

The Workers in the Ready-made Garment Industrial Sector

- A new way of life -

Based on a study conducted on the work force in the export processing zones.
(Free Trade Zone-Katunayake)

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Economic Background

The rapid increase in the percentage of females in the national work force was a significant feature present in the national work forces of both the European and Latin American countries in the fifties and in the sixties. This characteristic, in fact, was a phenomena seen in the work forces throughout the world and helped change the male dominance hitherto present in the structures of the work forces the world over.

It was almost after a decade that the Asian countries experienced this phenomenon and in Sri Lanka this was delayed almost till the last decade.

The change of government in Sri Lanka in 1978, paved the way for an open economy which resulted in rapid export development. The ready-made garment industry took pride of place in this respect. The number of companies engaged in textile and leather goods manufacturing numbered 530 in 1970 in which the work force totalled a figure of 27069. In 1973 the number of factories engaged in this industrial area of activity rose to 535 with a work force of 29994 persons. (Central Bank Report 1973.p 56.)The percentage vis-a vis the entire industrial sector in 1970 was 3.3% whereas in 1973 it fell to 2.4%.However, in 1978, the total number of factories in this sector was 654 and the total number employed rose to 38832.(Central Bank Report of 1978.p 61.)

Thus the phenomenal development of the textile and garment sector after 1977 was due to the establishment of free trade zones/export processing zones. A total number of 61419 were employed in the factories which came under the Greater Colombo Economic Commission out of which 70% worked in the ready-made garment sector. (Central Bank Report of 1989.p 55.) This situation improved in the nineties, which saw the inclusion of 60% of ready-made garments exports in the total industrial exports which rose to 69% in 1992. The numbers employed in factories coming under the Board Of Investment were 104220 in 1992 which is a 22%

increase from the figures in 1991. Fifty per cent of these employees worked in eighty factories in the Katunayake Export Processing Zone. (Central Bank Report 1992, p 56,94). About this time there were Export Processing Zones established in Koggala, Katunayake and in Biyagama and the majority of the factories were those engaged in the manufacture of ready-made garments. In 1981 out of the 51 factories 24 were ready-made garment factories i.e. around 47% and by 1982 the figure had risen to 69%. (H.B.N.S. Karunatileke. 1987.p 426-430). The export earnings of the projects coming under the purview of the Greater Colombo Economic Commission in 1986 was 5449 million rupees which was 43% of the total export earnings for the year out of which 4/5ths were earnings from the ready-made garment sector. According to the Central Bank Report for the year concerned, out of the total work force in the Zones which was 41614, 33937 - i.e. 81.55% were employed in the ready-made garment manufacturing sector. (Kumudini Rosa: 1989:1998). This confirms that the greater number of projects in the zones fall into the category of ready-made garment sector.

Evaluation of the Work force

The aim of this paper is not a mere analysis of statistical data but are identification of the common factors of the workforce with a view to ascertain the common features in their standard of living. The most common factor about this work force is that the highest percentage of workers belong to the female sex. This was even more evident in the analysis of the total workforces in all three zones.

Accordingly it is a fact that about 84% of the workforce comprise women. We see a 29% increase in the workforce in Katunayake itself an increase of 45% has been recorded. 68% of the total work force of 85,379 in all three zones were found in Katunayake. Why I selected the Katunayake zone for my study was because it had the biggest percentage of workers in all three zones and because it was 20 years since it commenced operations.

Even though the percentage of female workers in the zone is as much as 84% when the work force of the entire country is taken into consideration the percentage of females is less than males. By 1997 the rate of employment was 89.6% where the percentage of males employed was 65.7% over and above the percentage of females employed which was 33.1%. (Annual Report of the Central Bank 1997, p 103.) It is this fact that makes the higher percentage of female workers in the ready-made garment industry all the more interesting.

TABLE 01:

Name of Zone	Total no. Employees	No. of Females	%	No. of males	%
Katunayake	58720	49853	84.90	8867	15.10
Biyagama	21408	16770	78.33	4638	21.67
Koggala	5251	4746	90.38	505	9.62
Total	85379	71369	83.59	14010	16.41

The next common feature about the female work force is their age and their civil status. "In 1992, the majority of the female work force in the Katunayake Export Processing Zone fell into two main categories of age-i.e. ages between 15-29 years and 30-44 years. 50.7% fell into the first category whereas 46.6% fell into the second category." (W.I. De Silva:1985:77)." 37% of those employed in the export processing zones are females out of which the majority are unmarried and between the ages of 28-25 years." (T.Hettiarachchi/1991:42,43)." 85% of those employed in the export processing zones are those between the ages of 18-25 years and are of semi-skilled or non-skilled. Most of them have studied only upto the 8th or 10th grade." (Kumudini Rosa: 1989: 199,200). In the course of my study an employee attached to the Board of Investment job bank stated that while 88% of the female workers were unmarried and were around 18-25 years of age, 76% were between the ages of 16-25 years. While 69% had sat the G.C/E ordinary level examination 24% had dropped out of school before the G.C. E. Ordinary Level examination. There were around 5% who had sat the G.C.E. Advanced Level examination. Therefore one could see a similarity in their educational qualifications.

