

Working Women on Estates

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With the spread of colonial rule and the consequent introduction of capitalist forms of enterprise there arose a demand for female labour in the plantation and industrial sectors. The methods of exploitation in 19th century Britain, which included the cutting of production costs by employing the cheap and docile labour of women and children, were introduced to the colonies. Soon the foreign-dominated plantation sector in Sri Lanka came to rely heavily on the labour of women. In no sector of the economy was the exploitation of women less disguised and more blatant than in that of the plantations. Thus, the working women in the plantation sector came to be considered the most discriminated among the discriminated sections of workers in the country.

According to the 1971 census, out of a total work force of 3,622,000 the number of women employed amounted to 815,000 of whom 42 per cent (343,000) of these women were in the plantation sector (tea, rubber and coconut). In general the plucking of tea and tapping of rubber on estates are done by women. Women workers constitute approximately 52 per cent of the estate workforce.

The key area of discrimination is that of wages where open and legal discrimination is practised. While women in other sectors in

middle class occupations generally are entitled to equal wages, these working women are subject to wage discrimination.

The table below shows — for a ten year period from 1969 to 1978 — the wage movement and the disparities between male and female wages on the tea plantations:

The present basic minimum wage for tea growing is:		
Male	Female	Child
14.00	11.69	11.13

The Rs 70 increase announced by the government has not been implemented in the plantation sector as yet. The difference between men's wages and women's wages has been around 25 per cent. Further they work longer hours than the men, approximately from 7-7.30

BASIC MINIMUM WAGE INCLUDING ALLOWANCES 1969-1978

TEA PLANTATIONS		Males Rs.	Females Rs.	Difference Rs.	Difference Percentage
1969	...	4.67	3.65	1.02	21.8
1970	...	4.79	3.69	1.10	23.0
1971	...	5.09	3.83	1.26	24.9
1972	...	5.45	4.07	1.38	25.3
1973	...	6.17	4.55	1.62	26.3
1974	...	6.83	4.99	1.84	26.9
1975	...	7.01	5.11	1.90	27.1
1976	...	6.57	5.14	1.43	21.8
1977	...	8.29	6.25	1.95	23.8
1978 September	...	8.91	6.73	2.18	24.7

Source: *Labour Gazette* September 1978.

MINIMUM DAILY WAGE RATES, INCLUDING ALLOWANCES

	Male	Female
Tea growing and manufacturing	13.16	10.85
Rubber growing and manufacturing	13.40	11.25
Coconut	13.41	11.09
Coconut Manufacturing	11.69	10.10
Cocoa, Cardamom, Pepper growing and Manufacturing	10.55	8.33

Source: *Labour Gazette* Jan-June 1980

Within the entire plantation sector the disparities between male and female wages has been maintained as clearly seen in the table below. (Minimum daily wage rates, including allowances, as at January 1980, payable to workers for which Wages Boards are established).

a.m. to 4-4.30 with an hour for their noon meal. On tea and rubber estates men perform a variety of tasks known as 'Sundry'. The 'Sundry' work for males is on a task basis which is usually completed round about 1 p.m.

Children are also employed on the estates. The legal age for em-

ployment of children, on a casual basis is 14 years for girls and 15 for boys. Due to the shortage of labour on certain estates children younger than the stipulated age are also employed in work on the estates. One major factor in the high percentage of school-drop outs in the estate sector can be attributed to the employment of children; very often siblings stay home to look after the younger children. This is especially true of young girls. In families where women are the principal wage earners the differential in the wages only increases the financial burden.

It should also be noted that in situations where men are employed in the traditional female tasks of plucking and tapping they are paid the higher rate; whereas when women are employed in the usual male tasks they are paid the lower rate. It must also be emphasised that women work longer hours above the stipulated period. The women have to carry the heavy load of tea to the factory and queue up until it is weighed. This adds a further hour or more to the working day which is unpaid. It is also alleged that short weighing occurs frequently which deprives the women of their just dues.

The demand for equal wages for equal work has been in the forefront of the demands made by estate Trade Unions and other organisations. Though it has been granted in principle it has yet to be implemented in this sector.

Another important demand by the estate worker has been the demand for a monthly wage. Since work is on a daily paid basis, and unless there is a guarantee of a full months employment, the worker suffers financially. One can only imagine the uncertainty and anxiety of the worker who is both wage earner and home maker.

Yet another aspect of employment in this sector is that there is no occupational mobility for the worker. She spends her entire life either in plucking tea or in tapping. She receives the stipulated daily wage and there are no rewards, no mobility into the supervisory grades no increments, no bonuses or other fringe benefits. Even in comparison with her urban counterparts those women engaged in sorting and packing tea receive a higher wage. There is a discrepancy in the gratuities paid to the estate workers and other workers.

Further, wages are not tied to the cost of living as in the case of other workers.

