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Title: **Plantation Patriarchy and Structural Violence: Women Workers in Sri Lanka**

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Abstract

Using the case of Sri Lanka, this paper argues that plantations were patriarchal institutions that perpetuated structural violence against women workers. 'Plantation patriarchy' incorporated social hierarchies and gender biases stemming from colonialism, race, caste, ethnicity, religion and culture into the structure of the labour regime and in the social organisation on plantations, justifying and normalising the subordinate status of women workers. Under its influence women workers were for nearly two centuries (a) placed under male authority at all levels (b) exposed to physical and sexual violence (b) paid lower wages and worked longer hours than their male counterparts (c) largely responsible for the reproductive chores in the household (e) denied equal access to education, health and other welfare services and (f) excluded from political leadership. The long-term denial of their life chances, the comprehensive controls of plantation patriarchy as well as the relative isolation of the workers from the wider society, allowed structural violence against women workers to be a durable characteristic of Sri Lankan plantations.

Plantation Patriarchy and Structural Violence:

Women Workers in Sri Lanka

Rachel Kurian and Kumari Jayawardena

Plantation production began in Sri Lanka in the early 19th century under British colonial rule, when the government provided financial incentives and infrastructural support for the commercialisation and export of agricultural crops in line with promoting laissez-faire capitalism. Motivated by the possibility of making high profits, British entrepreneurs, including several officials, took up the large-scale cultivation of initially coffee, and then subsequently, tea, rubber and coconut. Keen to minimise their costs of labour, the planters recruited workers from neighbouring districts of the Madras Presidency in south India where there were large numbers badly affected by the widespread famine and indebtedness in the region. The spread of plantation production in the 19th and 20th centuries resulted in a more permanent workforce, constituting the single largest and organised segment of the working class in the country. While women formed a small proportion of the early pattern of migration, their numbers subsequently increased and, by the 20th century, they comprised half the now permanent workforce on the plantations.

Many academics, politicians and planners have highlighted the contribution of plantations to the economic development of the country.[1]Attention has also been given to the situation of the workers on the plantations, including the history of their recruitment, conditions of work and life, experience of ethnic discrimination, as well as the development of trade unionism and political rights [2]. These different publications deal with important aspects of the plantation sector and its labour force. They have however, subsumed the experiences of women within the wider category of workers, ignoring in this process the forms of gender discrimination that were incorporated into the plantation labour regime and community. The neglected reality

[1] For example, see Corea 1975; Snodgrass 1966; de Silva 1982.

[2] Some of the most important include Jayaraman 1975; Hollup 1994; Peebles 2001; Meyer 1992; Roberts and Wickremeratne 1973; Wesumperuma 1986; Bass 2013; Nadesan 1986 and 1993; Daniel 1993; Devaraj 2010; Kanapathipillai 2011; Lawrence 2011; Uyangoda 2012; Jayawardena 1972.

is that women workers bear the brunt of patriarchy, in addition to class, ethnic, caste and other forms of exploitation. There is no consideration of the double burden that women bear, which includes undertaking both paid employment and domestic chores. Ignored also in the impact of male authority that is imposed on women workers at all levels of the plantation hierarchy. There is also little or no attention given to the lack of protection provided to women workers from male alcoholism and domestic violence. It is not surprising, under these circumstances, that policies and programmes and political processes do not, on the whole, reflect the specific needs of women workers, thereby continuing male biases and gender discrimination with regard to women's capabilities and entitlements. These biases are also reflected in the lack of adequate representation of women in the leadership of trade unions and political leadership. This erasure of the specific experiences of women workers exposes a gender deficit in the literature on plantations in Sri Lanka.

That gender power relations played an important role in the labour regime, in the community and cultural activities, and in politics is evident from the existing few studies that have focused on the experiences of plantations women workers. [3]What this paper argues however is that discrimination against women workers was not merely the actions of particular planters, government officials, husbands or trade union leaders, but a systemic characteristic of plantation production. It suggests that plantations were, in essence, patriarchal institutions that incorporated gender discrimination into the labour regime and social hierarchy. It asks the following questions. What were the characteristics of plantation patriarchy and how was it manifested and sustained over time? How did gender biases in the prevailing social hierarchies, such as those based on class, ethnicity, caste, and religion and other cultural traditions inform plantation patriarchy? In which ways were women workers affected through the controls embedded in plantation patriarchy? Did these controls have a bearing not only their paid employment but also on the reproductive health, capabilities and political achievements of women workers?

The paper develops the notion of 'plantation patriarchy' as a comprehensive set of controls on plantations that incorporated social hierarchies and gender biases stemming from colonialism, race, caste, ethnicity, religion and cultural practices into the structure of the labour regime and in the social organisation on plantations.

[3] See for example, Philips 2003; 2005; Kurian 1982; 1998; Kurian and Jayawardena 1984; Kanapathipillai 1992.

