

Exports, Gender and Poverty: A Critical Dialogue

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This article explores the nexus between exports, gender, and poverty by taking into consideration the two most prominent exports from Sri Lanka, viz. labour and garments; while the former is a service (largely housemaids), latter is an industry. Further, women, who are largely drawn from rural and semi-urban areas, dominate these two export sectors. This article is an opinion piece, and nothing more than that.

Exports play a major role in the Sri Lankan economy. Two major exports in terms of volume and value are garments and labour. Total value of exports of garments and textiles during 2006 was LKR 320,830 million (USD 2,971 million), which was 13% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2006. Similarly, total net private remittances received from Sri Lankans working abroad during 2006 was LKR 223,452 million (USD 2,069 million), which was almost 10% of the GDP in 2006. Hence, almost 23% of the GDP is derived from the exports of garments and labour. In addition to the remittances through the formal banking and money transfer channels there is a lot more coming through the unofficial channels, the amount of which is unknown. Garments and labour exports are the two largest sources of foreign exchange earnings to the country. Therefore, these two exports make immense contribution to the macro economy of Sri Lanka.

Moreover, women dominate the labour force of these two export sectors. Women account for over 80% of the labour force in the export garments sector. Similarly, about two-thirds of the labour exports are women. There are over a million Sri Lankan workers abroad. Bulk of them is housemaids in the Middle East. There are housemaids going to Cyprus, Malaysia, and Singapore as well in the past decade. Nearly a million Sri Lankan women work in the Middle East and the garments factories in Sri Lanka, which is 10% of the total female population in the country. Furthermore, vast majority of the female workers in the export garments sector and housemaids to the Middle East are from rural areas and deprived communities. The foregoing information indicates that there is a strong nexus between exports, gender and poverty in Sri Lanka, which is unambiguous. There is also no doubt about the enormous contribution these export sectors make to the macro economy. However, there are differences of opinion as regards the impact of these two sectors at the micro/household/individual level.

Critics claim that export garments industry workers and housemaids in the Middle East are exploited by long hours of work, poor working conditions, and low wages. Besides, critics also argue that these two export sectors have created social problems within the households as well as in the wider community, because of broken families and children going astray as a result of women leaving their children with the spouse when they go abroad, and unmarried women exploited by unscrupulous men in and around the garment factories. However, this article argues that the social problems created by these two export sectors are minimal in comparison to the positive effects they have at the micro/household/individual level, and it is the existing economic, social, and cultural deprivation that have propelled these workers to seek employment abroad or in the garments factories.

For example, every year over hundred thousand women go to the Middle East to work as housemaids. There are no figures available on the number of women

affected by physical and/or psychological harassment/abuse abroad or the number of families of migrants affected due to the absence of a mother. However, from the media references to such incidences we could gather that such incidences affect only a tiny proportion of migrants and their families. Similarly, the numbers of women who undergo personal or social problems in and around the garment factories appear to be marginal in comparison to about 350,000 women working in this industry. At the same time, according to the studies undertaken by the MARGA Institute and the Centre for Women's Research, the material well being of the migrants and their families have improved a lot.

These two export sectors are new developments in the post-1977 liberalisation period that have provided enormous opportunities for women to seek paid employment in the formal sectors of the economy who were hitherto confined to unpaid household work or in their home gardens. First of all, we have to remember that garments and migrant workers are voluntary labour and not forced labour. That is, individuals are making a conscious free choice, often with the approval of their immediate family members, to seek employment in garment factories or migrate abroad for employment. These paid employment opportunities have empowered domesticated women to be independent of the patriarchal social structures within the household as well as in the wider society.

Critics claim that employers, through cheap labour and other physical and psychological constraints and abuses, exploit these women workers (including rape in extreme cases). These critics use an absolute definition of 'exploitation'. That is, international benchmarks of economic, social, and cultural rights of workers are used to define exploitation. In terms of these international benchmarks, women workers in garment factories and housemaids in the Middle East are indeed exploited. Besides, critics also implicitly assume that these women workers were not exploited within their households or wider community prior to entering into the formal labour market. However, this article pleads for the use of a relative definition of 'exploitation' to determine whether these workers are exploited more now than before. That is, we have to compare the level of exploitation of these women within the household or in the wider community prior to entering paid employment with the level of exploitation at their present workplaces.

If we use the relative definition of exploitation we will come to realise the reason for the growing demand for employment in garment factories and the Middle East in spite of the exploitative working conditions. These women workers continue to seek employment in garment factories and the Middle East because they as individuals and their families are relatively better off than they were prior to seeking paid employment.

The living standards of the families of these women workers must have improved, if not there is no incentive for them to seek employment in garment factories or the Middle East. Many studies within the country as well as in other labour and garments exporting countries have demonstrated that material well being of the families involved has improved, albeit, in some instances, at a social cost. That is, the families of these women workers have emerged out of absolute poverty, though they may remain relatively poor. Further, physical and psychological harassment or abuse they endure in the garment factories and/or their living places and within the households in the Middle East may not be much different from what they have experienced within their own families and communities (including incest and rape) prior to entering the paid employment market. Furthermore, the number of such incidences in the garment factories or Middle East pale into insignificance compared to the hundreds of thousands employed in these places.

For example, critics point to the physical, psychological, and sexual harassment of housemaids in the Middle East and women workers in and around garment factories (including rape and murder), which is true. However, what they do not consider and highlight is the exploitation of domestic aides within the households in Sri Lanka and workers in non-export factories and offices (including sexual harassment, rape, and murder). If we compare the wages and the level of exploitation of workers in the export processing zones and the Middle East with that of wages and level of exploitation in local workplaces, it would be clear that workers in the former are relatively better off than the latter (I emphasise relatively). This explains why there is a growing demand for employment in these sectors despite the apparent hazardous nature of such jobs.

Generally, research on the housemaids in the Middle East and workers in the export garment factories has concentrated on international benchmarks on economic, social, and cultural rights of the workers concerned. However, in order to find out whether these new employments have enhanced the economic, social, and cultural welfare of the workers and their families or not, it is imperative to compare their pre-employment status with that of the current status. This is the major lacuna in research into these aspects of trade.

This article pleads for a more open-minded understanding of the issues involved, and not rush into putting administrative and legal hurdles to women workers seeking employment in these sectors at their free will. Recent prohibition of women who have children below the age of 5 years going abroad for employment by the government is a negative administrative control of freedom of choice. Instead the government should evolve suitable social policy/ies to address the social problems created by migration of mothers with very young children. Moreover, some of the conditions applied on the imports from developing countries to the developed countries could be considered as non-tariff barriers to trade. International benchmarks are a luxury these workers can ill afford. No worker would seek a job that is less attractive than her pre-employment position. The fact that they may be better off now than the pre-employment times does not mean that these workers should not aspire to get better working conditions and wages according to international standards, and make the employers meet international benchmarks in terms of economic, social, and cultural rights of the employees. Indeed these workers have the right to do so. But such aspiration should not be at the cost of falling back to the pre-employment economic, social, and cultural status.