

# Gender Inequality at Work: A Literature Review

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**Abstract:** - Gender inequality at work is the focus of this article. Accordingly, it attempts to highlight the conceptual frameworks on gender inequality at work and present the practical applicability of these theories with the use of garment industry in Sri Lanka as an example. Women in the garment industry in Sri Lanka account for three fourth of the workforce in the industry and patriarchy plays a vital role within the social structure of the country. Buddhist philosophy highlights that a person becomes who s/he is with what s/he does, but not with what s/he has or who s/he is in the society. In contrast, Sri Lanka being a Buddhist country people's position is still determined by who they are. Capitalist patriarchy, gender regimes, gendered organisations, creating subjectivities and resistance and agency are used as the conceptual frameworks to understand gender inequality at work. The literature on Sri Lankan women in the garment industry produce important evidence regarding women's subordination, identities, agency, resistance etc. Most significantly patriarchy plays a vital role in creating gender subordination and government intervention facilitate the subordination of women employed in garment factories in Sri Lanka.

**Key Words:-** Gender Inequality, Garment Industry, Subordination of women, Patriarchy

## I. INTRODUCTION

The main focus of the article is to present the conceptual frameworks found in literature in relation to gender inequality at work and to relate the theories to practice by using Sri Lankan garment industry as an example. Thus the broader frameworks on gender inequality will be discussed first. This will be followed by literature relating to the experiences of gender inequality by the employees in the Sri Lankan garment industry to highlight the applicability of the theories in a practical context. The garment industry is selected as a case study because: women employees' account for 73% of the workforce in the garment industry (Savchenko and Acevedo, 2012); second, to understand the degree of subordination experienced by women and their awareness of being subordinated.

Sri Lanka is an Asian country, in which gender prejudices and patriarchal norms stemming from colonialism, race, caste, ethnicity, religion and cultural practices are incorporated into the structure of the labour regime (Kurian and Jayewardene, 2013) and 70% (approx.) of the population is Buddhists. According to Buddhist philosophy a person becomes who s/he is with what s/he does, but not with what s/he has or who s/he is in the society. In contrast my personal experience as a senior academic in a local public sector university is that despite Sri Lanka being a Buddhist country people's position is still determined by who they are. As a result I have

experienced gender inequality and still experience it even as a senior university teacher.

My review of studies of Sri Lankan garment factories found evidence of the effects of patriarchy on women's positions within the industry and government support for control of women's purity, along with women's resistance and agency. I will use capitalist patriarchy, gender regimes, gendered organisations, resistance and agency as theoretical perspectives to understand the experience of employees in relation to gender inequality at work.

## II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS ON GENDER INEQUALITY

The concepts of capitalist patriarchy, gender regimes, gendered organisations, and subjectivities have been used to conceptualize gender inequality. Following is a critical review of these frameworks to identify the concepts that are relevant to understanding the creation/recreation of gender inequality in Sri Lanka.

### *Capitalist patriarchy*

Feminist theorists in the 1970's and 1980's argued that the inter-dependent relation between capitalism and patriarchy are at the heart of women's position in global production. The majority of employees in the global factories that emerged at that time were women, including in Sri Lanka. A very influential account by Elson and Pearson(1981), evaluated the new possibilities and problems for women caused by the employment of women in global factories and explained these through the complex dependence of capitalist profits on women's subordination. Many women worked in the Free Trade Zones (FTZs) that governments created, including Sri Lanka, where national laws on workers' rights were suspended, allowing employers to increase productivity without effective resistance. Elson and Pearson(1981) argued that global factories employed women, counter to the expectations of traditional gender norms in many countries, but that this neither made women equal nor necessarily lead to their emancipation from family norms. Firms gained by using women's domestic obligations to treat them as a secondary labour force, employing women at 20%-50% of men's wages in the same role and seeing women as 'naturally' docile and less inclined to join trade unions. The discriminatory treatment of women was justified by employers saying that women are naturally inferior workers because they are unable to continue employment once they have children. In contrast, Elson and Pearson(1981) reject the idea that subordination of women is 'natural' but argue that subordination is intrinsic to today's gender construction processes in the world. Thus, it is

not patriarchal attitudes alone that produce gender subordination, as some feminists argued, nor capitalism, as some Marxists argued, but rather the intricate material processes which go on in our daily practices which are rooted in what they call 'capitalist patriarchy'. Capitalist labour processes use women's domestic obligations to allocate them to a secondary status in the labour market.