Plantation patriarchy was directly linked to the profitability of production, and it was therefore in the interests of those in power to sustain norms and practices that promoted the low status and therefore the lesser entitlements for women workers. The power of 'plantation patriarchy' extended beyond the boundaries of the unit of production, and planters exerted their influence on the state and wider society, gaining favourable concessions and legal support.

In the case of Sri Lanka, in addition, the paper argues that gender prejudices and patriarchal norms stemming from colonialism, race, caste, ethnicity, religion and cultural practices were incorporated into the structure of the labour regime and the organisation of life on plantations. It discusses the the role of different actors and institutions, including colonial government, the management, the trade unions and the community, in influencing discriminative practices against women workers in their paid employment as well as in the wider community. It shows that norms and practices promoting male domination pervaded all classes in the plantation sector, including the planters, management, recruiters and workers (including women) accepting the traditional view that the subordination of women was justified by custom, religion and law. Under these conditions, the subordination of women was normalised ideologically and structurally; their work was exploited as 'cheap' labour, they were disadvantaged with regard to education, health and income, and they were excluded from the leadership of plantation politics.

These different forms of discrimination and exploitation were further sustained by the geographical, social and political isolation of the plantations and its workforce. Plantations were located at a distance from the surrounding villages. Plantation workers were discouraged by the management to interact social and politically with the wider community. Furthermore, the workers were of a different ethnic and cultural background and spoke another language (Tamil). In addition, the management practices on plantations were distinct while being particularly harsh and ruthless to the workforce. Under these circumstances it was possible to sustain these forms of discrimination for nearly two centuries, perpetuating structural violence against women workers on plantations.

Plantation Patriarchy and Structural Violence

The concept of patriarchy has been widely used in feminist literature to analyse ideologies and practices that endorsed male domination in structures, institutions and

processes. (Barrett 1980; Beechey 1979; Bhasin 1993; Lerner 1986; Mies 1986; Walby 1990). Within the Indian context, the notion of "multiple and overlapping patriarchies", was initially used by Kumkum Sangari, to analyse religious-based personal laws and their impact on women (1995:3287). The framework of 'multiple patriarchies' has proved useful in analysing the male biases stemming from class, race, ethnicity, caste and religion in the case of the Sri Lankan plantations. [4] This paper takes the analysis of patriarchy further by distinguishing the patriarchal origins and nature of plantation production, its institutional features and characteristics in the labour regime, as well as its all-embracing controls on women workers.

Plantations were by origin and structure fundamentally patriarchal institutions. The first plantations, developed by the Portuguese for the large-scale production of sugar in the 15th century used slave labour and incorporated features of the prevailing patriarchal feudal household of the period. [5] On these early plantations a strict hierarchical social order and a division of labour were maintained based on race and colour differences and reflected on the fields as well as in the segregation of living quarters and social distance (Durant *et al* 1999: 11). At the highest level was the white planter, (or manager) supported by similar staff. Lighter skinned slaves, usually the children of black slaves with either the owner or the managers, were maintained as house servants. All persons in authority on the plantations (planters, overseers, recruiters, and even inspectors and other government bureaucrats) were men reflecting hegemonic masculinity at all levels. The planters were linked to the dominant class and supported by established political and legal systems and plantations were an important source of finances for the exchequer.

Women slaves, while essential labour on plantations, were subject to severe punishment and violence (Patterson 1967: Reddock 1985). These practices of male domination were retained even after slavery was abolished with women remaining at the bottom of the plantation hierarchy and under male domination at all levels of fieldwork and also within the household with sexual exploitation persisting even with indentured labour (Hyman 1990:14). Only a few women migrated during the early

[4] "State, Citizenship and Democratic Deficits; Multiple Patriarchies and Women Workers on Sri Lankan Plantations" forthcoming.

[5] Familiar with the use of slaves for domestic labour, they used greater numbers of slaves for the large-scale cultivation of sugar, providing a "model" of slave plantations in the subsequent period (Curtin 1998: 23-24).

period of indenture as planters preferred "only able-bodied male labourers" with women being "requested only when the cooking and sexual needs of the male labourers had to be met" (Shameem 1998:54). However, planters became aware of the importance of the (free) domestic work that was provided by women, and the fact they could be employed on the fields (classified as unskilled work) paid lower wages than men, the latter involved mainly in task jobs or in the factories and mills which was viewed as more skilled work (ibid: 55). This gender division of labour and the associated lower remuneration for women's work was incorporated in the labour regime and in the organisation of plantations, and supported by the wider society. This 'plantation patriarchy' reflected the discriminative norms and practices in colonialism, race and gender relations, as well as other cultural practices to enforce women's subordinate position in the plantation hierarchy. These 'multiple patriarchies' legitimised a gendered division of labour in which women workers were allocated the labour-intensive tasks on the fields and the household, and were constantly under male supervision and control. It justified women being paid lower wages while working longer hours than their male counterparts, and also their being largely responsible for any reproductive chores, including taking care of the children, sick and elderly. As most workers resided within the boundaries of the plantations and interaction with 'outsiders' was relatively limited, plantation patriarchy was durable.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that these women were disadvantaged in terms of opportunities and entitlements as women, as workers and as members of the plantation community and society. The processes and the outcomes of these disadvantages can be useful captured by the notion of structural violence. As the author of this important concept, Johan Galtung, has explained that structural violence is "built into the structure" and reflected in unequal power and life chances and as well existing social injustice for a group (1969: 171). It is reinforced through physical/direct violence and cultural violence, the latter making structural violence "look, even feel right: (1990:291) and "legitimized and thus rendered acceptable in society" (ibid: 292), impacting " not only on the human body but also on the mind and the spirit" (ibid: 294). [6]Patriarchy he argued combined "direct, structural and cultural

