

The Language of Threads: Unraveling the Consequences of Labor Advocacy

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Introduction and Background:

The global garment industry is comprised of roughly 40 million workers, and 60 to 90% of these workers are women under the age of 30 (Hale & Wills 2005). The majority of these women work for multinational industries operating in the economic South. This global workforce is a recent phenomenon impacting the roles of women who previously did not participate in wage labor. Formerly traditional Asian societies, such as China and Bangladesh, now have rapidly growing industrial export-oriented economies employing vast numbers of women. Most notable is the transformation that has taken place in Sri Lanka, which now has over 200 garment factories across the island, employing vast numbers of young women. This highly feminized labor force has attracted the attention of international labor rights organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and feminist scholars across the globe.

Contrasting stories of victimization and modernization have left these organizations at odds with three main questions: how to understand the impact of global consumerism on women factory workers, how to improve their working conditions, and how to empower female workers. The current efforts by the International Labor Organization (ILO) include introducing a “social clause” into the World Trade Organization’s (WTO) legislation. (Kabeer 2004). The aim of this clause is to enforce global labor standards and prevent the exploitation of women factory workers by way of sanctions on noncompliant factories.

However, this approach does not incorporate the voices of women workers who attach a sense of self worth to their employment. Rather, this clause speaks *for* these women. Such a stance views women as merely passive victims of corporate globalization, unable to organize themselves or provide valuable input. Despite the truly difficult conditions these women work in, many of these jobs provide them with genuine opportunities. This paper will first explore why such a clause could indeed reinforce inequalities between the economic North and South. The case of Sri Lanka serves as the primary focus of the research, along with supporting evidence from China and Bangladesh. The analysis will conclude with the policy recommendation that rather than punish factories and their workers for having sub-par standards, an incentive system should be put in place to promote better working conditions and corporate social responsibility.

Development is a Three-Letter Acronym: The Link Between SAPs, FTZs and EPZs

Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and Free Trade Zones (FTZs) are sites where imported materials are manufactured into exportable goods, such as clothing, without incurring the normal amount of taxes and duties. In such “zones” international labor standards generally do not apply. As a result, workers in these areas are often subject to forced overtime, low wages, difficult working conditions, and trade union repression (Hale & Wills 2005).

EPZs emerged during the 1960s and 1970s as an economic development strategy promoted by organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. This period of economic liberalization, spearheaded by the IMF, led to the installment of structural adjustment policies (SAPs) in countries receiving economic aid. These policies required the “opening up” of FTZs to enhance foreign direct investment. In Sri Lanka, this

investment resulted in the establishment of hundreds of garment factories owned by Northern corporations.

These policies also required states to cut back or completely remove social programs and subsidies. For example, water, electricity, healthcare, and other basic needs previously provided to the poor by the state are frequently privatized (Hale & Willis 2005). Thus, families are required to absorb the costs of social services that were previously provided to them, presenting enormous economic constraints to already poor households.

As women in most societies are generally responsible for providing for their children's and extended families' health, education, nutrition, and wellbeing (all of which are more time consuming in developing countries), such neo-liberal policies undoubtedly place the burden of economic adjustment upon female household members (Momsen 2004). As a result, women's unpaid household and social labor increases drastically. At the same time, economic conditions are dramatically tightened, making alternative sources of income required (Mills 2003). It is under these conditions that we see mass migrations of young women from the countryside flocking to factories in their countries' newly established FTZs and EPZs. Rohini, a female garment worker in Sri Lanka explains such hardships:

Some of the youth who work at garment factories are trying their best to help their parents' economic struggle. We are working in garment factories to help our siblings continue their studies. It is unimaginable to think of the unfair treatment we receive at the hands of some of our employers. They could make you feel so negative about yourself by scolding you or punishing you with a salary cut.

If we do not want to go through what most of us endure at these torture houses, we have to stay home. But God, how can we do that when we realize so many loved ones are

dependent on us? We are all going through this mental agony of deciding which way we should move (Lynch 2007).

Social Stratifications: From the Home to the Factory

Multinationals in the textile industry were drawn to invest in FTZs due to the labor-intensive nature of the sector. As a result, these companies came to see a large supply of “cheap” labor as essential to profitability (Hale & Wills 2005).

“Cheap” is certainly no exaggeration – in 2002, the average female Sri Lankan apparel worker made \$0.48 an hour (Jassin-O’Rourke 2002). The supply of textile labor has been taking the form of young, unmarried women from the developing world. These workers, stereotyped as “docile, nimble fingered, patient and obedient,” (Lynch 2007) are recruited under gendered assumptions that they are “highly flexible, inexpensive, and easily disciplined” (Mills 2003). Disciplinary strategies often include verbal and physical aggression (Hawamanne 2008), as well as erotic banter and sexual harassment. According to Ting Yong, Chinese factory owners are in general agreement that it is more difficult for management to handle male workers because they are more resistant to the difficult working conditions in sweatshops, exemplified by numerous cases of violent fighting between male workers and management (Yong 2004). Many Sri Lankan investors seem to agree, characterizing men as troublesome, difficult to control, likely to strike, and as overall “SOBs” (Lynch 2007).

