

Inclusion and Empowerment of Export Processing Zone Women in Sri Lanka: Stakeholders Perceptions and Perspectives

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The vast majority of research on women who work in Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and in Sri Lanka focuses on the 'lived experiences' of the women themselves. The other major source of research with a similar focus comes from macro-economic perspectives, focusing on policy and economic rationale behind the emergence of EPZs and global export-oriented manufacturing in general. This paper provides insights into the issues of empowerment and inclusion of Sri Lankan EPZ workers, but does so from the perspective of 22 stakeholders in Sri Lanka who have unique insights to offer. The stakeholders were factory managers; senior public administrators; senior union representatives and women's NGO representatives. In so doing the paper provides a unique insight into the issues faced by young women who work in EPZs. It also points to areas where empowerment and inclusion of women is occurring and areas where it is not.

Key words: Sri Lanka; Export Processing Zones; Women as Labour; Inclusion and Empowerment; labour force and society

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Introduction

This paper does not seek to explore the concepts of inclusion and empowerment from a theoretical perspective. Instead it presents the views and perceptions of a group of 22 stakeholders with intimate and in-depth knowledge of the issues, problems and experiences associated with young women who work in EPZs in Sri Lanka. The paper provides a brief outline of the pre-eminent literature associated with women as labour in developing nations and also upon women as labour in EPZs. However, the purpose of this paper is not to present an exhaustive literature review or conceptual framework, it is to present data as it was analysed, and the themes that emerged from this analysis. The research was funded by *AusAID's Australian Development Research Award* and was focused on the experiences of young women who work in Sri Lanka's Export Processing Zones.

This paper has divided the results into 4 themes as these emerged through data analysis. These themes indicated that there were 4 areas in which young women's experiences should be considered in any study of women as labour in EPZs. These were the impacts of factory work at the; 1) personal level; 2) the family level; 3) the work place and 4) society. The data presented in this paper is broken down into these 4 categories as the data dictated and no attempt is made to separate the data by stakeholder input, i.e. factory managers would be expected to have very different views when compared to women's NGOs and activists. However, their views, which are commonly contradictory, are presented under each theme. This approach was chosen rather than categorising data by stakeholder group. This decision was made because many of the comments in each theme from each stakeholder group were also complimentary and there was quite a bit of overlap. It is in these areas (where consensus and contradictions overlap) where the stakeholders understanding of the complex lives of young EPZ workers can be found.

Literature

As stated there is a great deal of literature, mainly ethnographic in nature, that has focused on women as labour in developing nations. Sen and Grown (1987) and Wolf (1992) produced the first of a long series of research that involved social and/or feminist research which basically portrayed young women in export-oriented manufacturing as victims of a global system (see also Jamilah, 1994; Lim & Oishi, 1996; Elson, 1999; Pyle, 1999 & Pyle & Ward, 2003). Some researchers even argued that the feminization of labour markets was a form of gender-based violence (Piper, 2003).

Similarly in Sri Lankan contexts research has focused on EPZ workers, especially women and their lived experiences. Hewamanne (2003) argued that female EPZ workers faced societal level scorn and disapproval and claimed that EPZs or 'Zones' were labelled with derogatory labels such as 'whore zone' in national discourse. Other research has focused on the situation, working conditions and experiences of young women in Sri Lanka's EPZs (see

Attantapola, 2005; Hancock, 2006a, Hancock 2006b; Hancock, 2008 and Jayaweera & Sanmugan, 2001). Other Sri Lankan researchers have focused on the exploitative nature of EPZ work for young women in the nation (see Sivananthiran, 2007 and Jayawardena, 1998). While researchers such as Samarasinghe (1998) and Perman *et al* (2004) have focused on the macro-economic and policy issues *vis-a-vis* EPZs and the nature of the feminised workforce associated with their rapid development since the late 1970s.

