

Women of Sri Lanka: Oppressed or Emancipated?

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This is International Women's Year and the several discussions that have been held on the subject have been mostly general ones. In this article an attempt is made to place the level of exploitation of women in Sri Lanka in scientific perspective. Kumari Jayawardena teaches in the University of Sri Lanka and among her publications is Rise of the Labour Movement in Sri Lanka.

Are women in Sri Lanka exploited and oppressed and in need of emancipation? Or does the question of women's liberation not arise in this country because of our religious and cultural traditions and because we have the first woman Prime Minister in the world? These are among the questions that women's organisations and trade unions in Sri Lanka have been discussing at meetings to celebrate International Women's Year. Attempts to discuss such questions in the absence of comprehensive research about the role of women in society or their status can only be tentative and impressionistic. Detailed studies must be made into the specific problems of women workers in the urban, rural and plantation sectors and into the role of woman as wife, mother and worker, before a more definitive analysis can be made of the positions of women in Sri Lanka.

Moreover, in discussing the problems facing women in Sri Lanka, we must recognise the fact that all women do not as a whole belong to

a separate homogeneous class, subject to the same forms of exploitation and oppression. There are class differences between unskilled women workers in the plantations, paddy fields and factories who receive unequal pay, and the professional middle-class women who receive equal pay with men and have an economic independence denied to the poorer women. Apart from the differences in social strata, there are also cultural, religious and regional differences between women. For example, it is difficult to compare the secluded Muslim women of Kalpitiya, the Jaffna women from orthodox Hindu families, and the rural Sinhala women from areas where strong feudal relationships prevail, with the women of the urbanised elite and the militant women in the trade union and political movements.

However, while accepting all these limitations which arise in any discussion on the position of women, one can yet venture the view that in patriarchal male-dominated societies, women occupy a subordinate status and are *subject to varying*

degrees of discrimination, exploitation and oppression.

It was Charles Fourier, a 19th century Utopian Socialist who first pointed out that the degree of the general emancipation of any society can be measured by the degree of the emancipation of women in that society, and Socialist thinkers from then onwards have shown that the real liberation of both men and women cannot be achieved in an economic and social system based on the exploitation of the working people.

In writing of India, Ashok Rudra has remarked that "Indian society has all along been a male-dominated society, where the woman's place has been primarily confined to the home, her role limited to procreation, upbringing of children, and catering for the needs of men folk by way of creature comforts..... women's position was considerably higher during the Vedic period.... but *during no historic period did women enjoy equal position and status with men.*"

This picture would be broadly true for Sri Lanka with the addition that the influence of Buddhism made for a greater degree of freedom for women. But, in spite of periods when the country was ruled by queens, and in spite of the liberating influence of Buddhism, society at all stages of history has been male-dominated; working women toiled in the fields and the women of the ruling classes lived idle and parasitic lives.

The advent of imperialism to Sri Lanka radically altered the economic structure of the country, imposing capitalist forms of production on a feudal agricultural economy. The growth of plantation capitalism after the 1830's, the development of transport and the emergence of Colombo as the commercial centre of the export economy had repercussions on the role of women. The expansion of education, including female education in the 19th and 20th centuries also led to the entry of numbers of middle-class women to professions such as teaching, nursing and secretarial work. With the transition to capitalism in the 19th century, women and girls who had earlier laboured in semi-feudal conditions as unpaid family workers began to be recruited as a source of cheap wage labour for the tea and rubber plantations where they earned 25 cents a day, (men received 33 cents), for work on the roads (12-36 cents a day) and in plumbago stores and coconut fibre mills, and as unskilled workers in shops and factories for 50 cents to Re. 1/- a day, and as domestic servants (for food and a pittance of about Rs. 3/- a month). It was a transition from one form of exploitation under feudalism to a new form of exploitation as wage labour under capitalism. However, women for the first time entered the labour market as wage workers, earning their living in money terms, thereby gaining a certain degree of economic independence and sharing (as Angela Davis has pointed out) "the deformed equality of equal oppression".

