Women, Work and Empowerment: A Study of women workers in two of Sri Lanka’s export processing zones

Peter Hancock
Centre for Social Research, Faculty of Arts and Education
Edith Cowan University
p.hancock@ecu.edu.au

Abstract:
In the last three decades young, predominantly unmarried, Sri Lankan women have formed the backbone of an enormous economic shift toward export oriented industrialisation. As a result much attention has focused upon the impacts and outcomes of this shift upon Sri Lankan women, particularly those employed in the nation’s numerous Export Processing Zones (EPZs). Using both qualitative and quantitative methodology, this paper is a contribution to this canon of literature. While confirming that Sri Lankan EPZ factory women do face serious hardships and new forms of gender inequality and subordination as a result of their roles as ‘factory women’, I also discovered evidence of some of the benefits new and stable employment provide.

Introduction
The rapid absorption of young women into formal employment in Sri Lankan EPZs has caused hardships for women in the workplace, at societal-levels and related gender subordination. However, employment has also brought about many benefits, particularly to families and households where stable incomes are usually non-existent. This dichotomy forms the basis of the paper, which concludes that it is possible for Sri Lankan EPZ factory women to experience processes of empowerment and disempowerment simultaneously. In essence, the qualitative component of my research tended toward conclusions that factory women were subordinated at the societal and economic level, while the quantitative component of my research indicated potential for significant empowerment (as a result of relatively high monthly salaries and stable employment). Due to space restrictions, this paper presents findings from the research...
conducted rather than any conceptual or analytical framework other than to note that I conceptualised empowerment in simple terms (mother-daughter comparisons, societal status, ability to solve problems, education levels, economic power) and in line with previous research I had completed among Indonesian factory women as seen in Hancock, (2000; 2001a & 2001b). Despite this simple conceptualisation of empowerment (which the participants had no problem relating to or understanding) the resulting paper had some difficulty in concluding one way or the other! Were women empowered as a result of factory work?

Map One: Export Processing Zones in Sri Lanka

Methodology and Background

Sri Lankan factory women were randomly selected to participate in my research (a questionnaire), the only criteria being that they had worked in an export-oriented factory for at least one year prior to data collection. Participants were identified after contacting NGOs and labour support groups in areas close to the EPZ. After the completion of the questionnaire a further sub-sample of respondents completed focus groups and in-depth interviews.
370 women completed the questionnaire (220 from Katunayake and 150 from Kandy). Of the original 370 participants, 97 women further participated in eight focus groups, four in the Kandy and four in Katunayake and 19 women completed in-depth interviews (12 from Katunayake and 7 from Kandy). Further interviews were conducted with various factory managers and NGO staff (all in English). Two female research assistants were employed both of whom were fluent in English and Sinhalese. Access to factories in the two EPZs was granted through the Sri Lankan Board of Investment and cooperation was also received from the respective Directors of the EPZs. I visited a number of factories simply to observe and interview management and was only denied access by one of the factories (an Indian-owned garment enterprise). Access to factories was not controlled by anyone and through random selection potential bias was avoided.

**Demographic Data (Findings)**

Table 1 outlines the age, marital status and education levels of respondents. In summary, they were under 24 years, mostly unmarried with little work experience and minimal educational levels. However, lower education levels of the Katunayake participants are not, however, causally linked to the wages levels, working conditions or status in the home as one would expect. Indeed, as is highlighted in sections below, the respondents with the lower education levels (the Katunayake workers) exhibited superior ‘working conditions’.

**Table 1: Age, Marital Status and Education Levels**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average Age</th>
<th>% of all workers Married</th>
<th>‘O’ Levels</th>
<th>‘A’ Levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katunayake</td>
<td>24.2 years</td>
<td>18 (n=66)</td>
<td>68 % (n=251)</td>
<td>27 % (n=100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kandy</td>
<td>22.2 years</td>
<td>2 (n=7)</td>
<td>17 % (n=63)</td>
<td>83 % (n=307)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>23.4 years</td>
<td>10 (n=37)</td>
<td>47.6 % (n=176)</td>
<td>49.7 % (n=184)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2004

**Work and Empowerment (Findings)**

Empowerment of women is commonly associated with increased education levels and formal employment among young women in developing nations. Neo-liberals commonly assume a wage will empower women, while most feminist scholars argue
that labour force participation by young women in developing nations is overtly disempowering due to structural forces related to patriarchy, harsh working conditions and poor wages. Both arguments are valid, however based on my research neither are satisfactory explanations in their own right.

**Quantitative Data**

Table 2 describes the role and status of factory workers compared to their mothers. As can be noted, the majority thought they were ‘better of’ than their mothers, though the data highlights a slight difference in response between Katunayake and workers from Kandy.