I will argue that capitalist patriarchy is a suitable lens to read the experience of Sri Lankan employees and employers to understand how capitalism piggybacks on patriarchy for profits within global production, since studying the organisation of production must consider how patriarchal cultural assumptions of masculinity and femininity are integrated into employers' employment practices, how far employers strike a balance between profits and employee wellbeing (wages, facilities etc.), employers' capacity to influence national policy making bodies etc. Pearson (Jackson and Pearson, 1998) later challenged the overly general view that she and Elson had put forward about global trends in the employment of women in factories and came to recognize that the character of gender relations can also depend on the specificities of gender relations and the practices of local labour markets. Critiquing her earlier work with Elson (1981) she comments that they had ignored the reformulation of specific gender identities within which women are active agents. Thus, Pearson's earlier view on women as passive recipients of the effects of capitalist patriarchy but not as actors with active resistance is critiqued. The patterns found by Elson and Pearson (1981) are still evident, as in Fussell's (2010) study of maquiladoras in Mexico. She considers women as suppliers of low-wage labour in developing countries due to the social construction of women as secondary wage earners. Employers are uninterested in attracting qualified workers with higher wages, but prefer employing the cheapest labour to compete globally. Global competition affecting multinational assembly plants has influenced the local labour market reducing the earnings of women. Similarly, Sri Lankan factories operating within transnational production might be depending on women's low wages for profit, which the literature review might uncover.

Elson and Pearson (1981) identified three possible tendencies in the relation between the emergence of factory work and the subordination of women as a gender which we might still find present today. They are, 'intensifying' or 'decomposing' existing forms of gender relations and 'recomposing' new forms.

Evidence of all three forms can be found. Ngai (2005) in a much later work explains how Chinese supervisors build pressure on workers using time tables to meet targets with punishments for lagging behind, thereby 'intensifying' gender subordination in the factory. In contrast, Pearson (Jackson and Pearson, 1998) elaborates how daughters choose factory employment as a route to personal liberation; this can be seen in terms of 'decomposing'. This also happens in Java, where women workers' autonomy increased along with their

economic contribution to the household, and in Puerto Rico where older working women increased their power in the home (Safa, 1986, cited in Charles, 1993). 'Recomposing' is seen in Taiwan, where young women were expected to remain under the authority of the parents and they have to repay the parents for having brought them up (Wolf, 1990 cited in Charles, 1993). Sri Lankan literature highlights a similar increase in employed women's influence on family decision making as in Java, which can be seen as 'decomposing' gender subordination.

Cockburn (1983) also works with the idea of capitalist patriarchy, linking capitalism to a system of sex/gender relations. Her study of male compositors in the newspaper printing industry in the UK focussed on the human impact of technological change and found that the printing industry has a patriarchal craft culture in which skilled men and their strong trade union identification marginalized women within the industry.

She found that technological change altered the power relations between unionised skilled compositors, employers and female labour. Print unions' feared they would lose control of the labour process and male dominance of skilled jobs if women entered the industry. Entry of women is not much of a gain as the wages of feminised jobs became cheaper. What eventually happened was a reorganisation of the gendered division of labour leaving the control of technology in the hands of men and maintaining the definition of skilled work as men's work and unskilled work as women's. Keeping women out of craft jobs was a struggle by men to maintain patriarchal control and advantage. Cockburn concludes that, technological change was involved in the making and remaking of men who were still able to maintain their power over women.