The question of the extent of the exploitation and the nature of the oppression of women in Sri Lanka today has to be considered in the context of a society where there is uneven economic development and varying degrees of social progress. In spite of the existence of a public sector spread over many areas of economic activity and the implementation of land reform, the economy of Sri Lanka is primarily a capitalist one with certain remnant semi-feudal characteristics. In the plantation sector which is still closely linked to imperialist interests, labour-management relations are semi-feudal. In the industrial sector, which is still relatively weak, there is a work force of

wage workers some of whom have links with the countryside. In the traditional agricultural sector, semi-feudal and petty bourgeois modes of production and class relations co-exist and overlap with each other.

This article briefly examines the economic base of the exploitation of women in the three key areas of the economy—the plantation, industrial and agricultural sectors—where women form a source of cheap labour for owners of the means of production, in addition to their work in the fields (and in the home) as unpaid family workers. The article will also indicate that this double exploitation is maintained by an elaborate institutional and ideological superstructure of laws, practices, traditions, religious beliefs and social customs geared to ensuring a continuous supply of cheap female labour and to maintaining women in a subordinate social status.

THE ECONOMIC BASE OF EXPLOITATION

Plantations

Women in Sri Lanka form 48.7% of the total population. Of the female population 17% are employed and of the total work force 26% are women. These rates are affected by the high rate of participation (53.8%) of women in plantations. According to the Socio-Economic Survey of 1969/70 the percentage breakdown is as follows:—

	Urban Female	Rural Female	Estate Female
Employed	10.4	11.1	53.8
Housework	54.2	55.3	27.1
Students	30.7	29.5	17.1
Unemployed	4.7	4.1	2.0

This shows significant differences between estate women and women in the other two sectors. On the plantations as much as 53.8% of the female population is employed, whereas the figures for urban and rural women are 10.4% and 11.1% respectively. However these figures are probably an underestimate for they do not take into account the

unpaid labour of women in agriculture.

In no sector of the economy is the exploitation of women less disguised and more blatant than in the plantation sector, which from colonial times has inherited a high rate of exploitation combined with a rigid, military style of organisation and management. There are 300,000 women working on estates forming nearly half of the estate working population. The women are almost wholly (93%) occupied in the plucking of tea, which is considered unskilled manual work. The estate women are among the *lowest paid category of workers* in the island and they receive lower wages than the men workers on estates. The daily rates of pay are Rs. 5/93 for men and Rs. 4/52 for women, and they are only paid for days on which they work which can range from 3 to 6 days a week. The average monthly wage of estate women workers today is about Rs. 90/- a month.

On the question of estate women workers Tissa Balasuriya has stated: "These are one of the most exploited groups of women in the whole world. The cup of tea depends on them, the Ceylonese upper classes live on them; big multinational companies like Liptons and Brooke Bonds have grown rich on their exploitation for well over a century. They are about half the work force that earns the foreign

exchange of Rs. 1,500 million out of our total Rs. 2,000 million foreign exchange earnings".

Estate women workers also work longer hours than other categories of workers including men workers on estates. This is because the women have to spend from 1 to 1½ hours (after they clock off from

the field after 8 hours work), in carrying the leaf to the factory and queuing up while it is weighed. This time is not counted in the hours of work.

Moreover, the health and educational levels of estate women are deplorably low and well below the national averages. For example, whereas the maternal mortality rate in Sri Lanka was 1.5 per thousand live births in 1969, the estate rate was 2.7. Infant mortality rates were 52.7 per thousand live births in 1969 whereas on estates it was 110 and is today probably much higher due to the present food crisis. The high infant mortality rates which have always been more than twice the national figures are due to the gross anaemia and under-nourishment of the estate mothers. The illiteracy of estate women also constitutes a major source for concern. The illiteracy rate for women on estates is as high as 51.8%, that is, double the rate for men on estates (26.8%).