Other schools of thought come from economists who argue that women in EPZs in Sri Lanka are part of economic and policy reform of a developing nation, outlining trends and statistics which point to a strongly feminised labour market in export oriented sectors in Sri Lanka since 1980 (see Lakshman, 2004 & Yatawara, 2004). Most research of this nature has highlighted the macro-policy need for EPZs in developing nations and focused on issues of terms of trade and GDP for example (see Engman, *et al*, 2007). While both forms of research discussed above are important, we fell that there is a gap in our knowledge, and this paper fills this gap. The data is not grounded in any specific framework, other than to honestly and objectively present the analysed data in coherent themes, many of which can be related back to the literature cited above, but just as many reveal new insights in women as labour in EPZs in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

The Project Manager from The Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR) conducted the key informant interviews in 2010. After identifying the key informants, their consent to participate in the study was obtained. The interviews were conducted in the interviewee's office at a convenient time for them, using guide lines prepared for the study. It took nearly 45 minutes, on average, to complete 1 interview. Some of the interviews were conducted in English, and in the case of others, the interviews were conducted in Sinhalese and responses were translated into English. They were all asked 8 guide questions (open ended) which focused on attitudes towards EPZ women workers, as well as how they had been either empowered or dis-empowered and included or excluded as a result of working in an EPZ. The use of salaries to accumulate capital and involvement in wider societal processes was also a focus of the questions.

The 22 stake holders participated in the study were grouped under (i) government and semi government sector officials, (ii) factory managers, (iii) industry and trade union representatives and (iv) officials of non-governmental organizations. They were chosen because of their involvement with women workers and 59% of the stakeholders were women. They were asked questions about status and empowerment of young women in EPZs in open ended questions.

The data was recorded and transcribed into word documents and analysed manually using standard coding techniques for qualitative research. The narratives from all stakeholders were summarised after coding (see below) and written into a large coherent document. This document was used as the template for this paper, the interview data, once analysed, was 'written over' by the researchers and author to provide cohesiveness and consistency. Specifically, inductive coding techniques were used and led to the emergence of the 4 themes below. Further, data analysis led to the creation of sub-themes under some of the major themes and these are discussed below in detail. The 4 major themes were;

- (A) Status and empowerment at the personal level as a result of factory work
- (B) Status and empowerment at the family level as a result of factory work
- (C) Status and empowerment at the work place as a result of factory work
- (D) Status and empowerment at the societal level as a result of factory work

A) Status and empowerment at the personal level as a result of factory work

Changes at the personal level were analysed and five main sub-themes emerged. Of all the themes identified this one presented the most data and the largest number of sub-themes, these were: (i) economic conditions, (ii) decision making, (iii) new knowledge, (iv) new skills and (v) life style.

Economic conditions. There was so much data under this sub-theme that it had to be surmised in bullet points below, but it should be noted most of this data is primarily positive and comes from all stakeholders;

- A basic salary that is higher than the 'minimum wage' is paid.
- Allowances and bonuses are available.
- Good opportunities for employment, especially for rural women from agricultural and fishing communities with lower levels of education.
- Women have a stable source of income unlike in seasonal occupations.
- Female factory workers have access to and control over their financial resources.
- Women have the power to decide on the use of their earnings.
- Their economic conditions have improved compared with their situation in the past.
- Women are no longer dependents of their families.
- Some factories provide meals and free accommodation, thus workers can use their earnings to cover other expenses.
- Women automatically acquire the habit of saving in bank accounts in their names as the salaries are credited to a bank account.
- Most of the women also use informal saving mechanisms.
- Most of the women use such investments as their 'dowry'.
- Some women use the money to buy land or renovate or build their houses. There are loan schemes available for workers.
- Women also invest in jewellery.
- Some women have requested loans from the Employees Trust Fund (ETF) to renovate their houses or to buy a piece of land.
- Pregnant women have minimal capacity to save as they have more expenses.
- Women have short term plans.

- Women work for 5 to 10 years, collect the gratuity, ETF, EPF and other monetary benefits.
- Earnings may not be adequate in the context of the high cost of living.
- Some women have requested loans from the Employees Trust Fund (ETF) to renovate their houses or to buy a piece of land.