These perceptions gave way to the large female workforce spanning the garment industry. In 2003, the International Labor Organization estimated 42 million workers were employed by EPZs in 106 countries across five continents (International Labor Organization 2003). Factories in these EPZs reproduce a model of organization in which women occupy the

lowest levels of pay and authority while men dominate higher levels of supervisory and managerial positions (Mills 2003).

Such a model indicates that women's increased involvement in wage labor has not yet ended their subordination, and there has been a clear transfer of patriarchal norms from the household to the factory (Momsen 2004). In Sri Lanka, the dominant Sinhala Buddhist image of the ideal woman is one of a passive and subordinate dependent, who should be protected within the confines of her home (Hewamanne 2008).

For this reason, female factory workers known as "Juki girls"¹ are stigmatized as overtly sexual because they do not live at home, and are therefore corrupted by their independence, western capitalism, and disobedience. This creates tension in the factory, as many girls want to prove that they are "good girls" by never flirting and being obedient. Patriarchy is also reinforced in terms of unequal pay and an absence of promotions. One factory worker, Bhagya, describes this asymmetrical relationship:

When I started sewing here 10 years earlier, Sanuja sir was a production assistant. Then he became the floor coordinator, and look where he is now (factory manager). Ten years later we are still sewing in the lines (Hewamanne 2008).

Female workers at Suishin Factory in Sri Lanka were also forced to engage in daily rituals that reinforced authority and subservience or gendered power relations on the shop floor (Hewamanne 2008). Each morning, the women would line up across from the male factory officers. The male floor coordinator would say three sentences in Japanese, after which a female factory worker would step out of line and curtsy. Then all of the female workers would bow at the same time and flare their skirts. The Japanese language was used in this ritual because the factory was Japanese owned.

¹ Juki is the Japanese brand name of the sewing machines used in Sri Lankan garment factories.

Such rituals are comparatively mild relative to numerous other examples of extreme forms of discipline. In 2000, reports emerged of male, Sri Lankan managers assaulting and physically abusing female workers. One extreme example is given by Da Bindu, a Sri Lankan garment worker:

While I was sewing a supervisor came from behind and shouted at me “Is this how you were asked to sew?” Whilst saying this he hit me on the head. My head struck the machine and an iron piece injured my left eye. The company told me to go home. With unbearable pain I went to the medical centre in the FTZ. The medical officer told me that he did not have either the equipment or the medicine to treat me and that I should get myself admitted to the general hospital. I began walking to the main gates of the Zone and at the main entrance I lost consciousness. When I regained consciousness I was warded in Negombo Hospital.

It is difficult to talk. The pain in my eye is unbearable. I cannot see anything with this eye. I won't be able to work. My younger sister also works in the FTZ. Because she took 5 days leave to look after me, she was not paid her salary this month either. The management visited and gave me 200 Rupees (US\$5) and told me to buy what I need!
(Hale & Wills 2005)

Such abuse has important negative implications for the status of women. Within the factory, it is proof of their vulnerability and instills a threatening working atmosphere. By making an example of one, other workers will certainly fear organizing or bargaining for better conditions, salaries, length of the work day, or sick leave and pay. This form of intimidation constitutes a “flexibilization” of the labor force which has been centered on female employees,

whose lower wages and common release from employment upon marriage has solidified their weaker bargaining power not only relative to employers, but also to men (Benaria 2003).

Power struggles exist for women both within the work place and outside of it. Other societal factors contribute to some women's "flexibility." These include living far from their families and being unmarried with no children to take care of, and therefore more able (and in some cases more willing) to work overtime. Flexibility also refers to patterns of work that are not protected by state regulation. Outsourcing, contract labor, casual, part time, and home-based work all fall into this category of flexible labor (Kabeer 2004). The subordinate status of women inside and outside of garment factories, coupled with their ability to endure difficult working conditions, has earned them the additional reputation of "passivity."

The supposed passivity of women was not only used as a device to control them within Sri Lankan factories, but also used as a rhetorical device in speeches delivered by rival politicians in 1994. They spoke of women as passive victims, proclaiming that it was a shame that the ruling party had let young women suffer under foreign hands. They saw it as their responsibility to save these women from Western exploitation. They also spoke of women getting into trouble because of their relationships with men, and how they would improve living conditions around the factory so that women would not feel pressured to have boyfriends. Finally, they mourned the loss of traditional values linked to village women as they moved into cities and away from their families to work in FTZs (Hewamanne 2008).