Another common feature about these workers was the fact that they all hailed from a rural village background. A survey was conducted by the Greater Colombo Economic Commission in 1980 with the assistance of around 27386 girls so as to identify the districts from which they hailed.

Accordingly 27% belong to the Gampaha district since the Katunayake processing zone is within the said district. 23% hailed from the district of Kurunegala while 14.4% come from the districts of Galle, Matara and Hambantota. 5% are from the districts of Anuradhapura

TABLE 2.

The district basis of the sample surveyed-1989

Name of district	percentage
1. Colombo	0.85
2. Kalutara	3.00
3. Kandy	52
4. Matale	2.1
5. Nuwara Eliya	1.3
6. Gampaha	22.00
7. Galle	5.00
8. Matara	6.00
9. Hambantota	3.4
10. Jaffna	0.01
11. Mannar	0.01
12. Mulatwu	0.01
13. Vavuniya	0.06
14. Batticalo	0.5
15. T'malee	0.3
16. Kurunegala	23.1
17. Puttalam	4.0
18. A'Pura	3.00
19. Polonnaruwa	2.00
20. Badulla	1.4
21. Monaragala	0.3
22. Ratnapura	4.00
23. Kegalle	8.00
Total	1005.3

and Polonnaruwa while 12% come from Ratnapura and Kegalle. The lowest percentage is from the North and the East. This shows that females from all over the country are represented in the Katunayake processing zone. When considering the ethnicity and the religious background of the work force the majority of them are Sinhala Buddhists. "While 97% are Sinhalese, 56% are Sinhala Buddhists. 41% are Sinhala Catholics since the majority of the people in the areas surrounding the zone are Catholics." (Kumudini Rosa:1989:200).

The next-most important factor to be taken into consideration is why these females with common characteristics should engage in working in the zone leaving their hometowns and villages. Most of those who seek to answer such a question is of the common view that it is mainly poverty which drives them to jobs away from their families and familiar surroundings.

This is of course true. Another explanation is that it is the state of joblessness which influences these persons to come away from their villages to work in the zones. "The youth labour force in developing countries has developed into a massive labour force which is available at any

given moment entirely due to the availability of excess labour and an acute state of joblessness prevalent in this part of the world." (Economic Review:1982 June 17). Thus, when taking into consideration the fact that in a context where certain skills have been obtained by certain individuals owing to free education but not in a position to get jobs to suit their qualifications, and also in an environment in which girls going far away to do jobs is scorned a massive female labour force is not made use of for a long period of time.

An interesting question which arises here is how this work force which was made inactive for a long period of time owing to the traditional beliefs of our society could, all of a sudden break away from the shackles of traditional belief and migrate to the city. The answer to that is the socio-economic revolution that took place in Sri Lanka. With the opening up of the economy the wants, aims and the needs of the people changed overnight. A new philosophy of 'living life to the full' emerged. Further the free availability of goods- especially imported goods, served as a bait to lure the hitherto conservative females to the city in search of jobs in order to fulfil their desire to own such imported goods. The desire to earn, to be successful, to raise one's standard of living was almost every middle-class woman's wish which resulted in their migration in large numbers to the cities.

The biggest challenge faced by these women was to find hostels or boardings close to their places of work. The lack of good boardings with the minimum facilities drove them into staying in places which were not satisfactory at all. A survey was conducted by the Greater Colombo Economic Commission so as to examine the conditions of these boarding houses. The results of this survey would help understand the conditions of the boarding places. (See table 3). According to Table 3, 46.35% of the boardings are in an around Katunayake. Further more than 50% of these boardings are small- housings with less than 50 inmates. The facilities available in the boarding houses left much to be desired. Even though standards call for the allocation of at least 36 square metres per person, these boardings usually house around five persons in an area of 100 square feet thus depriving the inmates of at least 20 square feet each. The results of the survey revealed that 4% of the boardings housed 6-10 girls in an area of 100 square feet, while 1% housed 11-25 persons. The walls of 76.9% of these boardings were not plastered. 19.2% used boards for walls while 1.0% used cadjan for the walls. The roofs were tiled in 60.2% cases while 26.9% had sheets and 7.5% had asbestos and 5.4% used cadjan. My observations also revealed that the height of the buildings of these boardings in a majority of the cases were about 10 feet. (10x10 or 20x10). There has not been any factual data published

