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Estranged Labour on the Global Assembly Line? 'Sewing Girls' of Post-colonial Garment Factories in Sri Lanka

By Prajna Seneviratne¹

Abstract

Inspired by the Marxian conceptualization of 'estranged labour', this paper seeks to explore the phenomenon of 'sewing girls' of global garment factories in Sri Lanka leaving waged work after a relatively short span of time, drawing on this trend of thought. Even though issues surrounding female labour in the global garment industry are widely researched, there is little or no evidence of existing literature attempting to place the empirical issues within a Marxist conceptual framework. It is in this context that this paper, which takes on a methodological approach of ethnography from a feminist perspective attempts to narrate the 'stories' of 'sewing girls' of a postcolonial garment factory in Sri Lanka as they work as labourers on the global assembly line. Their 'stories' as told here shed light on the similarities between 'estranged labour' as described by Marx and the labour of 'sewing girls' spend on the global assembly lines. The multiply oppressive conditions under which they work and the inevitability of leaving waged work after short spans are also revealed through their stories, situated and read within the Marxian concept of 'estranged labour'.

Keywords: Women's Labour, Garment Workers, Estranged Labour, Sri Lanka

Introduction

'Third World' Women in Global Market Factories

As the 1970s saw the end of the post Second World War boom period, the need to change the system of the world economy to ensure continuous growth of capitalist economies became of paramount importance. The resultant *new* international division of labour (IDL) meant that 'labour intensive production processors should be exported to the colonies, now called the 'developing countries' or the 'third world', that whole industrial plants should be shifted to these countries and that third world workers, because of their low wage levels, should now produce the machine made goods for the masses in the Western countries' (Froebel et al, 1980). Under the new IDL large multinational corporations of the USA, Germany and Japan began relocating their factories in the Free Trade Zones (FTZs) of Philippines, Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore, Mexico, Sri Lanka and Thailand. These were particularly in the textile and garment industries, the electronics industry and the toy industry (Lim, 1983; Mies, 1998; Elias, 2004; Azmeh, 2014; Tran, 2017). In the Free Trade Zones (FTZs) of South-East Asia, Africa and Latin America, more than 70 percent of the labour force is female; the majority of these women are young—between the ages of 14 and 24—and work in the actual production processes on the assembly line, mostly under male supervisors

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(Frobel et al, 1980; Lim, 1983; Phizacklea, 1990; Rosa, 1994; Hurley and Miller, 2005; Azmeh, 2014; Chang, 2016, Seneviratne, 2018). The massive incorporation and proletarianization of third world women in global factories is explained by Mohanty (1991a :28) as “world market factories relocate in search of cheap labour, and find a home in countries with unstable (or dependent) political regimes, low levels of unionization, and high unemployment. What is significant about this situation is that it is young third world women who overwhelmingly constitute the labour force of these world market factories”. Global capital has once again discovered - they had already once been discovered during colonization - *women* - specifically poor third world women.

Why women, Why ‘Young Third World Women’?

Feminist scholars (Elson and Pearson, 1986; Mies 1998) while pointing out that it is young third world women who overwhelmingly constitute the labour force of ‘world market factories’ and that third world women seem to be more attractive as workers to global capital than men, also raise queries about this situation. It is based on such thinking that they ask; is this situation really a change of heart in the centres of capitalist patriarchy as promoted by the official slogans of ‘integrating women into development’? (Mies, 1998) Or do we indeed need to problematize the relations through which women are ‘integrated into development’, as part of the problem itself rather than as part of the solution? (Elson and Pearson, 1986) Agreeing with the latter point of view, prompts us to look for other reasons for the attention given to women in the colonies today. As Mies (1889:114) argues, for the strategy of new IDL—that is to produce at the lowest possible cost to work, relocated industries have to look for the ‘cheapest, most docile and most manipulable workers’ in the underdeveloped countries. Women are seen as possessing ‘naturally different innate capacities and personality traits than men’ (Elson and Pearson, 1986:72) which makes them more attractive to global capital. As the Malaysian government in an investment brochure designed to attract foreign capital says:

...the manual dexterity of the oriental female is famous the world over. Her hands are small and she works fast with extreme care. Who, therefore, could be better qualified by nature and inheritance to contribute to the efficiency of a bench-assembly production line than the oriental girl? (Grossman, 1979 cited in Mies, 1998:117).