One stakeholder noted that workers have to face many difficulties although their economic situation has improved. In view of the present high costs of living workers try to earn as much as possible. Many women undertake overtime, come to work every day to get the attendance bonus even though they are sick, take minimum time for lunch and tea to get production incentives – e.g. finishing the normally 30 minute lunch break within 10 minutes. Some diseases surface after they go back to their villages. The factory women have savings but these savings are not sufficient to address their health problems. Economic conditions are therefore very positive according to the majority of the stakeholders.

New knowledge

The majority of factory women are educated at least up to G.C.E. Ordinary Level (O-Level above). There are women who have been successful at the G.C.E. Advanced Level (A-Level Above). This situation is a result of the free education opportunities available in the country. Many stakeholders stated that the women have been empowered as a consequence of their access to new knowledge. Women have the opportunity to participate in a variety of training programmes which discuss different issues. The Ministry of Child Development and Women's Affairs, the Department of Labour, BOI, Police, and NGOs working in the area carry out such programmes. Induction training programmes include courses such as factory life, labour rights, labour laws, gender, threats, safety, first aid, health habits, relationships, sexually transmitted diseases, contraceptive methods, and social issues.

The women previously knew only about their village and the villagers but because of the exposure to a new and wider society, now Women know about city life, and even about other countries in the world. For example, some women working for a Japanese based company are sent to Japan for training therefore workers get the opportunity to know the culture of another country. Similarly, overseas workers too, come to their factory and work with them.

One stakeholder argued that the level of knowledge or information of women has been improved, although not all workers had the same level of awareness.

“Recently, four women came to see the Minister of Labour and they have been referred to me. The problem was that the services of those women had been terminated. Therefore they wanted to get their gratuity and other benefits. One woman explained that the management has forced them to sign a resignation letter. That woman has asked other workers not to sign the letter. She was aware of their benefits such as gratuity, EPF, ETF, and other worker rights. She said that according to the act the management cannot do a thing like that and it is illegal. I was very happy to see that they were aware of their worker rights” (A representative of the Department of Labour).

Though there are many positive features, there are negative features too. The factory women have not been exposed to some important topics when they were in the village and that

knowledge is very important for them to live in a complex society in the city. The knowledge of many of these women, specifically young women, on reproductive health is very poor. Another gap is that most of the factories do not like to release all the workers to participate in awareness programmes. Therefore it is very difficult to provide knowledge to all the women and a new strategy needs to be identified to cover the entire population of workers.

New skills

A stakeholder from The Department of Labour stated that it conducts training programmes such as in dress making with the hope that these women can start self employment enterprises when they go back to the villages. The Department of Labour, Trade Unions, NGOs and factories conduct vocational training programmes such as in sewing, cookery, beauty culture, housekeeping, making of accessories and English language classes. In their village women would be engaged in their parent's traditional occupations such as farming or fishing. The skills they develop on the job benefit them, such as ability to work as a team, leadership qualities, organising skills, and problem solving skills.

Life style

All stakeholders had viewed on this sub-theme. Most stated that lifestyles of the female factory workers have changed with economic power and exposure to a new society. Highlighted are both positive changes in many women and some negative changes in a fewer number of women. Women have had exposure to a wider group of people from different parts of the country. They have made new friends and are a part of new social networks. Women have acquired new and complex social skills. As a result, the women had more choices in finding a suitable partner. In that context, it is a relief for their parents. They have developed self confidence with their new social experiences.

The women have the opportunity to learn how to cope with risk factors prevailing in the urban society and to be safe. The awareness programmes conducted on sexual harassment and other gender based issues have given them useful information, survival skills and confidence. Most of the time women move around in groups. The reported incidents of sexual harassment have declined.

Some stakeholders stated that a positive change in their lives is the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the use of modern equipment and household appliances. With experience, they know the new products in the market; Women know how to select good shops and good products in the market, and even how to bargain. Their leadership qualities have improved. They know how to move in larger society and when they go back to their villages they can perform better as a result.