[6] In his lecture, *Religions, Hard and Soft* (1994), he identifies the religious sanction given to the caste system in Hinduism as a form of structural violence manifested in both economic exploitation and political repression on those on lower rungs of the

violence in a vicious triangle". While "direct violence, such as rape, intimidates and represses; structural violence institutionalizes; and cultural violence internalizes that relation, especially for the victims, the women, making the structure very durable" (1996:40). At the same time, as argued by Catia Confortini, direct violence can influence both cultural and structural violence preventing women from accessing their social, economic and political rights, thereby being "a tool to build, perpetuate and reproduce structural violence" (2006: 350). Domestic violence for instance can be closely linked to wife abuse and structural violence against women, and rape need not be a deviant activity of an individual but closely related to promoting male supremacy and gender inequalities in society (ibid).

Structural violence has particular relevance in analysing the experiences of women workers on the Sri Lankan plantations. The use of physical violence to control the workforce has been a characteristic of plantation production since its inception the Portuguese used slaves for the large-scale cultivation of sugar. The physical cruelty of planters, the management and overseers on slaves, and subsequently on indentured labour and so-called 'free' labour has been well documented (Wolf 1959; Tinker 1974; Breman 1989).[7] In addition, as will be discussed in the subsequent sections on Sri Lanka, plantation patriarchy in Sri Lanka was additionally supported by gender biases in caste, religion, ethnicity and other cultural practices.

Women Workers on Colonial Plantations in Sri Lanka

Women were part of the labour force recruited from the 1830s by the planters from the famine-prone districts of the Madras Presidency in South India. These women belonged to the lowest classes and castes in the villages and, like their male

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caste ladder. The low status of women within the caste system left them exposed to what Galtung has referred as 'culture violence' where religious ideology is used to "justify or legitimise direct or structural violence" (1990: 291).

[7] Eric Wolf has argued that the plantation was "an instrument of force, wielded to create and to maintain a class structure of workers and owners, connected hierarchically by a staff line of overseers and managers" (1959: 136). Plantations were characterised as 'total institutions' with workers on a plantation being often restricted from having contact with outsiders, while the planters exercised authority over "all aspects of the lives of people within its territory" (Beckford 1972:9). In analysing the plantations on Sumatra's east coast under Dutch colonial rule, Breman has also observed "the relationship between the planter and the coolie, which was so imbued with the use of public and private violence, represented an extreme form of the lack of freedom of colonized labour under Dutch rule" (1989:)

counterparts, suffered from chronic indebtedness and sought some form of remuneration for their survival. These workers were, as noted by Sir Emerson Tennent, the Colonial Secretary in charge of Ceylon in 1847, caught between the dictates of plantation capitalism and debt bondage, with little choice of place of work or seasonality of employment. [8] Women formed a very small proportion of the workforce during the initial stage, just 2.6% of the labour force in 1843 and 27% by 1866. Their conditions of travel were dismal, they were vulnerable to all kinds of dangers, and it was most likely that they also sexually serviced the male migrant workers. W. C. Twynam, Government Agent of Jaffna commented on the fact that the few women accompanied the workers during the initial period of migration, indicating that the migrant workers formed "...miserable gangs of coolies of 1843 and 1845, with one or two women to 50 or 100 men, strangers in a strange land, ill-fed, ill-clothed, eating any garbage they came across (more however from necessity than choice...[9]

The planters were keen to recruit women workers and the Secretary of the Immigrant Labour Commission in 1860 asked the Agent in India to look for more labour, "either on long or short engagements, and who if required would bring their wives and families with them."[10] The planters were motivated by economic as well as labour control advantages in recruiting women. First, women workers in south India were paid less than their male counterparts, a principle that was adopted in the recruitment of women as workers to the plantations. As such the Commission was willing to pay relatively higher rates for 'able-bodied' men, with "women and youths at some proportionally lower rate."[11] Second, women workers were viewed as more controllable and according to the Agent women were generally "the more steady and regular labourers."[12] Both these elements stemmed from the patriarchal norms and practices in their home regions, and were taken over to their work on the plantations in Sri Lanka. The recruitment of women workers, and the maintenance of discrimination against them with regard to payments and control were clearly in the interests of plantation profitability.