**Table 2: Role and Status of Factory Workers Compared to their Mothers’**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1) Better Role and Status Than Mother</th>
<th>(2) Better Than Mother in Some Areas But Not in Others</th>
<th>(3) Mother’s Role and Status Better</th>
<th>(4) No Difference in Role and Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katunayake</td>
<td>74.1 (n=275)</td>
<td>11.4 (n=43)</td>
<td>10 (n=37)</td>
<td>3.2 (n=12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kandy</td>
<td>41.6 (n=153)</td>
<td>44.5 (n=165)</td>
<td>10.2 (n=38)</td>
<td>3.6 (n=13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


When participants were asked about the impacts of factory work in terms of improvement in their lives, significant patterns emerged with both respondent groups providing overwhelmingly positive answers to the questions in Table 3. These answers were based predominantly upon the income and the power that it provides. However, problems with societal subjugation and working conditions, as well as socio-economic subordination significantly influenced the ways in which factory work is perceived by the workers.

The over-riding reason provided by the 370 participants for choosing to work in a factory was ‘economic factors’. Given the poor economic position of Sri Lanka, particularly its rural areas, this is not surprising and matches other research (Malhotra & Degraff, 1997) In reality, factory employment is one of only a few stable employment options available to young women in rural Sri Lanka.
### Table 3: The Impacts of Factory Work on Factory Workers Lives in General

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1) Improvement in Life, Financial/Problem Solving Capabilities</th>
<th>(2) Improvement in Life, But With Problems (Stress, Boredom, Exhaustion, etc)</th>
<th>(3) Negative Health Impacts and No Free Time</th>
<th>(4) Life Worse than Before</th>
<th>(5) Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katunayake</td>
<td>63.2 %</td>
<td>26.4 %</td>
<td>4.1 %</td>
<td>5 %</td>
<td>1.4 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kandy</td>
<td>51.4 %</td>
<td>40.8 %</td>
<td>0 %</td>
<td>7 %</td>
<td>0.7 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Interesting data was revealed *vis-à-vis* working conditions. The women from both groups earned, on average and not including overtime, 4,683 Rupees per month (Table 4). They worked an average 50.75 hours per week, on top of which an average of 8.8 hours overtime was worked. Their fathers’ ‘average’ income was 3,035 Rupees. The highest maximum salary was 12,000 Rupees. Analysis of the relationship between the number of hours worked on overtime and increases in salary was tested. The Pearson Correlation used to test the relationship between the two variables, resulted in $r = 0.479$ (and for the monthly hours worked, $M = 9.6$ and $SD = 7.27$ and for overtime salary; $M = 1198$ and $SD = 1012$) which is a significant correlation. The conclusion drawn is that the amount paid for overtime increases incrementally with the number of hours worked.

### Table 4: Working Conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All currency in Sri Lankan Rupees</th>
<th>Average Monthly Salary</th>
<th>Average Hours Worked Per Week</th>
<th>Average Hours on Overtime</th>
<th>Father’s Average Monthly Salary</th>
<th>Average Remittances to Family</th>
<th>Proportion of Income to Total Family Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katunayake</td>
<td>5,387</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2,274</td>
<td>1,106</td>
<td>54 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kandy</td>
<td>3,979</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>3,797</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>40 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>4,683</td>
<td>50.75</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>3,035</td>
<td>797</td>
<td>47 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


A further correlation analysis of all participants revealed a very weak relationship between marital status, age and monthly salary. In other words, age and marital status was not a factor in predicting wage levels. There was, however, a positive relationship between length of tenure in factory employment and wage levels. It could be reasonably argued, therefore that if workers stay in employment for longer periods that they will receive higher salaries.
Money sent home or contributed to the family is an important phenomenon in developing nations and this was no different among the women sampled in my research. Further, evidence that women had monies left over each month to send to families was a clear indication that women were not incurring debts simply as a result of working as Elson (1999) found among women as labour in other South Asian nations and Wolf (1992) among Indonesian factory women. The women who participated in my research remitted an average of 797 Rupees to their families each month. More importantly, when the women worked out the proportion that their factory wage was to their entire household or family income (whether they lived in a boarding house or at home) the average proportional income was 47% (Table 4). This is a significant figure and highlights the major reason why factory employment is important to young women and their families, particularly families who live in poverty.

**Qualitative Data**

While the analysis of the quantitative data presented above pointed to evidence of empowerment, or at least the process of empowerment, as a result of work, qualitative data revealed a picture that was far more negative and indeed potentially disempowering. Further, the qualitative data and narratives (presented below) highlight the mechanisms of patriarchy at most levels of Sri Lankan society.

Problems at the workplace were the most common factors traced to ‘negative impacts’ by participants. Nevertheless, the qualitative data show clear evidence of complex and overlapping boundaries of subjugation and subordination, whereby health problems, caused predominantly by long hours of work, combined with the industrial system and societal scorn, were obvious hardships. This is not unusual in developing nations. Of further significance is the dominance of societal issues in the data. These were identified as a major problem and a significant negative impact, particularly among the Kandy respondents.

Issues of societal-level subjugation of young women who work in Sri Lanka’s EPZs is significant. As the majority of the women who participated in my research originated from rural backgrounds, they are in the short term ‘at the mercy’ of many societal forces over which they have little control. The perceptions of many of the participants
show clearly ways in which Sri Lankan society can oppress and disempower as highlighted by Attanapola (2003) and Hewamanne (2003).