Industry

With the growth of industrialisation in Sri Lanka there have been more employment opportunities for women in this sector as semi-skilled and unskilled labour. Women form a high proportion of the labour force in the textile and garment industry, in tea processing and the manufacture of primary rubber and coir fibres, in the beedi and tobacco industries, in the manufacture of industrial chemicals and food (including biscuits, chocolates and sweets), and in the match, footwear, brick, toy, and soap industries.

In all these industries women workers are paid less than men workers. Where industries come under the Wages Boards, the wage differentials for men and women are laid down and published each month in the Labour Gazette. The discrimination against women workers is perpetuated in two ways; either the jobs in each industry are demarcated into male and female sectors and labelled Class 'A' and Class 'B', and the women workers who are relegated to Class 'B'

are paid lower rates, or this fiction is dispensed with and a straightforward division is made into "male workers", "female workers" and "young persons", and different wage rates are paid to each of these categories. Below are a few examples (in trades governed by the Wages Boards) of discrimination in wage rates:—

	Men	Women
Brick & Tile Manufacturing	5.90	4.84
Coir Mattress & Bristle Fibre Export Trade	4.73	4.42
Match Manufacturing	5.20	4.75
Plumbago Trade	6.44	4.37
Rubber Export Trade	6.25	5.95

Agriculture

Women's organisations and political associations among women have largely tended to be urban based and little activity has been carried on in the rural areas. Nor have any studies been done on the nature of oppression and exploitation of women of different segments of rural society. The women of the landless and poor peasant families labour in the paddy-fields with men, but there is a certain division of labour, women being traditionally confined to work involving transplanting, weeding, winnowing and harvesting and excluded from ploughing, sowing and work in the threshing floor.

In areas where old beliefs persist that women are "unclean" certain tasks connected with paddy agriculture (such as work in the threshing floor) are not allocated to women in the belief that yields would go down.

Women of the middle peasantry are confined to work indoors rather than in the field, although seasonally they may supervise the work of others in the field. There is a tendency to preserve status by not relying on the manual labour of the women in the family, but on hired daily-paid labour.

Women form a significant proportion of wage labour in paddy cultivation; their rates of pay vary from district to district ranging from Rs. 3/50 to Rs. 5/- a day (with lunch) depending on the demand for labour

and the customary rates of pay in the areas. However, one factor is universal and that is that women doing such work receive Rs. 1/50 or Re. 1/- a day less than the men. Women wage workers in the countryside are from families of landless peasants, or those whose land holdings are too small to provide them with an adequate income.

In the traditional agricultural sector, apart from paddy cultivation, women are also employed in highland cultivation (coconut, chillies, vegetables, spices, etc.). Here, too, women of the family or women wage workers do many of the difficult tasks connected with this type of cultivation and, in the case of wage labour, the pay is less than that paid to men workers. In rural areas, women wage workers are also employed at lower wages in industries and occupations such as the production of bricks, coir, beedies, stone cutting and in construction.

In all three sectors (plantation, agricultural and industrial) the main demand of women workers should be for equal wages; they should also press for better canteen and medical facilities and for modern creches and infant schools, which would help to relieve these workers to some extent from the double exploitation as wage workers and housewives to which they are subject under the present economic system.

THE SUPERSTRUCTURE

In Sri Lanka — where the three sectors of the economy are partly based on cheap female labour, and where in certain echelons of society, social status is measured by the non-participation of women in productive work — a superstructure of laws, institutions, ideology and culture have been evolved to justify the prevalent exploitation and to rationalise

lise the unequal social status of women and the discrimination that is practised against them.

