember that women benefit differentially according to their class positions, race, ethnicity as well as the multitude of ways work performed in the domestic

setting is inserted into the wider economic structures. To understand why women continue to be marginalised by economic development we need to turn to Connell's discussion of a "gender order". Connell stresses the need for an historical analysis and an analysis of the institutionalisation of interests—class, gender and ethnic. This is a "process" approach which treats the state and economic development as a "thing" which enables a focus on social practices which produce and reproduce social structures.

This approach looks at how female marginalisation is sustained by micro-level social practices in everyday life, which through their repetition produce and reproduce gender relations in everyday life, at home, at work, within the state and other social institutions. This approach allows an insight into how segmentation in labour markets is actually maintained at a practical level and the mechanism whereby jobs are assigned to a particular gender. The way in which expectations about work come to structure everyday conceptions about appropriate work for women and men is through the social construction of skill. This in turn is related to dominant conceptions of the roles and attributes of women and men. The "naturalisation" of supposed differences is perhaps the key to the gender differential in the social construction of skill. Ideologies of this sort and the material social practices associated "essentialise" male/female differences. Phillips and Taylor (1980) note that.. "skill definitions are saturated with sexual bias, the work of women is deemed inferior simply because it is women that do it. Women workers carry into the workforce their status as subordinate individuals and this status comes to define the value of the work they do. Far from being an objective economic fact, skill is often an ideological category imposed on certain types of work by virtue of the sex and power of the workers who perform it."

It is this social construction of skill that relegated women into tea plucking on the estates as they were perceived to be "nimble fingered". It is this same social construction which allowed women to become teachers and nurses in the late nineteenth century but affected the acceptance of women as doctors or lawyers. Across social structures the construction of skill has deemed certain professions "women's" work whilst other jobs (often higher status and better paid jobs) are perceived as unsuitable. The construction of women's work needs to be deconstructed in order to show that ideological views of women, informed by a bias to women's capacities in marriage and motherhood have affected work opportunities for women in Sri Lanka. As Dr. Swarna Jayaweera notes "women have always been active in the field but it was not recognised because of the middle class Victorian concept of women as housewives. The reality is very different."

What affects women's roles in economic development in Sri Lanka is connected to their roles in reproduction, production and the community and how women's social roles are defined and perceived. It appears that in Sri Lanka, the co-existence of high female labour force participation with a very poor position for women, especially their status in relation to male family members, is more important than their place in the labour market in determining their role in economic development. This is a challenge to Marxist analyses which explain women's economic position in terms of

"system level contradictions and tendencies" created by the development of capitalism. What has now been recognised is that: "the analysis of differences between men and women reveals a gender bias in all activities, not merely those involving women and requires revision of the way we think about these activities themselves" (Scott: 1991 p.109). Elson has written about "male bias" as something which pervades every aspect of people's lives. It appears at a conscious level in policies which take for granted the fact that men are more important than women. Or it may be unconscious, the result of overlooking women. Theoretical bias exists in which certain socio-economic categories are gendered eg. "farmers". Male bias is also a feature of public policy in which women's rights are marginalised.

This analysis helps us to understand that gender discrimination in the workforce is part of a much wider process which includes a bias in everyday attitudes and practices as well as social and economic structures and bias in the process of defining and implementing public policy (Elson, 1991 p.6). This is evident in the World Development Report which has not tried to offer a theoretical analysis of employment segregation beyond conceding that the problem exists. Gender disaggregated data is needed to analyse women's contribution. The report looks at biological differences but oversimplifies preferences and endowments.

This means that research on women's workforce production **can not** be separated from other aspects of women's lives. Fundamental changes for women will not happen simply with an increase in their earning power. One of the key issues stressed in the 1990s has been how women can combine "getting a living and raising children". For Elson, this is a problem of individual entitlement for everyone regardless of status or income. It is a problem which necessitates social provision and the mediation of organisations in the public sphere. As noted earlier professional women who employ domestic servants circumvent this challenge. At a time when the advances of some women are overshadowed by the increasing poverty and unemployment of others, we can not advocate women's specific interests against as opposed to alongside traditional socialist goals. The growth in the number of informal-sector and low-paid women workers is the centrepiece of global restructuring - that restructuring has often made other workers redundant so we still need to identify bases for political alliances and solidarity.

I would argue for a theoretical approach which recognises universalism and difference and is prepared to struggle towards a new understanding of social justice which recognises the pervasiveness of power. The example of women's subordinate position in the workforce underlies the need for a critical re-engagement with political economy. Not all identities are worth clinging on to - an identity which internalises oppression must be discarded. In order for women to challenge their position in the workforce they also need to challenge the persistence of the processes which gave rise to their subordinate status in the first place. That process as I have tried to show is both the result of the penetration of capitalism as well as social practices (the discursive production of sexuality, social construction of skill, feminisation etc). Feminists must challenge all these.

Marxist Feminist analyses and their idea that wage labour would "liberate" women from the household and integrate them into productive development reveals an acceptance of the private/public dichotomy and an insensitivity to social constructions of work for women in Sri Lanka. Radical Feminism opened up the household and relations between men and women as serious subjects for analysis. Nonetheless we need to move beyond old conceptions of male power and consider how these were/are played out in social and cultural practices and how women themselves might reconstruct their social roles in order to benefit from the development process. Scrutiny of production in the context of the household—within which survival and subsistence are organised—seems more likely to illuminate the way in which pre-capitalist sexual divisions are transposed into capitalist relations of production and the way in which women continue to be marginalised by the process of economic development. What is clear is that the economic crisis which pervades Sri Lanka continues to affect men and women differentially since women bear the brunt of a double work burden. What is needed is a recognition, by policy-makers, of the importance of women's work and an attempt to bring into the mainstream women's work and design ways of improving their productivity which would benefit the household's survival strategies best. This will involve gender planning which challenges the idea that economic development and its rewards will trickle down to all sectors since it is clear that there exist different rewards for different groups depending on sex, class and ethnicity.

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## Footnotes

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