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[8]SLNA 3/34 Pt.I Tennent to Grey, Dispatch No.6 (misc). 21 April 1847.

[9]London, Colonial Office, CO 54/475, Letter to Colonial Secretary, Henry T. Irving in "Correspondence on The Condition of Malabar Coolies in Ceylon", p.16, Enclosure No.8 30 September 1869.

[10] SLNA. 6/2144: Dawson to Graham: 6 March 1860.

[11] SLNA. 2/2644: Dawson to Graham: 6 March 1869.

[12] SLNA. 6/2644: Graham to Hansbrow: 24 March 1859.

The system of recruitment through the so-called *kangany* system further reinforced patriarchal norms and practices. *Kanganies* were 'native' persons who were given advances by the planters to go to their villages in India and try and recruit persons, usually friends and relatives, to work on the plantations. Under these circumstances, the workers who migrated were aware of the backgrounds of the others, and carried over the prevailing caste and religious norms to the plantations. In this process, the subordinate position of women in Hinduism, in the caste hierarchy as well as in the prevailing Indian society, was transferred virtually intact to the plantations. As mentioned previously, these attitudes were consciously retained by the planters, as they justified paying women lower wages than their male counterparts.

Few regulations governed the recruitment process as it was considered to be the movement of 'free' labour. In reality however, these workers were not afforded even the minimal protection that was provided for workers on indenture. Workers often fell ill, fever and dysentery prevailed on the estates, and workers were not sent to hospitals or given treatment by medical advisors.[13] The active recruitment of women resulted in their increasing numbers as workers on the plantations and by the early decades of the 20th century they constituted the majority of the labour force on the plantations.

The Patriarchal and Hierarchical Labour Regime

The labour regime on the Sri Lankan plantations retained the hierarchical features of the earlier slave plantations in the Caribbean and Latin America. The British superintendent, or the *periya dorai* (big master), like his counterpart under the slave plantations, was at the top of hierarchy wielding ultimate authority over every aspect of estate life. He commanded all those below him and was helped by some assistants, generally British as well – the s*inna dorais* (small masters) Below them were the office staff, such as the accountants who tended to be Tamils or Euro-Asians from outside the estate, and who viewed themselves as superior to the workers. Below the management were the workers, men and women who worked and lived most of their lives within the confines of the plantation. Similar to the race, class and gender hierarchies of the slave plantations, women occupied the lowest rungs and were subordinated to men at all levels of the estate hierarchy. According to 1847 the

[13] SLNA. 5/34. Pt.I Disp. No.6 (Misc.) Tennent to Grey. Colombo. 21 April 1847.

Superintendent of Police in Kandy, J.S. Colpepper, in 1847, the treatment of plantation workers was "exceedingly arbitrary and cruel" and worse than "Negro slavery" (quoted in Roberts 1966).

The patriarchal order on the Sri Lankan plantations was further strengthened through the *kangany* system of recruitment, and more particularly the role of the Head Kangany on the estates. As *kangany* gangs increased in number and new *kangany* gangs came into existence (Majoriebanks and Marakkayar 1917:2), and over time, a hierarchy also developed on the estates with a head *kangany* controlling several sub-*kanganies* (Wenzlhuemer 2008:250).[14] The Head Kangay usually belonged to a relatively higher caste than the workers, and functioned as the intermediary between them and the management, using his position to control most the "domestic affairs of his gang" including settling their disputes and dealing with their grievances (Majoriebanks and Marakkayar 1917: 2). He also supervised the workers on the fields for which he was paid 'head' money which was the payment that was due to him for every worker that turned up for work. The workers were further split in smaller groups under their own patriarch or silara kangany, and lived in barrack –like structures, debt-ridden to the Kangany and the planters. Their line rooms were often arranged, in consultation with the kangany, along caste lines. In these ways, the patriarchal norms associated with Indian caste and religious practices were retained in women's lives on the plantations. According to the Report of the Labour Commission in 1908, however, the plantation workforce was divided so as to enhance the 'family principle', [15] - workers at each level exercising rights on those below them and paying respect to those higher in the hierarchy. In reality, women remained the lowest scale on this social ladder as well as within the 'families'.