In contrast to Cockburn's study, the Sri Lankan garment industry's workforce has a majority of women and unionisation is restricted by law. But I can still use Cockburn's work to understand the relation between male work cultures and women workers and to see whether gender struggles also go on in Sri Lankan factories.

#### *Gender regime*

Connell (1987) introduced the concept 'gender regime' in order to recognize forms of gender subordination in every institution such as family, state and street. She highlights that at the time she was writing, institutions were analysed as if gender has no account at all. Most of the writings on classic themes of social science such as state, migration etc., demonstrate gender blindness. But gender relations are present in all types of organisations and a major structure of most organisations.

By the "gender regime" of an institution we mean the patterning of gender relations in that institution, and especially the continuing pattern, which provides the structural context of particular relationships and individual practices

(Connell,1987 cited in Connell,2010, pp 6). Wherever people are, gender relations are inevitably present. One organisation may be differently gendered compared to another due to prevailing context of it and of other related organisations. Thus, 'context' is significant in understanding the form taken by gendering(Connell,1987). For example in a recession, for profit maximisation the number of part-time jobs get increased and women fit-in to those due to their domestic obligations.

Her four dimensional model includes gender division of labour (how production and consumption are arranged), gender relations of power (how control, authority, and force are exercised), emotion and human relations (how attachment and antagonism among people and groups are organized) and gender culture and symbolism (how gender identities are defined in culture). A gender regime therefore combines these four elements and the distinction between each is a conceptual tool to understand actual relationships. Within this article concept of gender regimes, and the elements I just listed, may be useful to identify the characteristics of gender relations in factories.

#### *Gendered organisations*

Shifting from studying wider social structures in relation to gender subordination, Acker(1990) tried to explain gender inequalities through focussing on organisational practices and symbols within organisations. In a way this is a contrast between Marxist influenced approaches like Elson and Pearson's(1981) and Weberian approaches, with the latter focussing on the bureaucratic organisation structure. Acker views organisations as neither gender neutral nor asexual but gendered.

To say that an organisation, or any other analytic unit, is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine(Acker,1990, pp146). Acker argues that the assumption that the worker is a man, with a male body, sexuality, minimal responsibility in reproduction, and control of emotions, pervades work and organisational processes. In contrast women's bodies, sexuality, reproductive ability, menstruation etc. are stigmatized, and used to justify the control and exclusion of women. Gender segregation at work is sometimes openly justified by the necessity to control women's sexuality.

Acker adopts Connell's(1987) concept of gender regime and for Acker(2006) the term gender regime means the ways that gender is part of organisational processes at a particular time, in a particular organisation. Like Connell, she identifies a number of organisational processes and practices that produce and reproduce gender regimes in organisations: construction of divisions, construction of images and symbols, enactment of dominance and submission, individual identity and underlying assumptions and practices that construct most contemporary work organisations.

Acker has been criticised by Britton(2000) for assuming all organisations to be inherently gendered but not distinguishing between different aspects of gender in organisation. By doing so Britton attempts to clarify that organizations are not inherently gendered but differently gendered. Acker's work also does not consider some of the aspects of gender relations in work identified by Cockburn, such as the role of trade unions or informal worker resistance.

#### *Creating subjectivities*

With the shift away from grand narratives and the emergence of postmodernism, studying subjectivities and identities rather than structures became prominent in the study of gender inequality. Thus more attention is paid to active agency and the creation of subjectivities as an essential aspect of the reproduction of gender subordination and the possibilities for resistance. This continues a longer tradition of attending to women's agency. For instance, Pearson's (1998) recognition of the significance of reformulation of specific women's gender identities and the ways in which women are active agents in the interaction between capital accumulation and traditional forms of gender identities, Cockburn's(1983) emphasis on creating gender identities and resistance and Acker's attention to gender identities as products of organisational processes, all emphasise the role of subjects' own agency in defining femininity and masculinity. Ong(1987) and Wolf(1992) were also attentive to subjectivity and agency in their studies on Malay and Java factories. They described capitalism as a system of social relations and a cultural configuration that intersect with local Malay and Javanese practices and understandings which produce the specific manifestations of gendered work (cited in Bair, 2010).