Whilst others stated that a negative feature associated with women working in Zones is poor living conditions especially in the private boarding places. Problems associated with their boarding places were low levels of facilities, poor sanitary conditions specially toilets and bathing facilities, no privacy, no security, and conflicts with roommates. There is no mechanism to monitor the conditions of private boarding and lodging. Fungal infections can be seen among some female factory workers. Some factory managers are concerned to find out where their employees reside and always try to direct them to boarding places offering fairly good living conditions. To address this issue, some factories have started to provide accommodation facilities and at present one factory manager said there are three hostels for

their workers and 300 workers are benefitting. A second negative feature is that there is no one to talk to regarding their personal problems. Most of the time female workers hesitate to raise their voices against discrimination or unfair treatment.

One stakeholder argued that there is a risk in travelling after night work as in some areas there are no street lights. It is a risk to their lives too. There are safety problems and there are incidences of harassment while walking on streets. Other consequences have been the negative experiences due to love affairs or relationships, sexual harassment or abortions. Women become involved in relationships very easily due to peer pressure, stress at the work place, and lack of entertainment, not having parents or anyone to guide them. Most of the time these women have been cheated by married men. Sometimes they may have to go to the village with a child but without a husband. On such occasions their social status deteriorates and they may be excluded from the society/community. Complaints of such incidences were less now and if the police get a complaint they do their best to resolve the issue. Most of the time, the perpetrators are not permanent residents of the EPZ area.

“One young woman was referred to the counselling service of the Department of Labour by the factory. She was in a depressed situation. She had a relationship with a man and they had been living together for some time. Then the woman became pregnant and the man disappeared. When she searched for him she found that he was a married man. The factory was very sympathetic and referred her to our service as she was one of the best workers in that factory” (A representative of the Department of Labour).

The same stakeholder pointed out that some factories have professional counsellors to help women in such situations and who get involved with solving family problems. Women with unacceptable behaviour are not an asset either to the factory or their family or community. Such negative incidences were associated with only a small number of women, but when outsiders talk about such incidences they generalise it to cover the entire female work force and that creates a bad image for women. Such incidences were less compared to the past as most of these women have learnt from past experiences.

One also stated that a few women also have taken to prostitution and commercial sex work. Commercial sex workers find accommodation in boarding places to engage in their occupation. Outsiders think that are factory workers engaged in commercial sex work. Sometimes these sex workers encourage factory women to join them. Most of the women are unable to find suitable employment when they go back to their villages after marriage. As a result of that, their economic and social status, and mental health declines. Without a good husband the situation can get worse.

The discussion above highlights the enormous complexities young EPZ women face when they move to work in an EPZ. Their personal and societal knowledge is initially poor, and may fall victim as a result. Some stakeholder claim the new skills they learn at the workplace and in wider society are empowering, however as will be seen below other stakeholders viewed these as dis-empowering. However, it seems that there are support programs in place, but they need to be far more comprehensive to ensure all women workers are protected from both within the workplace and in the communities where they reside – these are issues of significant dis-empowerment according to many of the stakeholders.

B) Status and empowerment at the family level as a result of factory work

Of all the themes, this one attracted least discussion. This is probably because the stakeholders had covered family issues in other themes and could not add any new data. There was a general consensus among the stakeholders that there is recognition and acceptance of the women factory workers by the immediate family. These women financially support their parents and family members which helps in meeting the day to day expenses of the family members, education of younger siblings, medicine for sick parents, and to buy a piece of land, build a house or renovate their house. In some situations, not only the immediate family members, but the extended family members such as grandparents, aunts also depend on these factory women. Therefore there is a high degree of acceptance. In some families these women get more acceptance than their fathers as in some cases the woman is the breadwinner of the family. Where the woman or wife is the stable income earner in the family and the husband is engaged in casual work, she has more economic power within the family. This economic power and social exposure enables these women to participate more in decision making processes in their homes. Most factories organise family get-togethers in their factories annually which also helps to increase the level of acceptance by family members. While the data in this theme is limited it is very powerful pointing to a key area of status and empowerment which occurs at the family level as well as at the personal level. To summarise the two themes thus far it is evident that women experience far more inclusion, status and empowerment at the personal and family level, despite hardships and issues with working conditions and reputation in wider society.