As Perera (2007) asserts, the occluded agent of production in this post-industrial age is the super exploited (female) worker in ‘postcolonial’ developing countries. In business brochures, she is sold as ‘cheap’, ‘docile’ and ‘famous for her manual dexterity’. Furthermore, third world government advertisements offering their young women to foreign capital make no attempt to disguise their sexist undertones. For instance:

“the third world investment bureau of Haiti, trying to attract German investors, published an advertisement showing a beautiful Haitian women and the text: Now you can get more labour for your DM. For only 1 US Dollar, she works happily for eight hours for you, many hundreds of her friends will do so, too” (Frobel et al, cited in Mies, 1998:117).

“The concept of ‘nimble figures’ is often accompanied by two other important assumptions: that compared to men, women are more patient (and thus can tolerate monotonous

jobs) and more obedient (and thus easier to manage and control)” (Lynch, 2007: 26). Capital prefers women as workers not only because they are seen as easily trainable, disciplined and disposable but also because of their ‘docile disposition’ (Biyawila, 2006). Third world women enter global factories with a ‘natural’ exit (tendency to leave their jobs after a short span of time) out of the factory. At the same time they show a very high degree of productivity of work (Kelegama and Epaarachchi, 2002; Chang, 2016). Why global capital prefers young third world women to work in world market factories is illustrated by Elson and Pearson as: Women are considered not only to have naturally nimble figures, but also to be naturally more docile and willing to accept tough work discipline..., and to be naturally more suited to tedious, repetitions, monotonous work (1986:73-74).

Elson and Pearson (1986) take their analysis further by pointing out that, why only young women work in world market factories is also rationalized as an effect of their capacity to bear children. This means they will be either unwilling or unable to continue in employment beyond their early twenties. The phenomenon of ‘women leaving employment in the factory when they get married or pregnant is known as natural wastage’ (Elson and Pearson, 1986: 74) and is highly advantageous to firms which prefer to have an unstable, irregular, casual labour force. Mies confirms this view by drawing attention to the *maquiladoras* or free trade zones in Mexico where ‘80-90 percent of the workforce is young unmarried women who work under almost forced- labour conditions. These workers are usually fired when they get pregnant because their employers do not want to pay any maternity benefits’ (1998: x). Setting up of free trade zones in the third world, therefore, is driven by the availability of a work force that is ‘assumed to view work as a temporary interlude between childhood on the one hand and marriage and motherhood on the other’ (Mitter, 1986:49).

The phenomenon of women leaving employment in the factories to get married and bear children, considered as ‘natural’ by their employers, but problematized not as ‘natural’ but as exploitative of female labour and advantageous to capital by feminist scholars becomes an intriguing issue, a further study of which could yield important insights into women’s work in world market factories. Even though feminist scholars (e.g. Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Lim, 1983; Nash, 1983; Elson and Pearson, 1986; Mitter, 1986; Mies, 1998; Salzinger, 2003, Carswell, and De Neve, 2013; De Neve, 2014; Chang, 2016; Tran, 2017) have already questioned many aspects of women’s work in world market factories under ‘new’ international division of labour, when it comes to the specific locations where these factories are in operation and where the women actually live and work—the third world—the lack of theoretically informed studies about ‘how factory work affect woman’s lives’ leaves space for further research.

It is situated within this context that in this paper I attempt to engage in a theoretically informed discussion of women’s work on the global assembly lines as happens within the specific ‘third world location’; a Sri Lankan apparel factory.

The Sri Lankan Context

Sri Lanka was one of the British colonies that gained independence during the mid twentieth century. For nearly three decades since regaining independence in 1948 the country’s economy remained largely unchanged. From 1956 to the 1970s the local economy was characterized by state accumulation through nationalization and regulated private enterprise alongside import substitution (Lynch, 2002; Jayaweera, 2003). By the late 1970s the economy was in a crisis state with wide spread shortage of consumer goods—blamed on inward looking economic policies of import substitution, protectionism and welfare. The year 1977 was a

watershed in the economic history of Sri Lanka, with a radical shift towards market liberalization and an 'open economy'. These changes were accompanied by the adaptation of a structural adjustment programme, promoted by the IMF and the World Bank' (Indraratne, 1998). One of the significant policies of such 'structural adjustment' was export promotion; accordingly economic reforms that followed placed greater emphasis on export driven industries - particularly labour intensive industries such as the garments industry (Athukorala and Rajapathirane, 2000, Ruwanpura, 2013, 2016).