Physical violence, as in the case of the slave plantations, was also meted out on workers by the planters, with women facing in addition, threat of or actual sexual abuse. [16] The planters also used watchers and guards to prevent workers from

[14]Roland Wenzlhuemer, 2008,*From Coffee to Tea Cultivation in Ceylon, 1880-1900: An Economic and Social History*, Leiden, Koninklijke Brill NV.
[15]*Report of the Labour Commission*, Colombo: 1908.
[16] Writing in 1878 P.D. Millie noted that "cuff and a kick" were sometimes used to settle disagreements, and corporal punishments were also used (Jayawardena 2007 :66). These forms of physical violence were evident even in the 20th century and the Sabaragamuwa Commission in 1914 noted that "some superintendents are averse to the practice, but others have admitted that castigation was resorted to whenever the

absconding from estates even employing Sinhalese villagers to arrest workers on the roads outside the estate.[17] Condemning such practices as a "form of slavery" the social reformer and politician P. Arunachalam, in 1916 wondered "that the Superintendent of the Estate was not ashamed to insert such an advertisement and to organize a hunt for a poor sickly woman with a baby in arms and burdened with two more children" (1936:217). The Labour Ordinance of 1865 enabled magistrates to return workers, who 'bolted' from the estate including women and children, to the estates. In 1916, following on many protests, the Attorney General, Anton Bertram drafted a bill to exempt women from imprisonment, but provided that a female over 16 could be imprisoned for drunkenness, insolence or misconduct, as "women may be quite as capable of giving trouble as a man". The penal provisions of this Ordinance were only abolished in 1922 (Jayawardena 1972: 209).

Physical, Cultural and Structural Violence under colonialism

In addition to the harsh working conditions on the plantations, women workers, like their slave counterparts, were also exposed to sexual abuse, harassment and domestic violence. The planters, like the other males on the plantations, could subject the women workers to sexual exploitation with impunity. As early as in 1848, Governor Torrington noted these "most objectionable" ways of the coffee planters (cited in KM de Silva 1965; 98). British bureaucrats, soldiers and minor officials also sexually exploited the workers, as well as local women, with the children from these liaisons being sent to Catholic convent schools, or to the Paynter Homes, established for the purpose of "rescuing" the Eurasian children (Jayawardena 2007).[18] This violence was built into the labour regime and the household as women workers were constantly under the control of male authorities, whether it be the planters, the *kanganies*, or their fathers and husbands.

The subordinate position of women in the plantation hierarchy was also justified through what could be viewed as 'cultural violence'. Hinduism, the religion followed by the vast majority of the plantation workers, espoused the notion that to be

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occasion demanded it" (*Report of the Commission to Inquire into the Conditions of Immigrant Tamil labourers in Sabaragamuwa 1914*, cited in Jayawardena 1972 : 22).

[17] Report of a Commission 1916, op.cit. Para. 55.

[18] Little has been written on Eurasians by researchers,but there are some references in fiction set in Ceylon (Jean Arasanayagam, Lorna Wright, William Knighton), and also some writing on Anglo-Indians (Jayawardena 2007).

born a woman was a sign of a bad *karma* or the negative consequence of bad deeds in the past. Women had therefore to fulfil their *dharma* or duty, which was to be obedient to the male members of her family, including her father, husband and son and thereby hope for a better rebirth. In addition, such a woman had also to be deferential and respectful to those above her in the social hierarchy. Women workers were in the lowest rungs of this social pyramid, with religious rituals and norms pressurising her to abide by their rules in her daily existence. Strong female deities, such as Kali, Saraswathi and Lakshmi were also worshipped on the plantations, and women were highly involved in organising religious festivals. Thus, while religion was viewed as an important source of solace and strength for women workers, and participating in religious activities noted as a meritorious deed that could enable them to be reborn at a high level, it also endorsed the fatalistic belief that women's injustices stemmed from actions in the past, and were therefore deserved. In a similar manner, the so-called low castes in society were pressured to accept their fate and not attempt to challenge their situation. Planters, on their part, actively encouraged religion on the plantations, viewing it an important form of controlling the workforce (Kurian and Jayawardena forthcoming).

Physical and cultural violence were not something apart from the structure but in reality informed the structure of plantations, including the division of labour in the fields and households. Women were allocated the labour intensive and time-consuming tasks on the fields and in the households. The most important and labour-intensive task on the tea estate was plucking of the 'flush', or the immature leaf, that appeared on the bush. Women were viewed as particularly important for this task as they were considered to have 'nimble fingers' and to be 'patient'. In spite of its significance to the profitability of production, women were paid less while working longer hours than their male counterparts, as the patriarchal ideology normalised the lower value (and thus the pay) of women's work. At the same time, there is little doubt that cost considerations were important in the employment of women workers. As early as in the 1839, a planter pointed out that plucking had become expensive as it was done by men, who could not pluck "as cheaply as the women and children" with the latter also " working at it steady."[19] This inequality was incorporated by the

[19] Report by Rettie of the Spring Valley Estate, reporting on the Uva Estate on 4 July 1893; Spring Valley Estate.

State into the Minimum Wage legislation introduced in 1929 and continued until it was rectified by law in 1984 as a result of mass trade union action and mobilisation of workers (see later discussion).