C) Status and empowerment at the work place as a result of factory work

According to a significant number of stakeholders the women have been empowered at the workplace as team workers, and as trained and productive workers. More efficient and productive women get the opportunity to work as team leaders and thereby acquire leadership qualities and opportunity to participate in decision making at the factory at lower levels. Women workers are regarded as more trustworthy than their male counterparts; for example, men workers try to steal factory goods but women do not tend to do so. In a good working environment, workers do their job happily, the management treats them well, and workers can discuss their problems if any, with the management. As the women work in highly mechanised, modern working environments, they are exposed to new technologies such as computers. Some factories provide overseas training.

On the other hand, other stakeholders argued that there are few opportunities for upward career mobility for the majority of these women. As a consequence some women are working as machine operators for many years. However a small percentage of women have the opportunity to move upward as line leaders, section leaders, and supervisors and they have access to limited decision making power. Sometimes all the supervisors in the factory are women. Another negative issue is that after marriage many have to stop working and go back to the village if the husband is living in the village.

Some argued that because the women produce only a part of a garment in a factory, they do not acquire the skills required to make a garment and they are not adequately equipped to access other sewing related jobs. Thus, they can be isolated or unemployed when they go back to their villages. As a solution to this issue, is vocational training programmes for women as an alternative income generating activity. However, when such programmes were

conducted by one Ministry the participation of women was minimal as they did not get much free time due to their long working hours.

Though there are trade unions in some factories, the active participation of women in such activities is very low. This deprives women from participating in collective bargaining mechanisms. Not only in EPZs but at the macro level too, the participation of women in trade union activities has declined in the country.

“I met a woman working in a factory in an EPZ who is a member of a trade union. She works hard. However her husband is not aware of her trade union activities as she has not told him. She said that her husband does not allow her to participate in extra activities. Therefore she does all the trade union activities during her office hours” (A representative of the Department of Labour).

D) Status and empowerment at the societal level as a result of factory work

Regarding the status and empowerment of women at the societal level, the responses given by the respondents were categorised under three sub-themes: (i) participation of women in community and in political activities, (ii) acceptance from the village, and (iii) perceptions of the general public.

Participation of women in community and in political activities

There was consensus that participation of women in community and political activities was rare as they have no interest in such activities. Most agreed that women do not vote even though they get leave for this. However, the women commonly participate in religious activities and they participate in community activities if they get an opportunity.

Time and distance were identified as barriers to participation in village activities by most stakeholders. Some women workers were members of village societies such as the Death Donation Society and temple societies. As a result some stakeholders argued that the factory women are more capable and have more leadership qualities than the women in their villages and therefore when they go back to their villages, there is more opportunity for them to participate in community or political activities at the village level. However, these women workers are not considered as a part of the community around the Zone and therefore there is little opportunity for them to participate in community activities while they are working in factories.

Acceptance from the village

There was further consensus that acceptance from the villagers depends mostly on the behaviour of the individual and the type of job that women are engaged in. Further, women are accepted increasingly in their communities with the improvement in their economic condition and personality. Even the temple and villagers respect them more as they look after their families. Social recognition attached to different occupations is different. For instance, teachers and nurses get more recognition than a machine operator. The social stigma of working as factory workers persists though at the same time society respects the factory workers for their economic and social empowerment.

Some stakeholders argued that there is a certain level of acceptance from the rural community because of their economic empowerment, and exposure to and capacity to cope with city life. When recruiting new workers, factory managers request existing employees to recommend candidates and they introduce their relatives and friends from their village. This also ensures recognition for these women as they are helping other villagers to find employment, and at the same time, the villagers join them as there is trust and a positive image of these workers.

Perceptions of the general public

Stakeholders generally agreed about the negative public perception of Zone workers. Some stated that although the female factory workers in EPZs still do not have a good public image the situation has improved from 10 to 15 years ago. At present the public perceive EPZs as economic centres contributing to the economic development of the country. These Zones increase the economic power of workers, especially women workers, and benefits ultimately go to the village. Therefore attitudes are changing from negative to positive. In the early days, people thought that EPZs have only garment factories, but they are now aware that there are factories producing different items in a Zone, therefore, the concept of 'garment objects' has declined.

