

## Editorial introduction

Exercising employee voice is fundamental to developing workers' self-organising capacity and realising their work rights. However, the voice of women apparel workers engaged in lesser-paid factory work is suppressed to ensure uninterrupted production in Global South sweatshops. This briefing paper explores how women apparel workers in Sri Lanka individually and collectively express resistance to unfair labour practices amid myriad voice suppression mechanisms. Based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with these women, the paper explores how they, despite being restricted to lower hierarchical positions on the apparel production floor, are not objects of suppression and subjugation. On the contrary, they resist exploitation in many informal ways, pointing to the need for a strong collective voice to productively have their say.

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## About the Collection

This paper forms part of a collection on modern slavery and exploitative work practices that has been prepared in collaboration with the QUT Centre for Decent Work & Industry.

# Strengthening the resistance of Global South women apparel workers through empowering their collective voice

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## Labour in the Sri Lankan Apparel Industry

In the late 1960s, the production function of global supply chains was shifted to the Global South to take advantage of the abundant availability of cheap, docile, young female labour (Elson & Pearson, 1981). In Global South countries, the voice of women in domestic, social and work settings is highly controlled by the influence of the state, private organisations and local culture (Ahmed, 2004; Gunawardana, 2007). One industry that has taken advantage of these conditions in Sri Lanka is the apparel industry, where expectations of subservience and manual dexterity have become the main recruitment criteria (Gunawardana, 2014). As in other Global South countries, the literature on Sri Lankan garments points to the industry's exploitation and suppression of shop floor-level workers, despite its ethical proclamation of 'Garments Without Guilt' (Ruwanpura, 2022; Street et al., 2022).

Export processing zones (EPZs) or free trade zones have proliferated in the Global South, providing Global North capitalists with a cheap and controllable labour force comprised mostly of young female workers. Sri Lanka is no exception. Over 78% of the total operative workforce (machine operators, helpers, checkers and ironers) in Sri Lanka comprises women from rural and semi-urban areas (Asia Development Bank, 2020). In 2019, off the labour of these women workers, the apparel industry contributed more than 45% of Sri Lanka's total merchandise export earnings (Samanthi, 2021). Despite their immense economic contribution, EPZs are 'depicted as no voice spaces', given the constraints on the labour voice enforced collectively by local governments and foreign and local capitalists (Gunawardana, 2014, p. 453).

Sri Lanka has had a strong labour moment that explicitly attained and ensured worker rights, yet, after 1977, the labour movement was diluted due to the commitment of subsequent governments to meet capitalistic priorities (Ruwanpura, 2022). During the subsequent decades, trade unions in EPZs were curtailed via various state, regulatory and organisational ways and means (Gunawardana, 2007; Ruwanpura, 2022). While curtailing the unionised voice of female employees, EPZ factories, including apparel companies, encourage management-valued non-union voice mechanisms such as joint consultative councils/committees and workers' councils that enhance company productivity while addressing the issues of conflict, turnover and absenteeism (Gunawardana, 2014).

Sri Lankan women apparel workers struggle to raise their voice against the authoritarianism of management while attempting to establish work identities within power-laden discourses (Hewamanne, 2008). In this context, empowering women in labour–capital relations to exercise their voice is vital to ensure the quality of work life. In this briefing paper, we explore employee-initiated voice and resistance by Sri Lankan women apparel workers through the theoretical standpoint of labour process theory, which views voice as 'an impulse to take control rather than to be always subject of control' (Ackroyd, 2012, p. 4). We focus on acts of resistance that challenge the hegemony of managers in relation to workers' work, pay, leave and attempts to avoid unfair labour treatment.

## Women in Global South Factories and Their Voice

Employee voice can be a powerful tool employed by workers in an effort to shape decisions on issues that affect them and express resistance against their exploitation and oppression. Because the exercise of this voice potentially threatens existing managerial power (Allen & Tüselmann, 2009), it can be perceived as a potential barrier to global sourcing and the profit accumulation process. This has led to the control and suppression of workers' voice in Global South factories (Gunawardana, 2014).

Historically employee voice has been associated with 'any attempt at all to change rather than to escape from an objectionable state of affairs' (Hirschman, 1970, p. 30). Consistent with this understanding, employee resistance can be understood as an act of unsanctioned voice by workers (Walker, 2020) to resist unfair labour practices.

## Methodology

This briefing paper reports the interpretive analysis of 41 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with women apparel workers in Sri Lanka to uncover power inequities between labour and capital. Interviewees were from two distinct locational contexts: 1) the highly developed Katunayake EPZ (KEPZ), 29 km from urban Colombo, and 2) village areas where the Sri Lankan apparel industry has expanded, namely Kurunegala and Kegalle districts. Recruitment of participants from two different contexts enabled us to gather data from women workers with different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds and obtain a broader understanding of the experiences of women apparel workers in Sri Lanka (Samarakoon et al., 2022). Consistent with ethical approval, pseudonyms have been used to protect research participants' privacy.

## Individual Resistance

Workers in late industrialised countries have adopted diverse acts of resistance and misbehaviour in the workplace to curtail the control exercised over them (Dundon & Rollinson, 2004). Worker resistance is workers' 'attempt[s] to carve out spaces of control at work' to move away from the management-initiated voice (Gunawardana, 2014, p. 456). Workers' resistance in the workplace can be inconsistent, as either an individual or collective form of discontent (Collinson & Ackroyd, 2005). Participants in our study revealed that, in some instances, they and their co-workers express their resistance individually against unfair work practices in their workplace but, in doing so, expose themselves to retaliatory practices from management.