Women were also under constant male supervision by the planters, the management and the kanganies. For example, the plucking was usually done in a 'gang', which was under the supervision of a kangany (generally a man). It was the duty of the kangany to maintain the standard of the plucking and maximize the quantity of good leaf. This usually meant a fairly strict overseeing of the 'gang' in the field and during the time of the weighing. Vigilance had to be maintained to see that the workers did not slacken in their efforts or waste time, and also to improve the quality of the product by checking on the number of '*bangies*'(hard leaves) and seeing that the standard of plucking is maintained. The gang-system, under the supervision of the kangany, allowed for this close (male) watch over the performance of the workers.

Apart from their work on the fields women workers were also responsible for a wide range of household tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, caring for the children and other family members, fetching the water and firewood. This was the accepted traditional gender division of labour and as it was unpaid (or even acknowledged as work) it basically subsidised the wages workers received for their work. Like their work on the fields, the women were under male authority in their households, and were supposed to, by culture and practice, take care of the needs of the different males (husbands, fathers and at times, even the *kangany* and the planters). Some women workers also served as domestic servants in the homes of planters, as kitchen assistants and caregivers for children and were also vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence from the planters as well. Overall the tasks undertaken by the women were labour-intensive, repetitive and placed them under male supervision and control. Finally, the different activities provided them with little time for either, social contacts or sustained political activity, and the nature and intensity of estate and household work placed them in a well-defined, limited and highly controlled situation.

In addition to discrimination in wages, the State and the planters did little to improve the health or education (basic capabilities) of women. The abysmal sanitary conditions and high mortality rates of the plantation workers forced the government to pass the Medical Ordinance of 1872 to establish minimum health services for the workers. The schemes under the Ordinance however, turned out to be a "complete

failure" due to amongst other reasons, the unfamiliarity of the European Medical Officers with the language and needs of the workers, and were primarily motivated to please the planters. (Jayawardena, L.R.1960:117) According to reports from 1888 to 1892 the estate hospitals were "badly built, wretchedly equipped and dirty, and the mortality was frightful" (cited in ibid). There was no specific mention of the health of women workers. It is clear however, given the treatment meted out to all workers and the lack of concern for their health, that women workers had little choice and suffered from the poor quality of these services.

The primitive estate schools were mainly for boys, and little effort was made to raise women's literacy. While literacy was, on the whole, very low for both males and females, the statistics for 1911 showed that women fared significantly worse than the men. The literacy rates for women among the Indian Tamils in the principle planting districts were between 1% to 3% (the equivalent figures for males was between 13% and 21%) (Denham 1912:409).

Patriarchy in Politics: Historical and Contemporary Injustices

While the colonial government and the planters did their best to isolate the plantation workers from the wider working-class movement in the country, trade unionism developed on the plantations from the 1930s onwards and was able to mobilise a significant proportion of the workers, undertake militant strike action in alliance with the Left, and take up their demands for better working conditions, pay and other benefits with the planters and the government. There were also important women activists who highlighted the conditions on plantations. One of them was Meenachi Ammal, wife of pioneer trade union leader Natesa Aiyar. In the 1930s, she called for women's equality and chastised more conservative male leaders for their lack of attention to this problem. Women workers had a high level of trade union membership, since their fees were automatically deducted from their payroll. They also participated in large numbers in strikes and supported the plantation political parties.

Furthermore, as part of the process of increasing local government in Sri Lanka, the British colonial government granted universal franchise rights in 1931 to the plantation workers who could show that they had resided in the country for five years or longer. The franchise rights of the plantation workers were however, severely curtailed shortly after Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, when the newly

elected government passed Acts that denied citizenship to the vast majority of plantation workers, rendering them 'stateless'. The agreements between India and Sri Lanka in 1964 and 1974 allowed individuals to gradually register as citizens in Sri Lanka, but it was only in 1986, that the government finally passed an act granting citizenship to all the 'stateless'. [20]

At the same time, all the citizenship acts up to the 21st century reflected a gender bias stipulating the grant of citizenship to be based on male descent, and used only the masculine pronoun to refer to both women and men.[21]. No reference was made to the mother, grandmother or the great-grandmother, who might have been born in the country. This gender inequality was premised on the patriarchal notion in local laws that a woman's nationality depended on that of the man. The Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act of 1949 provided the right to apply for citizenship only to male heads of households, with women being able to apply independently only if they were widows, or unmarried and more that 21 years old (Valli Kanapathipillai 2009: 45). Even the 1986 Act, which effectively removed the 'stateless' problem contained this gender bias, reflecting the continuing association of women as dependents on men. This anomaly was finally removed in 2003, in response to pressures and campaigns from women's groups, lawyers and the National Committee of Women on the broader issue of gender injustice in the grant of citizenship.

Women workers were rarely included in the leadership of the trade union and political parties in spite of the high degree of their involvement in strikes and political action.[22] The exclusion of women from the leadership had both ideological and structural dimensions. Gender biases that informed plantation patriarchy continued

[20] The struggles of the plantation workers for their basic franchise and citizenship rights have formed an important part of the labour movement of the country (Kurian and Jayawardena forthcoming).