An even stronger interest in creating subjectivities can be found in poststructuralist studies on gender in global factories. For instance, Salzinger(2003) adopted a post-structuralist, feminist approach to study four global factories in Mexico. Her aim is to explain the ubiquity of what she calls the 'the trope of productive femininity', that is the 'icon' of the docile and dextrous women worker(Salzinger,2003 cited in Bair,2010, pp217) which she located in discourse rather than family structures.

Salzinger, develops the idea that subjectivities are created not just locally, but on the shop floor, and differently in different factories. New subjects are created through discourse, and are more productive as they take on the expectations of management. However, Salzinger may be criticised for failing to identify linkages between what happens in particular factories and wider socio-economic structures and practices. Thus, Bair(2010) argues that the construction of productive femininity, as highlighted by Salzinger, not only reflects transnational managers' vision but also their placement within a larger structure of global capitalism. This link between the local and larger global structures is essential to provide a

satisfactory explanation about gendering in transnational production.

Taking a similar approach to Salzinger(2003) but considering the effects of capitalist patriarchy Ngai's(2005) study of an electronics factory in China found that a newly embodied social identity emerges in these factories to meet the changing socio economic relations of the country and the needs of capital.

Post-structuralist researchers focus on agency and subjectivity to highlight the significance of women's active participation in creating subjectivities which leads to gender subordination within factories and this is important to fully understand gender relations in factories. But it needs to be combined with attention to wider structures, which these authors neglect.

### III. STUDIES OF GENDER INEQUALITIES IN SRI LANKAN GARMENT FACTORIES

Review of studies relating to Sri Lankan garment factories reveals that patriarchy plays a vital role in creating gender subordination. Taken as a whole the studies show a complicated picture of the intensification, decomposition and recomposition of gender subordination, but there has been little attempt to identify reasons for different patterns at different times and places.

In some of the studies such as those of Jayaweera(2003), Hancock(2006,2011) and Hewamanne and Brow(1997) wider capitalist and patriarchal structures of the kind examined by Elson and Pearson(1981) are recognised as central to the creation and maintenance of gender subordination in the garment factories. However they do not locate the factories in the context of global capitalism. For instance, Jayaweera(2003) studied changes in gender roles and relations within families of women worker's in FTZ's. She agrees with Elson and Pearson (1981) that women's reproductive roles make them secondary earners, and patriarchal relations are reproduced in different forms in the workplace. With women's expanding economic roles, some modification in patriarchal relations does take place at home but does not result in an equitable gender division of labour.

Hewamanne and Brow(1997) interviewed workers in Katunayake FTZ, and analysed the conflict between and confluence of 'neo-traditional cultural values' and 'capitalist work culture'.

It seems clear that the FTZ women's entanglement with popular cultural beliefs has constrained their understanding of the structures of subordination to which they are subjected and has inhibited that understanding from developing into an organized and determined collective will (Hewamanne and Brow,1997, pp 12). With their limited understanding of subordination, women move from village patriarchy to industrial patriarchy, which can be seen as recomposing gender subordination(Elson and Pearson,1981).

Hancock's(2006) study of 'empowerment' and 'status' in Katunayake and Kandy FTZ's, argues that: The qualitative data and narratives highlight the mechanisms of patriarchy at most levels of Sri Lankan society (Hancock,2006, pp 234) At the same time, Hancock et al.'s(2011) study in six FTZ's questioned that the majority of women in developing nations have been dis-empowered due to global and national patriarchy. They found that: Once women started working they were viewed as an 'asset' to the family and patriarchy put aside in many cases, at that level at least(Hancock et al.,2011, pp. 4).

Sometimes tendencies similar to the decomposition and recomposition of gender subordination operate in factories in the same country. Women lead complex lives, with empowerment and disempowerment working simultaneously.