The experience of *Sada*, a machine operator working in the KEPZ, is an illustrative example of individual resistance against an unfair labour practice: 'It is compulsory to work [overtime]. Once I got into a fight over that and was stopped from coming to work'. As she explained, she refused to work overtime as she had worked continuously from 7.30 a.m. to 7.30 p.m. over several weeks without having time to cook or eat. As a result of her refusal, she was banned from coming to work for three days as a punishment for disobeying the manager's order. However, *Sada* demonstrated courage as an individual worker to express her noncompliance with her manager's unfair act. In this incident, *Sada* fought for her rights until the last point by defending her argument with the production manager and relevant staff from the human resources department, disregarding her vulnerability as a less powerful machine operator.

During the interview, her courage and a strong motive for resistance were clearly manifested through her facial expressions, solid voice and bright eyes. However, in the absence of a strong collective voice, such as a trade union, due to the suppression of unionisation, her resistance effort became an act of failure with personal impacts. As she revealed, workers' efforts to form a trade union were brutally controlled by managers, resulting in some workers losing their jobs.

## Collective Resistance

The data revealed that most of the participants' resistance has resulted from collective voice rather than individual voice. Most individual and collective resistance has been in regard to wages, incentives, working hours, work conditions and obtaining leave. Consistent with Rosa's (1991) research on female workers' organisation and resistance strategies in Sri Lankan free trade zones, our participants revealed they had been involved in acts of spontaneous resistance in matters related to work conditions, wages, incentives and inflexible leave schedules. Although Rosa (1991) found that most spontaneous resistance was a concealed form of resistance due to the influence of socialisation in a patriarchal family environment, the experiences of some of our participants revealed direct and explicit forms of resistance.

*Sunethra*, a machine operator in Kurunegala district, revealed the relative power of machine operators as a group on the production floor as a result of their indispensability as skilled workers (Allen & Tüselmann, 2009):

*There was an issue when they gave us 5,000 [rupees] instead of 10,000. Even though we have sewed so much. We, the whole line, stopped working. It happened not only in our line but in four or five lines. Then, Vishal sir [a production manager] from the production [section] came and shouted [at us]. But we said we are not working. We asked them whether we don't have other factories to work in. We pressured the work-study [staff]. We told them they could not do this to us. We told them that we would not work. Then, they were scared.*

This quote demonstrates *Sunethra's* consciousness about her (and other machine operators') power and the value of her (their) labour. As a female apparel worker from a village area, *Sunethra's* rebellion confirms that female workers from village areas also exhibit explicit resistance when they are confronted by unfair treatment meted out by management. This quote notably demonstrates that a collective voice is more powerful than fighting individually for their rights.

Ad hoc and informal resistance did not always result in a win for workers. For instance, Nayana, a packer working in the KEPZ, explained how their weakly organised collective resistance efforts in relation to a matter of leave were constrained and later dissipated due to the influence of managers. These worker experiences point to the importance of having a strong collective voice to assert rights.

## Trade Union Suppression

In line with Hyman (1989), the above analysis shows that while a non-institutional voice is possible in organisations, it achieves little to no change. The literature points out that unionism is the best means of employee voice, although trade union membership is declining today (Hyman, 1989, Dundon & Gollan, 2007). Within EPZs, although 'Sri Lankan labour law guarantees freedom of association, the right to organise, and the right to collectively bargain', the existence of trade unions is at an elementary level due to the influences of the government and individual private organisations (Gunawardana, 2007, p. 82). Many of our participants from both the KEPZ and villages in Kurunegala and Kegalle districts explicitly revealed that their factories currently do not have trade unions; instead, they have workers' councils or joint consultative councils led by management.

Some workers have refrained from forming unions because they fear reprisals such as losing their jobs. Interviewees recounted their experiences regarding failed efforts at unionisation, noting that factory management strictly prohibited and penalised union formation and fired their co-workers for undertaking initiatives to form a union. They pointed out that workers in the KEPZ have opportunities to join certain trade unions established independently of the factories, such as the Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union. However, none of the interviewees admitted to being a member of such trade unions—possibly due to their fear of reprisals by management.

## So What?

Employee voice is a fundamental right of workers and a significant component of the global International Labour Organization's Decent Work Agenda. Our study shows that having a strong collective voice can strengthen the capacity of these women workers' resistance against factories' unfair labour practices. Women's organisations outside the factories, such as the Women's Centre and the Da Bindu (Beads of Sweat) Collective, are already doing an admirable job of educating female workers in EPZs regarding 'possibilities for the action oriented

empowerment of women workers' (Gunawardana, 2007, p. 91). However, they also need to extend their operations and outreach to village areas, where support for women workers is extremely limited.

As collective voice has been found to exert more influence over management than individual voice (Elson & Pearson, 1981), women apparel workers should be supported to organise for collective action in either a formal or a spontaneous and sporadic way. When it comes to formal methods of organising, such as trade unions, it is essential to consider the role played by gender. The history of trade union actions in Sri Lanka evidences male domination of female union leaders despite several incidents of successfully organised trade union attempts by women with the support of local and

international women's organisations, unions, NGOs and buyers (see Gunawardana, 2007; Ruwanpura, 2022).

Amid these traditional forms of voice and resistance strategies, the literature points to novel strategies inspired by digital technology. For example, social media has become popular among workers for discussions on work relations (Walker, 2020). The recent history of the general public's resistance against the ruling party in Sri Lanka also exemplifies the general public's effective use of social media to influence the government and the president. Therefore, social media could provide a means for women workers to reconfigure and resist managers' hegemony in the unequal power relations between labour and capital in Global South apparel factories.

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