Introduction of the Social Clause and Consequences:

Sri Lankan politicians were not the only group who felt that they had to "save" these women. Starting in the 1990s, advocacy groups began expressing concern sparked by increasing

information surrounding inhumane working conditions. A media storm swirled around reports of exploitation in the developing world. One *New York Times* writer reported the following:

For the most part, it is the wretched of the earth who do the world's tailoring. Made in Bangladesh competes with Made in Honduras, Made in the Philippines, Made in Macao, Made in Any Steamy Reservoir of Third World Unemployment: those places where plentiful labor lacks the leverage to command high pay, and the most pitiful thing about the jobs is how hard it is to get them (Bearak 2001).

As the media and consumers in the global north caught wind of the “sweatshops” that were producing their clothes, it was concluded that decisive action needed to be taken. In response, the ILO introduced its “social clause,” enabling the World Trade Organization to pass sanctions against countries whose factories did not comply with “core” standards, with an emphasis on increasing wages (Kabeer 2004). This movement is gaining much international support from consumer groups, student activists, northern trade unions, NGOs, Western feminists, and academics.

Certainly, the working conditions within these factories need to be improved. Despite this, many women prefer factory work to other alternatives such as unpaid agrarian work on family farms, micro entrepreneurship, domestic service, or sex work (Kabeer 2004). In this way, factory work allows women an additional option to choose from.

It is also important to keep in mind that women’s economic participation brings along with it certain positive aspects in the long run. Recent studies suggest that waged employment fosters positive transformation in women’s lives, such as greater bargaining power when arranging marriages (Lee 1998), power to postpone the age of marriage, ability to leave abusive marriages (Kabeer 2004), increased autonomy, a higher degree of gender equality (Beneria

2003), enhanced decision making and renegotiation of power relations within the household, greater access to information and support networks, and enhanced feelings of self-worth (Salway 2005).

These feelings are exemplified by Chi-ying, a young peasant girl from rural HuBei China who moved to Shenzhen China for factory work. Although factory conditions in this part of China are well known for their relentless authoritarian management style, many young girls appreciated their independence and income. Chi-ying was able to use her wages to buy her way out of an arranged marriage. She had no desire to move back to the countryside and prided herself for being a modern, free, young woman. When she thought of her grandmother and mother at home, she would say “They have never left the village. They have not had their own jobs” (Lee 1998).

In Sri Lanka, most women left their factory jobs after they married at their husbands’ request. In many cases, these women were sad to leave their friends and independence behind. This sentiment is expressed by Chinta, a former Shirtex worker, who in an interview explained that she missed earning her own money to spend, going on outings with her friends, and having her friends to talk and learn from. Some of the things she had learned in the factory from her female coworkers helped her cope with her changed role as a housewife. This included advice about the importance of spending money wisely, how unfair men could be, and how she was expected to behave once she was married (Lynch 2007).

Unfortunately, these motivations and incentives to work are not fully conceived by the ILO and WTO, which are commanded by the economic North. For this reason, their present efforts to introduce a “social clause” into the World Trade Organization’s (WTO) legislation are somewhat misguided. The aim of such a clause would be to enforce global labor standards and

prevent the exploitation of women factory workers by way of sanctions on countries housing noncompliant factories.

However, there is reason to be concerned about the unequal representation of the women whose lives this would impact. This oversight constitutes a lack of knowledge about the consequences that this clause would have in the developing world. Some countries fear that the implementation of substantive labor standards would raise labor costs, resulting in a loss of their competitive edge (Kabeer 2004). In turn, sanctions could result in joblessness and widespread unemployment. This fear was legitimized in 1999, when a British company in the Filipino Bataan EPZ locked out its 1,000 workers and announced that it was closing down. The reason given was that they could not afford to pay the new legal minimum wage. Most workers lost their homes because they could no longer afford rent.

Workers throughout the globe are now confronting this fear of unemployment. This sentiment is dramatically expressed by one Bangladeshi factory worker, Fatema Akhter:

I am a garment worker ...As garment workers, we live and work under difficult conditions but at least we are managing to earn a living. Now we have heard rumors that in the next two to four years, the garment industry may close down. What will happen to us? You are perhaps all aware of the situation of women in Bangladesh – women have very few opportunities for employment. We are, however, slowly making some progress. Because of jobs in the garment industry, many Fatemas like me are able to work honorably. ‘Garments’ is the only option for us. We beg you not to take away these jobs and our right to work with dignity” (Kabeer 2004).