about these boardings after the said survey. Since the height of most of these buildings was very low and the fact that most had asbestos sheets for the roof the heat inside the premises during the day was almost intolerable. Further except for a single door there wasn't even one window in most cases and there was a feeling of suffocation inside. Even though the Greater Colombo Economic Commission specifies the existence of one toilet for at least 25 persons, only 30 boardings were identified as being within the said specifications. The majority of these boardings did not have even the basic amenities such as clean water, adequate space, the required furniture and recreation facilities. The charges, however were only Rs. 100 per person which made the girls overlook most of the inconveniences. However, in 1997, there was a change in the situation, especially in the areas of Averiwatte, Halgastota and Jayawardenepura in which areas only 4% of the houses did not house boarders. Further, the last 20 years witnessed the rapid expansion of the number of boardings which brought about affluence to those running the boardings and which also gave rise to intense competition among them resulting in the numbers of houses with cadjan roofing decreasing dramatically. As at present almost 100% of the boardings are built with bricks and have the basic amenities providing the inmates with facilities to watch TV etc.,

Objectives

The lack of facilities in the boarding houses is not the only setback these girls have to put up with, while working in the zone. Stringent rules prevalent in most of the factories, sexual harassment by superiors, thefts of personal property, victimisation by unscrupulous persons are some of the more serious situations they have to encounter in the course of their work. Further the lack of proper drainage facilities also subject these female workers to various illnesses. In short this labour force has to live in surroundings which leave much to be desired.

The want of a job and the desire to increase their standard of living has made these girls tough so as to put up with all these setbacks and continue with their jobs. In other words they have adjusted themselves to a kind of living which, from outer look would show as one which is carefree and without the adherence to cultural norms. But in actual fact there is deep suffering inside and this outer show of a feeling of carefreeness is only a camouflage.

65% of the girls who were covered by my study were interested in continuing with their jobs for at least 10 years. 98% wanted to get married and lead a normal life. According to the statistics available at the office of the BOI there were 40% who had completed 10 years of service in the zone. Around 50% leave their jobs after serving for 5 to 10 years.

Spending Pattern

Another interesting feature was the spending patterns that were observed during the study. According to some who had conducted studies earlier, it was observed that only during the first few months that a certain amount of money is sent home by these girls. After a certain period of time their entire salaries are spent for themselves. However, in actual fact their spending traits show a deeper involvement. According to the study I conducted, around 75-80% send part of their salaries to their homes the amount of which will differ according to the kind of need that exist in each house. In families which could afford to spend on food the additional money sent by these girls is spent on the education of the rest of the family members. If however, the parents and the other members of the family are also employed the income earned by these girls is invested for the future. Most girls engaged themselves in putting 'seettu' to buy furniture or jewellery for themselves. Even without putting 'seettu' a good part of their income is set aside to buy jewellery for themselves. It was also revealed that there were around 15 jewellery shops in the Katunayake and Averiwatte areas and the practice of buying jewellery on the payment of instalments was also seen as a common habit among these workers. Even though these workers buy jewellery to adorn themselves the underlying objective is to collect a 'dowry' for themselves with the idea of marriage on a future date.

The money required for this purpose cannot solely be earned from the salary. Therefore around 90% of them engage themselves in overtime work. Further, they work towards earning the attendance incentives which have been introduced by the factories. Most of them cook their own meals as a means of minimising costs. This has also led to most of them selecting boardings which charge around Rs. 200-250 a month rather than opting for places with better facilities. Most of them try to keep their expenses to a minimum of around Rs. 1000 per month and therefore, food plays an important role in this context.

Most of the workers cook their own meals and confine themselves to cooking only once a day. "Around 37% cook their own meals or together with a few pooling the expenses. The concept of eating "out" does not mean taking their meals from the boutiques or from a canteen but buying their meals from houses which supply meals to Boarders." (T. Hettiarachchi: 1991:42) "Most of the females cook their own meals, or prepare their meals in groups" (Kumudini Rosa: 1989:203). According to the survey carried out by me almost 88% prepared their meals by themselves or in groups. Therefore a wooden box in each of these kitchens symbolised the living standards of these workers. The box contained all the condiments needed for cooking. However the quantities they purchased were confined to 50 or 100 grams, the most, at any one given time. The items of food each one needed were

purchased on credit from the boutique maintained by the owner of the boarding house the payment for which was collected together with the charges for the boarding on the 10th of each month.

Since most of these female workers engaged in shift work the small confines of the kitchens did not bother them. Each one used the facilities of the kitchen according to the timing of their respective shift. This method was adopted in case of washing clothes too. Most often their meal consisted of a dhal curry, a sambol or 'lunumiris'. However, on Sundays the meals had more vegetables in it. Even though some are of the view that most of these girls are suffering from malnutrition my survey revealed that what they were suffering was from the lack of adequate quantities of food more than the lack of nutrients in their meals.