Sri Lanka is often held up as a model for other developing countries. As regards 'quality of life' Sri Lanka rates high when compared to other third world countries. However, these claims should always be prefixed with this qualification 'except' for the plantation sector'. Sri Lanka has a high literacy rate, high life expectancy, low infant and maternal mortality rates. But a detailed breakdown of the country as a whole shows a wide discrepancy in essential services that are provided for the plantation sector as compared to other parts of the country as a whole.

HEALTH

The low health conditions of the estate women are reflected in the high infant and maternal mortality rates. In 1969 the all-island rate was 52 per thousand but the estate rate was double, being, 100 per thousand. The cause of death of infants under one year is mainly due to the anaemia of mothers and effects of protein deficiency and malnutrition. Similarly the maternal mortality figures is double that of the all island figure. In 1969 the all-island figure was 1.5 deaths per thousand births, while the estate figure was 2.7. Most of these women are under-nourished, anaemic and work extremely long hours under trying weather conditions. They also have a low fertility rate as compared to the other sectors.

The woman worker is entitled to six weeks maternity leave. Two weeks prior to date of confinement (which is optional) and four weeks after (which is compulsory). In the case of the estate worker she is entitled to only 36 days wages since Sunday is not a paid holiday as in the other sectors. Further if she gives birth in the maternity wards on the estates deductions are made from the maternity benefits for expenses for midwife's fees, linen etc. Due to this factor many women prefer to give birth in the line rooms under extremely insanitary conditions.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that maternal and infant mortality rates are so high. The medical facilities are totally inadequate to meet the needs of a resident work force. They do not have access to free medical facilities

provided to other sectors of the country. The estate manager has to pay Rs. 5/60 per day for a worker if he enters a government hospital. The estate clinic is run by a medical assistant with a midwife both of whom are usually unqualified. There have been several instances where women have died in child birth because there was no transport available to convey her to the nearest government hospital.

HOUSING

Where housing is concerned the plantation worker has minimal facilities. The so-called line-rooms (barrack type rows of rooms) built over 150 years have hardly changed over the years. The Survey of Consumer Finances (1973) showed that overcrowding in houses was 35 per cent in the urban sector, 37 per cent in the rural, and 75 per cent in the estate sector; and that only 10 per cent of estate workers had houses with cement floors. A recent survey on Hantane Estate, Kandy, states that the average number of persons occupying each of the line rooms was 5.6 (family size ranging from 3 to 9 persons). Recently there has been a programme to build cottage type separate houses, but the predominant forms of housing remains the old type of line rooms.

It is alleged that in order to induce local village labour to move in as resident estate labour these cottage type houses are offered to the local families. These can only exacerbate existing communal tension if there is no corresponding improvement in the traditional line rooms.

Another vital area for improvement is the provision of well equipped creches in all the estates. Currently there is an UNICEF assisted programme to provide well equipped creches and to upgrade the existing ones. These creches could be used as a venue for imparting health and nutritional teaching and services to young children and their mothers. But it is reported that the task of caring for the children at the creches is performed by an old estate woman, while the creche attendants are mainly young non-Tamil speaking girls. This could be another area of tension since the more educated girls of estate origin vie for these posts and since these jobs are allocated through the 'Job Bank' system it is alleged that the estate girls do not stand much of a chance.

EDUCATION

If there is any one area which can be singled out as an 'area of darkness' it is in the field of education of the estate worker. The historic legacy of neglect of education still prevails in plantation areas where educational levels lag far behind those prevailing in other sectors. The general educational statistics reveal the realities regarding educational levels of young girls and women. The illiteracy rate among the estate women is 52 per cent whereas the island rate was only 30 per cent. (1971)

But it is to be noted that there is a small group of young women who have been educated in Sinhala and therefore have greater access to the political and national life of the country. These young women are very militant in demanding a greater share in national life. The content and concepts of education in the estates appears to have been the primary cause of the isolation of this community and its failure, to meaningfully integrate with other national communities. No social mobility of a community is possible when the women remain for the most part illiterate. The emotional and physical health of a community depends on the educational levels of the women.

A massive adult literacy programme should be instituted and implemented at grass root level with an important component of this programme being the provision of vocational training and non-formal education.

But it must be emphasised that all these programmes will remain marginal if these women do not have adequate leisure to participate in these programmes.

It is hoped that government and Trade Unions (where women form nearly 50 per cent of the membership) will recognise the dual burden of wage earner and home maker that these women have to bear and evolve measures to raise the 'quality of life' of these women.

Ameliorative measures should be taken in areas where these women are discriminated against. The priority areas are equal wages, monthly wages, shorter working hours, enhanced maternity leave, better ante and post natal care, well equipped creches, better educational facilities (both formal and non-formal), access to vocational training and programmes to raise civic and social consciousness.