Fatema’s sentiments express the invisibility of workers’ voices in trade agreements. Although the governments of China and Bangladesh have prohibited trade unions in EPZs,

wages and working conditions in these zones are reported to be far superior to those in the rest of these countries (Kabeer 2004). Furthermore, the level of wages is not the largest sources of dissatisfaction for EPZ workers. Rather, most complaints stem from irregular pay, restrictions on bathroom breaks, and unpaid overtime. Another common complaint is sexual harassment on the factory floor and in society, stemming from the cultural stigmatization that female workers face. Increased regularity in pay and freedom on the factory floor should therefore be encouraged. These stipulations would not negatively impact factories' labor supply, nor risk their competitive edge.

Inspiration from Within:

The new female working class in Asia has not been passive on these issues of working conditions and pay rates, but involved in struggles of their own. This has happened on the individual level in Sri Lanka, where experienced workers negotiate their autonomy, production schedules, and salaries with managers (Lynch 2007). Other innovative forms of spontaneous organizing include the use of "eye contact" in factories where workers were not allowed to speak, and the use of the local Sinhalese language in the presence of foreign managers (Hewamanne 2008). As one worker reported, "We have our own ways to organize ourselves. This is very important for us. After a period the workers have all got accustomed to these methods" (Hale & Wills 2005, 46).

These initial forms of resistance eventually led to negotiations at the collective level in Sri Lanka, with the Jaqalanka factory in Katanuyake serving as an example. In 1999, national legislation was modified so that even employers within FTZs had to recognize trade unions if a minimum of 40% of the workforce were members. In 2003, 50% of Jaqalanka's workers were members of the new FTZ Workers Union (FTZWU), however management refused to recognize

the union's presence. The union sought international support, and filed a complaint to the ILO and Fair Labor Association. Additionally, many workers sent letters to the buyers and their governments. Finally, Jaqalanka met the union and reached an agreement to recognize the FTZWU as the representative of its workers and to stop all victimization of union members. In return, the FTZWU agreed to stop its international campaign and suspend complaints lodged with the ILO (Hale & Wills 2005).

Thus, women workers have their own methods of collective bargaining. This can certainly be enhanced by the help of the ILO and other Northern labor organizations. As international organizations, the ILO and WTO can add volume to these women's voices. However the adoption of a "social clause" speaks for these women, without their equal representation. These multilateral institutions should not only be concerned with organizing women workers around their level of pay. These efforts need to be coupled with the elimination of discrimination and the equal participation by women in all spheres of life. As one NGO reported, "Struggles arising from the development of world market factories will remain seriously deficient from the point of view of women workers if they deal with only economic questions of pay and working conditions, and fail to take up other problems which stem from the recomposition of new forms of subordination of women as a gender" (Hale & Wills 2005, 49). In most factories, this typically involves the substitution of paternal control in the home with control by male supervisors in the factory, and replacing control by confinement in the home with control through the threat of sexual and physical violence.

Policy Recommendations and Concluding Remarks:

Coupled with addressing these concerns, there needs to be a re-regulation of the global labor markets and a removal of laissez-fair economic policies. Such policies could include the

reorganization of subcontract labor so that workers are in closer contact with the buyers of their products. Frequently this leads to a better transparency of factory conditions and workers' rights. Some labels, such as Nike, Adidas, Levi Strauss, and Gap now accept responsibility for working conditions throughout their supply chains (Hale & Wills 2005). Such exemplary corporate responsibility should be required of all clothing brands, with fines placed on the Northern Corporations – rather than the subcontracted factories – to comply with core labor standards. Fines could then be redistributed to workers at the end of the supply chain.

Often, countries pass the ILO core standards, but do not implement them within their factories. This gap between legislation and implementation is most notable in China, which passed a slew of regulations to join the WTO, but failed to change working conditions according to auditors (Creighton et al, 2006). Thus, effective implementation is imperative to mobilize changes in the workforce. Other alternatives to the social clause could include investigating the implementation of labor codes by the ILO in order to aid this process.

Other options should incorporate NGO initiatives aimed at improving the lives of poor women workers. Countries could be ranked on a series of indicators such as working conditions, living conditions, and efforts in place to empower women workers. Compiled reports of legislation and implementation could then be sold to companies looking to invest abroad. Investment in poorly-ranked countries needs to be discouraged, and the WTO could instead put incentives in place to promote investment in highly-ranked countries. Such benefits could include lowered duties for exports and tax incentives for foreign direct investment. Additionally, all clothing corporations with profits over a certain level should be required to reinvest a percentage of those profits into community development programs in the countries in which their factories operate.

It is not only up to corporations to prevent the exploitation of workers, but it also the responsibility of governments and the IMF to prevent the exploitation of the poor. The IMF should seriously reconsider its neo-liberal paradigm and reassess its structural austerity programs. Governments of developing countries should not be required to quickly privatize basic needs such as water, electricity, land, healthcare, daycare, and education. If these necessities are provided by governments to the poor, their “power to choose” in terms of work will be greatly enhanced. No longer would difficult factory work for low pay be in such high demand, and certainly the lives of poor women would be greatly enhanced.

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