Another marked characteristic of the standard of living of this particular group of people was that even though they minimised the costs of food the amounts they spent on adorning themselves such as on jewellery and on clothes was considerably high. Around 70% of the girls spent around Rs. 750 to a 1000 per month for this purpose while 8% spent as much as Rs. 1500 to 2000 per month on clothes and jewellery.

Most of them spend their leisure listening to Hindi songs and radio stations such as "Sirasa" and the majority of them owned a cassette recorder or at least a pocket radio. Watching the Sinhala teledramas too was observed as a common hobby among these girls but many did not enjoy the privilege of the availability of a TV set of their own.

Going to the cinema and the theatre too was seen as a hobby of these girls; however most preferred to go for variety entertainment shows. In 1990, there had been variety entertainment shows held almost every week in Averiwatte owing to their being so popular with these girls but since of late police permission was given only once a month to hold such shows.

'Love' too plays an important part in the lives of these girls. The majority of them have boyfriends/lovers. How they find their partners is the same as any other girl of their own age. Some of them get into such relationships with the sole objective of marriage and to lead a happy life. 35% of the families I interviewed during the course of my survey were those who were married to the girls who had come from afar to work in the zone and were once boarded in their homes. Nevertheless, owing to the large numbers of these girls in the area and also due to their poor reputation, certain unscrupulous men who are at times even married try to play around with them, so much so that these girls are often victims of sexual harassment.

The girls are very much aware of this situation but, still choose to have associations with the men of the area, their argument being that when they are identified with a man the others would not think of playing around with them-in other words that they are safer with a man around them.

Nevertheless, owing to the unlimited freedom they now enjoy-which they would not have otherwise enjoyed had they been living in the villages, and as a result of their youth the relationships these girls have with their male friends are most often of a sexual nature and akin to that of a marital relationship. The various abortion clinics and the nefarious hotels/rest rooms in the area bear ample evidence to this factor. According to a lab assistant in a medical centre in the area, around 15-20 samples of urine are received per day at this Centre for pregnancy tests. According to a source from the Averiwatte police the numbers of unmarried couples living together in rented rooms have increased dramatically. However since these persons are not minors there is nothing that the police could do about it, he said. However, complaints of sudden disappearances and complaints of malicious desertions, are, most often made by such people, he added. During the period 1995-97, 161 complaint of malicious desertions were received, while 185 complaints of sudden disappearances had been reported. Further, there have been numerous complaints of uncalled for, and uninhibited behaviour of these girls in dark lanes in the evenings by the residents of the area, which has led to periodical arrests of such persons by the police which however has not helped to improve the situation. The police however is of opinion that this sort of situation could not be brought under control or stopped to through the arm of the law and that this is human nature,

Reasons such as most factory owners being reluctant to employ married women, and the strain of living in sordid and unwelcome surroundings play an important role in the love life of these girls.

The complexity in their religious lives too go to show the tremendous pressure these girls are subject to. Most of these girls being Sinhala Buddhists, are boarded in Catholic houses and in a predominantly catholic area. Thus, the influence of the Christian religious rituals on their lives was obvious. When in 1997, I visited the area with the objective of observing a service in a well-known church in the area-the 'Kala Palliya', there were more than 5000 girls working in the zone participating in the service.

This does not mean that all these girls get converted to the Catholic religion. It is almost akin to our Buddhists visiting the Hindu Kovils to obtain relief in times of adversity. The only difference here is the substitution of the God in Catholicism for the Hindu gods. What these girls

look for is some source to obtain mental consolation and relief. They continue to go to the temple on Poya days and once they get back to their respective villages they would be behaving as any traditional Buddhist would - there is no doubt about it.

They would not hesitate one bit to fight for the rights of fellow-workers in the factory. However this has given various political groups encouragement to persuade them to join the political process. This however would not be successful since these girls do not have adequate knowledge about politics. Even though they would group themselves or join various groups in the zone to fight for the rights of fellow-workers they would not get involved directly in politics.

Conclusion

Thus, we find that the workers in the free trade zones have to socio-economic wise much in common with each other. This however I would describe as a way of life than a sub-culture since the standard of living and other traits are quite different in the workers in the other zones such as in Biyagama and Koggala. This would differ more in an area like Ratmalana where the ready-made garment industry thrives- the reason being that the workers adapt themselves to the life styles of the area in which they work wherever it may be. However, one factor is common to all of them.i.e. that the easy-going, care-free lives one sees from the surface is not what it really is but that these girls are under tremendous mental pressure working in environs quite different to what they are used to, in more urban surroundings, away from their villages .

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