The laws of the country affect the position of women in several ways. There are many legislative enactments which give certain privileges to working women (maternity leave and benefits, canteen, creche and rest room facilities) but these are not always strictly followed by employers. While the larger industries adhere to the maternity benefits provisions, the canteen, creche and other facilities are in most cases deplorable or non-existent, even in the best run work places. There are also other restrictions on hours of work, on night work (with certain exceptions) and on overtime, which are in keeping with enlightened legislation in other countries. But on the key issue of equal pay for equal work, the wages board legislation of the country enshrines the reality of discrimination between men and women.

The other types of laws that affect women are the personal laws of the Roman-Dutch, Kandyan, Thesavalamai and Muslim Law systems which govern inheritance, marriage, divorce and allied problems. Studies must be made of these laws in order to determine where women are at a disadvantage in respect of property, succession, divorce, payment of alimony and the custody of children.

Discrimination against women is especially prevalent in employment and is perpetuated by both employers and the government. Even though access to secondary and higher education is freely available to girls, the highest unemployment rates in the country are to be found among girls and women. In several types of government employment there is open discrimination against woman; it has been stipulated by circular that only 20% of available vacancies in the clerical service and 10% in the administrative service are to be filled by women. The extent of this discrimination can be seen in the results of the last examination for recruitment to the administrative service.

Certain occupations are traditionally regarded as male preserves.

Women are not employed in the armed services, in transport (road, rail and harbour), postal delivery and sorting, in electricity, gas and water services and (except in one or two cases) as engineers, surveyors, machinists, and electricians. There are only a few women in higher level government posts, in the diplomatic service and in top management posts. As a recent report has shown, in the training courses conducted by government departments and corporations for management, technicians and trade apprenticeship "women are initially excluded, chiefly because no women are employed in those fields", but short courses are conducted for women in certain government departments in home economics, needlework and for weaving instructresses, typists and telephone operators. Even in the Department of Labour girls are excluded from all the vocational training courses except tailoring. By thus restricting women to the "traditional" fields and denying them access to technical and management training, the vicious circle of discrimination against women is perpetuated.

Women workers tend to be concentrated in occupations which have a high cheap labour potential such as plucking tea leaves (93%) women, stripping tobacco leaves (90%), weaving, spinning and garment industries (75%), packing, labelling and beedi manufacture (60%), rubber growing and agriculture (40-50%), and coconut growing and coir manufacture (30-40%). They are also found in the traditionally 'feminine' occupations such as nursing and midwifery (94%), teaching (54%) and telephone operators and typists (40-50%).

Within industries too there is a marked sex differentiation, with women being employed mainly in unskilled, routine, repetitive jobs (weaving, spinning, plucking, picking, sorting, labelling) and in skilled jobs not requiring very high mechanical, technical or intellectual skills (clerical, sales assistants, secretarial).

The culture and mythology of oppression

The economic exploitation of women and their relegation to a sub-

ordinate status is maintained and fostered by strong traditional and cultural attitudes towards women which originated in patriarchal and feudal societies, and which have been perpetuated through an elaborate mythology of modern-day superstitions directed against women. There are, in many instances, traditional prejudices and obscurantist views which are reinforced by capitalist ideology. For example, the view prevails that women can never be given equal rights with men because of biological, physiological and emotional differences. These differences are said not only to prove the inferiority of women but also to act as the basis for the division of labour, and the demarcation of "spheres of influence", between man and woman.

In classical Sinhala literature (influenced by the Indian tradition) the emphasis of the ruling class was on woman as an object, a thing of beauty and an ornament, whose purpose was to serve, entertain and amuse. Woman, whose main virtues were servility and beauty, had to conform to a given stereotype (face like the moon, eyes like blue lotuses, hair like black clouds, breasts like swans and hips like chariot wheels) and possess the five attributes of beauty—pancha kalyana, (hair, teeth, skin, flesh and youth).