Many of the women had problems with their workplace. Health was a commonly cited problem. The familiar story we heard was that for all ailments, whether they were suffering from fever, cramps, nausea, backache, dizziness or lack of energy, the health workers in the factories provided the women with panadol. This problem has also been cited in other studies (see Attanapola, 2003, for example). Some of these issues were revealed in the narratives of factory women listed below:

Our mothers were never allowed to work, they were tied up in the house. I am allowed to work in the factory, but I am completely controlled by my in-laws and husband. They control my salary and every decision I take. I am scared of them (focus group, Katunayake, December 17\textsuperscript{th} 2004).

We are expected to work all day, standing in one position for hours at a time and with no break. The managers tell us that we should view them as fathers or older brothers. When we get home at night we are expected to do housework or cook for our families. We are too tired to do anything else (in-depth interview, Kandy, December 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2004).

There has been a lot of pressure from the international community to support women in the EPZs. There are many NGOs and government agencies working to protect and empower women, but we still hear many stories about abuse and inhuman treatment. Workers must organise and work toward having enough power to challenge the managers (focus group, Katunayake, December 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2004).

Societal level subjugation and subordination of EPZ workers in Sri Lanka is well documented (see Attanapola, 2003; Hewamanne, 2003; and Lynch 2002). However, the narratives from factory women themselves collected in my research also help bring these issues to light and highlight the complexities such women face in everyday life. They also highlight new issues of public harassment of women, an issue not commonly addressed in the literature:

Society has a very bad perception of women factory workers. They look down on us and consider us as immoral people. We are not accepted and people disrespect us. We cannot walk on the road alone. Men think that we are playthings that can be
used for their pleasure. Men fiddle and touch us on buses. They do not think of us as people working for a living (in-depth interview, Katunayake, December 19th, 2004).

We are the focus of gossip and hatred. Because we come from another region to work here, the local people treat us like we are whores. We are at the mercy of their laughter and abuse, there is nothing we can do (focus group, Kandy, January 5th 2005).

I lie to the people in my village about where I work. I am too ashamed to say I am a factory worker. If the village men find out where I work, I will become a target for their games and abuses (in-depth interview, Katunayake, January 10th, 2005).

Most stated that their status in their family had improved as a result of factory work. Of these, many traced this to the ability to provide for oneself and to their ability to financially assist their family, while the remaining small majority traced their newfound status to the ability to make decisions at the micro level and to generational differences between themselves and their mothers. Only some of participants stated that their status in society had improved as a result of factory work. On the other hand, most participants stated that they had not experienced improved status at the societal level. It is this experience that highlights the issue of societal-level subordination in Sri Lanka. For example, many participants reported that the shame of working in a factory and being ridiculed was ‘too much’ for them and others stated that they had ruined their life by taking a factory job and no decent man would marry them. These societal forces clearly demonstrate the power of discourse and identity in Sri Lanka.

The participants showed clearly that they had experienced significant levels of empowerment at the individual and family level. Alternatively, they no doubt faced serious forms of subjugation at the village (community), industrial and societal levels. However, the fact that the majority of participants chose to work in EPZs, and continued to remain employed for relatively long periods of time, implies an exertion of power, or a form of ‘voting with their feet’. Nevertheless, the potential for disempowerment among factory women was everywhere and an unnecessary obstacle.
Conclusion

It is to be expected that factory work causes ‘hardships’ to the young women who participated in my research, and indeed to most young women who work in Sri Lanka’s EPZs. Industrial employment is difficult, repetitive, boring and exhausting. Most of the literature that this research has cited has portrayed young Sri Lankan women who work in EPZs as victims of the ‘industrial system’, or powerless individuals subjugated and subordinated by significant societal forces. My research acknowledges that indeed these forces of subordination and subjugation do exist and form major obstacles through which young women must traverse to become involved in the processes of empowerment.

This paper also highlighted some of the benefits of industrial employment (regular income, overtime benefits, exposure to Western industrial methods, and a certain degree of independence). The fact that so many young Sri Lankan women persevere in the face of adversity is a form of resistance given the societal scorn they commonly experience. Further, the regular wages of the women we studied were highly significant to themselves and their families.

The analysis of qualitative data, as opposed to the quantitative data where n= 370, highlighted some results that could be construed as contradictory. Women in my research were asked (in both qualitative and quantitative forms) questions about status and empowerment. The results of qualitative analysis were different to the quantitative analysis, despite very similar questions being asked. This is due to the more intensive, insightful and less-formal nature of the qualitative data collection methods, to which participants reacted very positively. It is of great interest that the results of qualitative analysis would lead to a conclusion that the participants were victims and disempowered as a result of factory work, while the quantitative analysis pointed to a somewhat different conclusion. From this I concluded that the participants in my research were leading complex lives in which processes of empowerment and disempowerment were working simultaneously.
References