[21] According to the Sri Lankan Citizenship Act, a person born in the country needed to show that her or his father was also born in the country, or that her or his paternal grandfather and paternal great grandfather were born in the country.

[22] It is important to note that women in Sri Lanka in general have a poor representation in parliament and were seldom more that 5% of members in parliament and 2% in the provincial councils, municipal councils and *pradeshiya sabhas (ADB 2008: 6)* See G.R. Tressie Leitan's " Context Study and Actor Mapping in the South Asian Region: Overview of Decentralization and Local Governance in Sri Lanka" similarly highlights the low level of women in local government underscoring that it is 1.97% and the lowest in the South Asian Region (2010: 11) (Swiss Agency forDevelopment Cooperation (SDC), Colombo, July 2010.

the normalisation of the subordinate position of women in society. As a result, the leadership of trade unions as well as political parties – almost entirely composed of men – simply did not view women as capable to represent their interests, and few women were even nominated, and even fewer represented in the political hierarchy. In addition, as we have seen previously, the gender division of work was maintained well into the 21st century, with a normal working day for women workers beginning at 4 am and their household chores completed usually late in the evenings. In some contrast, men were involved in 'tasks' jobs, that were completed by about 2 p.m, and political meetings were held usually in the afternoons and the evenings during which time the women were either busy or too tired to participate in political discussions. According to Amali Philips women on plantations are treated like children who need to be controlled and guided by men at home and at work (2003:21). Even the *Matha Sangams*, which are womens' wings of the trade unions, were "limited to traditional religious, cultural and ritual events" (Philips 2003:27).

Up to the second decade of the 21st century, there were just a handful of women who had come up the ranks of the trade union and political leadership. Menaha Kandasamy, the first woman to lead a plantation trade union in the country, namely, the Ceylon Plantation Workers' (Red Flag) Union, has argued that trade unions are male dominated and women's leadership was essentially a "non issue" for men (2002: 37), with women being 'nominal' leaders", and of "use value only so far as it suited the male agenda of the trade unions" (ibid 51). [23]

Continuations in Structural, Cultural and Physical Violence

Given the persistence of plantation patriarchy and the poor representation of women in the political leadership, it is not surprising that many of the disadvantages women workers experienced persisted for a long period. Plantation workers, on the whole, were amongst the lowest in terms of quality of health and level of income, a historical legacy which continued to the 21st century. This can be seen from report of The National Plan of Action for the Social Development of the Plantation Community

[23] In line with these concerns, the RFWF organised an Asian regional conference held in Kandy in December 2011 on the significant theme "Can we be Democratic without Women's leadership?" (RFWM 2012). The participation of women in trade union leadership and local, regional and provincial councils, even if it is minimal, has brought about discussion and debate on the obstacles that women experience in politics.

which noted the persistent problems of housing, water supply, and sanitation, as well as "over-crowding of line rooms", which were "obsolete housing … unfit for human habitation" (NPA 2007: vi; 2). In addition, all health indicators are below the national average "with infant and maternal mortality and malnutrition among pre-school children more than double the all-island rates" and [24] public health preventive facilities are not always available to plantation workers (World Bank 2007: vii). Women workers were not only part of the marginalised plantation community that had lower basic capabilities than the rest of the country, but they were further disadvantaged on these scores in relation to the male counterparts.

In some contrast, and in response to increasingly better facilities for education, women have improved their educational capabilities. S. Thondaman, the leader of the CWC, who became a Minister in the government in 1978, put great effort into improving the educational opportunities for children on the estates, even mobilising foreign donors to support schools on the plantations (Little 2003:254). In response to these facilities, male and female literacy rates on the estates shot up from 80 and 58.1 percent respectively in 1986-87 to 88.3 and 74.7 percent respectively by 2003-2004 (World Bank 2007: 90 Table 8.1). While the performance of women continues to be less than that of men, these figures suggest girl children also greatly benefitted in this process.

Cultural violence, as manifested in the low status assigned to women in caste and religion, was continued and helped in legitimising inequality in terms of life chances and power. In the case of plantations, this cultural violence against women has been worked into the structure of plantation life. In analysing the kinship, marriage and gender experiences of Tamil women on six tea plantations in Sri Lanka in 1999-2000, Amali Philips, noted the importance of religion in justifying their subordination. According to her:

> Women bear their double burden of work at home and in the fields with poignant sarcasm, calling it the 'fulsome boon we have received from the gods' (*ithu engalukku pongi vantha varam*), while men attribute women's burdens to their karma and the 'sin of female birth'…. (2005:119).

Philips further describes the domestic rituals that reinforce their role as carers for

[24] The World Bank cites figures from the DHS (2000) indicating that 37 per cent estate children were stunted as compared to 14% of rural children and 48 per cent of estate mothers as had a low body mass index compared to 23 per cent of rural mothers (World Bank 2007: xvii)

their families.