Today, this "pancha kalyana" feudal attitude to women is used by the capitalist mass media to perpetuate the concept of woman as a mere commodity—either as a source of cheap labour or as a play-thing. For example, at a time when successful anti-imperialist liberation struggles with women participating alongside men have been waged in Asia, it is interesting to note that the mass media of the capitalist world is busy projecting and perpetuating myths and fantasies about the traditional "Oriental Woman". In the airline advertisements (including Air Ceylon) she is portrayed as beautiful and serene, whose only function is to serve male passengers: "Visions of warmth and laughter...our girl, gentle hostess in her sarong kebaya, she will care for you as only she knows how" (Singapore Airlines); "In Malaysia girls are taught the gentle ways of womanhood — among them

the art of providing graceful service; Its a tradition you will find on MAS" (Malaysian Airline Systems); "She never forgets how important you are. He certainly didn't expect her to sew his button back on, but she did" (Japan Air Lines); "The resplendently buoyant — yet prudently tender smile uniquely modest, traditionally oriental" (South Korean Air Lines).

and irrational, that they are by nature dependent, and that they are physically fragile. Second, on such false assumptions of physical and mental inferiority (which have always been used against oppressed groups), certain other myths are deliberately created: that women being inferior cannot claim equality with men and that equal pay cannot be given because women are incapable by

furniture, and shoes, thereby reducing women to the status of an eye-catching object in order to sell other commodities. The same is true of beauty contests organised and sponsored by business firms and by newspapers whereby women are degraded and reduced to the level of cattle, in order to advertise and market various products. Recently a "Miss Sri Lanka" beauty contest was advertised in the papers as follows "Calling all you beautiful dolls".



This picture by the well known Bengali artist Jemini Roy depicting Sita being consumed by fire at the death of her husband illustrates the social position of women in early India.

The so-called women's pages of our newspapers also direct the attention of women to personal questions like love, marriage, family, and ornamentation (jewellery, hair-styles, cosmetics) and consciously deflect their attention from social and political problems. This same attitude is seen in the weekly papers (*Tharuni*, *Vanitha Vithi*) which specifically cater to a large readership of young women. In a typical recent issue of *Tharuni*, the contents included a feature story on "Our beautiful air-hostesses", astrological marriage predictions, fashions for the New Year, and an article entitled "I would like to be beautiful". There was not a single story or reference to women at work, or women in any kind of intellectual, political or community activity.

Apart from the mystique about oriental women which the airlines of the world resort to, we find that the mass media in Sri Lanka is used to reinforce traditional prejudices about women and inculcate false values and attitudes to women.

Many myths concerning the alleged inferiority of women and their traditional social role are fostered by the press, films, radio as well as in text books and magazines. These myths fall into several broad categories. First, biological differences between men and women are used to put forward false propositions that women are mentally and physically weak. Such views are based on unscientific assumptions that women have less brains than men, that they are inherently emotional

definition of equal work. Third, the mass media is deliberately used to create a whole mythology that the only permissible roles for a woman are those of wife and mother. Connected with this are the well worn legends that woman's place is in the home, that housework is "women's work", that women who work outside the home lose their so-called femininity and that women are neither interested nor capable of involvement in political, economic and social activities.

How is the mass media used against women ?

In our newspapers, pictures of women are used to attract attention in advertisements to a whole range of products such as radios, tyres,

Sinhala and Tamil songs on the radio are also a form of propaganda to promote certain stereotype attitudes to women. The songs range from crude 'bailas' mocking working women ("Our grandmothers were not typists") to pop songs about the modern 'pancha kalyana' who demands and extorts clothes, perfume and jewellery from a man, who in turn is proud to be seen with a well-adorned woman.

The most degrading attitudes to women are reflected in the recent spate of vulgar Sinhala films whose crude titles are indicative of the content. (සුකිරි කෙල්ල, රත්තරන් අම්මා, ඔන්න මාමෙ කෙල්ල පැනයි, ආවා සොයා ආදරේ). In such films a woman is portrayed as a devoted wife and mother sacrificing herself for husband and son, or as the doll-like girl friend of gangsters, mudalalis and play boys.