Apart from the reproduction of gender subordination due to wider social structures, studying the construction of new subjectivities and their relation to women's agency has been a significant focus of research in gender subordination in Sri Lankan garment factories. In particular, women workers have to negotiate new identities in the face of what is perceived to be a clash between factory work and the maintenance of traditional female sexual morality. For instance, Lynch(1992) identifies the 'newly traditional identity' through which rural women workers attempt to differentiate themselves from their urban counterparts and to prove themselves as morally 'good girls' despite also being modern working women. The celebration of 'good girls' symbolizes a conjuncture of nationalist and capitalist gender ideals. Thus the process of identity formation illustrates the profound impact of the local context and not just global context on worker subjectivities. According to Lynch ideals of respectability and feminine purity are particularly important in shaping gender subordination in Sri Lanka, in part because they are incorporated in government policy.

The government's '200 Garment Factories Program' had the twin aims of protecting village women's morality and the integrity of the nation state and attempted to reproduce the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology through the use of moral purity of village women.(Lynch,1999). Under the program, factories were established in rural areas to ensure women's safety and morality as they go to work from home while being under the parental /spousal control.

Women in rural factories manipulate the nationalist ideal of morality to prove themselves as sexually chaste. Consequently, women gain freedom for new social practices and behaviours from parents, villagers and managers, only on the condition that they maintain their image as 'good girls', thereby decomposing and recomposing gender relations simultaneously.

'Sense of place' and 'self-identities' among migrant women factory workers are the concepts explored in a study done in the Katunayake FTZ by Attanapola(2006).These women have developed positive self-identities within the factories by

participating in social and political activities. Their contributions to the family income is recognised by their families, where they gain respect, an example of the decomposition of gender subordination, although not conceptualised as such by the author.

Cockburn highlights how resistance of workers to capitalist exploitation can help to recreate gender subordination. However in Sri Lanka resistance is minimum due to the Board of Investment (BOI), the government agency encouraging investment in the country advocating 'Employee Councils' instead of unions which limits the voice and power of workers to negotiate labour conditions. This is in contrast to ILO conventions to which Sri Lanka is signatory and also against the constitution which guarantees every citizen the right to form and join a trade union (Ruwanpura, 2012).

Gunawardene (2014) found that while enjoying the BOI restrictions on unionisation in line with global trends, managers permit internal, individualized voice mechanisms for voicing concerns of employees. She discusses how some voice mechanisms are used by managers to address conflicts, absenteeism etc. Women discuss their issues and grievances initially with their immediate supervisors and if not resolved, these proceed to other levels. She also notes how social relations such as respect embedded in hierarchies curtail women's voice in formal settings as a result of socialization within a patriarchal social structure.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Agreeing with the frameworks which explain the nature of gender inequality, the literature on Sri Lankan women in the garment industry produce important evidence regarding women's subordination, identities, agency, resistance etc. Most significantly patriarchy plays a vital role in creating gender subordination and women move from village patriarchy to industrial patriarchy. However once women are employed they were viewed as an 'asset' to the family and patriarchy put aside in many cases, at that level at least. Although the studies show a complicated picture of the intensification, decomposition and recomposition of gender subordination, the patterns identified by Elson and Pearson (1981) there has been little attempt to identify reasons for different patterns at different times and places. In relation to gender subordination in Sri Lankan garment factories, construction of new subjectivities and their relation to women's agency has been a significant focus of research. Thus, women workers have to negotiate new identities in the face of what is perceived to be a clash between factory work and the maintenance of traditional female sexual morality. Further the ideals of respectability and feminine purity are particularly important in shaping gender subordination in Sri Lanka. Going against ILO conventions to which Sri Lanka is signatory and also against the constitution which guarantees every citizen the right to form and join a trade union, the garment industry has only 'Employee Councils' instead of unions. However, women are the backbone of the garment

industry, but government interventions enable these global factories to employ women counter to the expectations of traditional gender norms. In conclusion it can be stated that women's employment in garment factories neither made them equal nor necessarily lead to their emancipation from family norms but they are subordinated.

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