> As if to thank the gods for their plight, women are assigned the tasks of praying and performing domestic rituals such as decorating the front step (*kolam*), lighting oil lamps, offering flowers to and garlanding sacred pictures and idols, sanitising the home with cow dung, and offering prayers for their husbands and family members. Prayer and worship are intermingled with domestic tasks. Women pray to the gods for a successful day, and they pray before lighting the hearth, cooking the rice meal, and cleaning the pots and pans at the end of the day (ibid)

The subordinate position in society, idealised in religion, was reflected in rituals on plantations. While women were enthusiastic and did voluntary work on religious occasions, they were "not allowed to serve on the estate temple boards" the excuse for this exclusion being that women were incompetent and stupid, and that management was a man's job (ibid: 115; and 119). The management also continued their support for religion, viewing it as a useful outlet for the feelings of the workers, and thereby helping them to accept their situation. Philips noted that in spite of complaints by the management that religious activities "cut into the busy work schedules " on the estates, the management "actively participates in the rituals and deducts money from workers wages for the expenses incurred in organising them" (ibid 115). Religious rituals, while embodying the "concerns and anxieties of workers who live and work under adverse conditions", were especially relevant as a "form of escape from the drudgery of work" and for women "a release from the monotony of repeated picking" (ibid 115). Women were able to use these religious ceremonies for their own purposes and they were also occasions for women to get together and socialise outside their work (Philips 2005: 119 & Kurian 1998: 79). They also enjoyed the dances and songs associated with religious events, and participated in their own dance forms such as women's' *kummi* dance. No doubt they also took pleasure in the songs and dramas performed by estate workers which could be used to perhaps express their grievances (See Kurian & Jayawardena, forthcoming).

Apart from structural and cultural violence, physical violence against women continued to remain a feature of plantation life. According to a study by Kamalini Wijayatilake & Faizun Zackariya in 2001, women from the plantation community remained targets of verbal and physical abuse, this violence being prevalent "within the family, the work place and in society reflecting unequal gender relations in these

three spheres" (2001: 17).

> *if the women showed anger or resentment at the passes the Kangani would make, or not acquiesce with his demands, he would reduce the weight of the leaf plucked and increase it for those who he favoured or those women who give in. When we protest about the short weight, he throws our card away and abuses us - (Wijayatilake &Zackariya 2001:13).*

Prevention of domestic violence and sexual harassment did not appear to be of high priority for the management and the unions, with women even losing confidence in the unions to take up their cause (ibid: 26). Physical violence or even the threat of violence also contributed to the low participation of women from the plantation community in politics, as it was unlikely that a woman would join politics if she was under physical or psychological threat.

The Sri Lankan state has taken several measures to counter violence against women and to promote gender equality. An amendment to the 1978 Constitution included principles of gender equality and non-discrimination. The country also ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1981 and subscribed to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995). The state also passed laws to combat sexual harassment in 1995 defining it as sexual harassment as "unwelcome sexual *advances* by words or action used by a person in authority, in a working place or any other place, shall constitute the offence of sexual harassment". Another important law was passed in 2005 was the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act of 2005. In spite of these progressive enactments, physical violence against women continues to be a pervasive feature of the plantations. The relevant information is not known widely in the plantation areas. And the women themselves lack the resources to initiate legal proceedings against their perpetrators. It is equally important to acknowledge that male authority has been normalised and internalised in the plantation community, with serious repercussions (including condemnation by her own family) if a woman should recourse to taking up legal action against domestic violence. Furthermore, the police and those in authority including trade unions, who should take action are often imbued with patriarchal norms, often encouraging the women to return to their

traditional roles and accepting their situation rather than seriously taking up their concerns.

It would be incorrect to assume that women workers completely accepted their subordinate role as ascribed by the hegemonic ideology. To the contrary, they expressed their anger at domestic violence indicating that it hurt and humiliated them both physically and emotionally. Several of them also passionately said that they would not allow their daughters to be victims of such situations (even if they felt that they could do little to change their own lives on this score). Such attitudes reflect an awareness of the wrongs that are being done to them even if these are not articulated as direct or open protests (Kurian 1989). The more recent increase in the number of separations and law suits by women for maintenance suggests that women are taking more direct action in challenging male domination (A.P.Kanapathipillai).

Conclusion

In spite of progress in entitlements and welfare, this paper has demonstrated that plantation patriarchy continues to prevail, sustaining women's subordination in the labour regime, the plantation hierarchy, trade unions, political parties and in the community. It still endorses gender biases emanating from religion, caste and other cultural practices that justify women's inferior status in society and validate their lower levels of income, education and health, as well as sexual abuse and domestic violence. Its durability stems from its ability to increase the profitability of production and to maintain male authoritative structures benefitting those wielding power, including the state, planters, the unions and the male members of community. This paper has demonstrated that this long-term gender discrimination and exploitation is a form of structural violence, which has systematically denied women equality with regard to life-chances and opportunities, and thereby promoted social and gender injustice in a key sector of the country.

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