Women in Sinhala films are alternately slapped, pushed around, pampered, showered with jewellery and clothes, taken to night clubs and birthday parties or worshipped in a shameless hypocritical way as a long suffering "golden mother".

These attitudes to girls and women are inculcated from infancy and a cursory glance at any of our school text books will leave the reader in no doubt about the place of woman. In the Grade 9 Sinhala reader, a section from *Kavyasekera* is included—"(Advice to a Daughter)"—which urges a woman to spend her entire time in serving her husband and his family and in looking after his property and belongings. Taking another school book (English Book 4) at random we find the following examples :

"Mrs. Perera is cooking rice",

"Mr. Perera is working",

"Gunasiri is a mechanic",

"Somalatha is a dressmaker",

"Leela is sweeping the kitchen",

"Ranjith is repairing his bicycle",

For the school exhibition, "some boys will make model aeroplanes, spaceships, ships, trains, buses and motor cars. Some girls will make teapoy covers, tea cosies, tray cloths, cushion covers, paper flowers, shell ornaments."

In a country where nearly 30% of the work force are women, Mrs. Perera is portrayed cooking, sewing, sweeping and making endless cups of tea for Mr. Perera, who having returned from work is reading a book, while his daughter is sewing, but his son is playing with an engine. In all our text books women are never portrayed doing intellectual or mechanical work, reading books or going out to work.

Signs of hope

In discussing Sri Lanka, we must emphasise certain positive aspects which favour the emancipation of women. The fact that the country has the first woman Prime Minister, that there have been and are women Ministers and Members of Parliament, that there are a few women University Professors and that some women hold leading positions in government service and in certain professions (especially legal and medical), that all the radical political organisations in this country and the trade union movement have had their share of militant, courageous women activists — all these are no doubt incentives to other women in the present struggle to achieve equal rights.

One of the most hopeful signs is the high educational standard among girls today. With the advent of free education and education in Swabasha girls have availed themselves of all opportunities for education. For example of the total enrolment of students in grades 1-12 (for 1970) 48% of the students have been girls. What is more remarkable are the figures for the higher grades. In grades 9-10 (in 1970) there were 56% girls in the Arts and 41% in the parallel Science stream. In grades 11-12 the figures were 59% girls (Arts) and 36% girls (Science). The other remarkable development of the past decade has been the increase in girls at the University level (24% in 1961 and 42% in 1972). In some faculties like humanities, social sciences and education the women outnumber the men (53% in 1973) and the proportion of women in the science and medical faculties has increased significantly.

What does this mean in terms of the status of women? In traditional societies, the ignorance, illiteracy and lack of educational opportunities for women were weapons used

to keep women in a slave-like subordinate status. In a country where the women's literacy rate is among the highest in Asia (71% today compared to 10% in 1911) and where women have equal access to schools and universities, it will be difficult to continue to deprive women of equality in other fields.

But in spite of the hopeful position in education, women and girls in Sri Lanka are also subject to various forms of dependence and subjugation based on attitudes and practices of a feudal era. These include the dowry system, arranged marriages and a ready acceptance of the superior status of father, husband, and son and the subordinate roles of mother, wife and daughter.

The psychological problems and anxieties of women in Sri Lanka have yet to be studied, but from a cursory survey of attitudes of girls from rural homes one finds a multitude of fears and superstitions about devils, ghosts and spirits with malevolent influences over women, along with fears of rejection by parents, relations and society if any deviation is made from traditional norms of conduct. Some of these fears are of course inter-connected; the belief that certain devils possess women more than men is linked with taboos on women going out late, or leading an independent life. As in most patriarchal societies, this is also connected with a rigid code of female chastity.

Changes in the economic structure of the country, the introduction of collective forms of ownership and greater industrialisation will sweep away feudal attitudes to women and bring women into public life on an equal footing with men. One will then find that the great untapped source of productive and creative talent of the women of the country will be harnessed into all activities connected with the transition to Socialism.