One stakeholder stated that in the late 1970s, the Greater Colombo Economic Commission was established in Sri Lanka by the government with the mission to bring investors to Sri Lanka and to create employment opportunities. The investors were expected to bring in foreign exchange, put up factories and manufacture products for export markets. This policy worked well. However, over the years with the increase of the number of factories in Zones, the size of the labour force, especially in the garment industry, expanded tremendously. A large number of rural women came to work in the Zones. However, infrastructure facilities outside the zone such as hostels and transport were not adequate to accommodate the influx of migrant workers. On the other hand, organised groups sometimes with political backing and organised thugs and criminals exploited the situation of women who came to the city from rural areas. At the end of the day, the blame came to the industry or investors. The public view was that the investors should provide accommodation or transport. Some factories provided these facilities. The responsibility of investors is to create safe jobs and to bring foreign exchange. At that time, the media also wrongly interpreted this situation and incidents that were published created a negative image of the factory women. Looking after the security and living conditions of factory women outside the factory is the responsibility of the social system and legal authorities in the country. There are instances of exploitation of women financially or sexually. Controlling such situations is beyond the investor's capacity even though they are concerned about the situation. The State has the responsibility to maintain law and order and from the investors' point of view, there are so many legal and social obligations they have to fulfil while making profits in a very competitive international market.

The public still had the perception that EPZs are places where employment is provided for less educated, less privileged, rural workers and some people label these women as 'garment objects' or 'garment girls'. EPZs are places giving opportunity to people who cannot find any other employment, income, any other social status, or when there is no other alternative to look after their families. Some people still think that they can have sexual relations with these women easily. In the early days, women were reluctant to say that they are factory workers in Zones as it was considered to be degrading, especially when they are looking for a partner for

marriage. Pregnant working mothers of EPZs presenting at a medical clinic do not like to mention their job title as a 'garment worker' or as an 'EPZ worker' on their clinic card. They prefer to write it as a machine operator. However, the situation has improved considerably.

It is a credit for women with low educational qualifications and low socio economic backgrounds to earn independently and to look after their families. The majority of these women are young and most of them are soon after their school education.

"I have experienced that in the month of December the numbers of women in the Biyagama hostel which is managed by the Ministry are increasing as the girls are coming to work in factories just after appearing at the G.C.E. Ordinary Level exam. They have come to work even before the release of their results mainly due to poverty in their families. Therefore we should appreciate their efforts". (Representative of the Ministry)

Again a stakeholder noted that at present, the state, politicians, and media have publicized the fact that these factory women contributed to the economic development of the country. The Department of Labour, when commemorating the International Women's Day, gave priority to factory women and give awards to the best performers. They have developed video clips also to show the public the importance of the contribution of these women to the development of the country. Media also gave publicity to such events. It was noted that the media should be more responsible in their reporting as this is one of the main industries in the country. However trade unions and some NGOs are not satisfied with the actions taken by the state, politicians, and media to improve the situation of factory women and expect more action from them.

Another noted the dis-empowering aspects of EPZ employment but noted that for a country like Sri Lanka, it is better to develop the garment industry rather than send women to work overseas as unskilled labour. The factories have improved and are providing better working conditions. Despite this the notion of being a garment worker carries with it negative connotations that imply low educational and societal status and low morals. This is very dis-empowering because 80% of the women who work in the EPZs are working in textile and garment industries. The discourse around 'garment objects' is tremendously dis-empowering and deflating.

Discussion

Inclusion and empowerment are used in this paper in the simplest of senses. The paper does not attempt to discuss at length their meanings across theoretical debates or conceptual divides. These terms were simply used in everyday discourse, and the stakeholders did not question the terms when raised i.e. *what do you mean by empowerment?* For this reason the paper accepts that while each stakeholder may have slightly different understandings of the two terms, their data and discourse revealed that they had common understandings of what the terms meant *vis-a-vis* the research aims. The ways in which the data was divided into only 4 themes above is testament to this.

In the headings above the views of the stakeholders were 'mixed' into a coherent dialogue about the processes of empowerment and inclusion of women in Sri Lanka who work in

EPZs. The 22 stakeholders came from 4 categories; (i) government and semi government sector officials, (ii) factory managers, (iii) industry and trade union representatives and (iv) officials of non-governmental organizations. The government officials tended to come from a functionalist perspective outlining the issues faced by women and a long list of programs designed by government to solve these issues. These same stakeholders tended to partially blame the negative situation on the women themselves, although they were aware that problems emanated from factories, community and boarding houses and were out of the control of women.

The industry and trade union representatives had similar views to those above, but tended to focus on the lack of involvement by women in wider society, due to societal forces and lack of time. These stakeholders, interestingly did not cite many breeches of law or working conditions, and did not see that working conditions were too harsh or that women were being exploited. However, they did cite a few cases, but nothing summative or equivocal was said by this group. They did however state that cited issues were being addressed but that women did face a large array of problems. Interestingly all were male.

The factory managers provided real insights into the working experiences of their workforce and it should be noted that 2 of the 8 managers interviewed were female. These stakeholders agreed to participate because arguably they could defend the working conditions in their own factories, as they did above, but also highlighted problems women faced outside the factory especially social and personal issues and poor living conditions.

The NGO stakeholders were all female and provided a more balanced portrait of women who work in EPZs and the struggles they face with regards inclusion and empowerment. This group provided an in-depth outline of women's lives from the factory level to societal levels outlining the 'positives and negatives' associated with each theme discussed in this paper.

In summary, according to the stakeholders, EPZ women in Sri Lanka experience increased economic empowerment and inclusion at the personal and family level – this theme was constant across all the data. The women were portrayed as major financial contributors to their individual and family wellbeing - economic empowerment. The sub-themes of new knowledge, skills and lifestyle were also forms of empowerment for women (according to some of the stakeholders), but with many caveats, especially regarding the naivety of young women who move the Zones and negative societal 'opinion' toward EPZ women. However, these sub-themes cannot be categorised simply as forms of inclusion as many stakeholders also argued that women faced 'exclusion' at many levels under these sub-themes.

At the workplace the data was mixed with around half the stakeholders arguing that it was a place of empowerment and inclusion. There was strong evidence that the workplace was not a source of positive experiences, especially in terms of long hours of work, workplace breeches, travelling at night and safety and security. Low levels of trade union activity by women overall and the fact that women were not gaining 'sustainable' skills that could be used in their villages when they returned were major dis-empowering issues faced by the women. The piecemeal nature of their work was also dis-empowering according to many of the stakeholders while others argued there was room for upward mobility for women. These stakeholders argued that women could be promoted and moved to supervisory roles, which was empowering. These contradictions are important as they provide a more realistic sense of what is happening to young women in EPZs.

At the societal level there was least evidence of empowerment and inclusion. Indeed it seems that factory women face enormous societal exclusion, this emanates from around the 'Zones' where many local people see the women as immoral and outsiders living in a manner that goes against the cultural norms of the nation. It also includes the media and wider society; however, some stakeholders argued that the situation was improving due to government initiatives and pressure. Nevertheless, on the whole the data pointed to societal level exclusion and dis-empowerment being a major issue for EPZ women in Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

In general, based on the views expressed by the stakeholders who participated in the study, it is clear that there is social inclusion of the factory women at the family and village level. However, the extent to which they have been empowered is identified differently by different stakeholders. There is economic empowerment with access to and control of financial resources. Their decision making power has increased at the personal and family level and with some women at the factory level. They have been empowered by gaining new knowledge and skills. Their social empowerment has improved with increased mobility, exposure to modern economic methods, life style, and acceptance from the immediate family and the village. However, the fact that there are few avenues of upward career mobility for the majority of women workers, the monotony and the lack of creativity in the work and the social stigma attached to the Zones point to dis-empowerment.

The portrait presented in this picture of women as labour was painted by 22 stakeholders and it is to be expected that there would be contradictions and consensus. However, it was surprising the amount of consensus evident in the data. This paper does not offer any summative conclusions about which stakeholders views are more valid or objective, instead it offers a somewhat postmodern and mixed view of women as labour, including the contradictions and consensus. What the paper hopes to achieve is to create a new forum for debate on women who work in export-oriented manufacturing in developing nations and specifically in EPZs in Sri Lanka.

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