As Jayaweera (2001) argues during the period following structural adjustment programmes, a majority of the middle income and the poor factions of the society were confronting severe shortage of their wealth and income. Income disparities widened and poverty increased by creating hardship among the poor. Earnings of the head of the household in the traditional monogamian family were not adequate even to fulfil the basic needs of the family members. In this context, women in most traditional middle-income families in urban and suburban areas, and in peasants' families in remote areas were compelled to seek employment to supplement the dwindling real incomes of their families (111). However, in a weak labour market, where unemployment and marginal, intermittent informal sector jobs were the norm for unskilled workers (Shaw, 2007) free trade zones (FTZs) were virtually the only source of regular, secure work available to these women. In a context where socially esteemed jobs in the public and white-collar sectors has contracted (Lakshman, 2002), women whose families were able to support them preferred to remain unemployed at home. It was only the poorest who were compelled to seek employment in the zones. Thus, "rather than being 'pulled' to the zones by the prospect of regular work, women of poor rural families were 'pushed' by poverty and a lack of choice into jobs they would not otherwise take (Shaw, 2007).

Over the years scholars studying different aspects of employment in the zones have repeatedly pointed out high turnover among female workers as a major problem facing the garment industry (e.g. Kelegama and Epaarachchi, 2002; Attanapola, 2005; Lynch, 2007; Ruwanpura, 2013, 2016). This situation of high labour turnover—or the tendency to leave waged employment after a short period of time - viewed in conjunction with related research findings (e.g. Jayaweera, 2002:122) which state that "the garment industry has been feminised with 90 percent of its employees being young women workers. Among them 70 percent of are in the age group of 15 to 25 years, 91 percent never married..." points towards a unique trend or pattern of employment among garment workers in Sri Lanka. As data reveals, the local garment industry had continuously exhibited figures of high labour turnover, while being characterized by an over-whelming representation of young female workers. Given this context, why it is that only young women work in garment factories? And why is labour turnover in the garment industry exceptionally high? This has become pertinent issues to explore. It is in this context that this paper attempts to shed light on the uncertainty surrounding these issues; and it does so drawing on the Marxian theorization of 'estranged labour. Thus is it to a brief discussion of estranged labour as it relates to the female workers of this study that this paper now turns.

Estranged Labour

Marx (1959:72) describes estranged labour as "...labour that is external to the worker, i.e. it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself". A worker performing estranged labour, argues Marx, "does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins

his mind” (1959:72). Thus the worker only feels himself outside his work. In Marx’s terminology “He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home” (1959:72). Marx sees such labour not as voluntary, but as coerced or forced labour. As he argues it is not the satisfaction of a need but merely a means of satisfying needs external to it (1959). This alien character manifests itself clearly in the fact that as soon as the physical or other compulsions are lifted ‘labour is shunned like the plague’ (Marx, 1959:72). A women’s experience of estranged labour is described by Studs Terkel in the *Quest* (1976), where explaining what it feels to be working as a receptionist she says:

You are there just to filter people and filter telephone calls... You are treated like a piece of equipment, like the telephone.... There isn’t a ten minute break in the whole day that is quiet... I always dream I am alone and things are quiet ... where there isn’t any machine telling me where I have to be every minute. The machine dictates. This crummy little machine with buttons on it. Your job doesn’t mean anything. ... Because you are just a little machine... (cited in Hartssock, 1998:45).

Eyeing the work of women workers of this study through the conceptual lense of ‘estranged labour’, then, they are seen as the proletariat or the majority producers whose surplus produce is appropriated by the bourgeoisie—the minority non-producers who control the means of production. It could be argued that these women are placed at the midst of an exploitative class relationship; a relationship that is achieved through increasingly separating them from their labour. Also their work as sewing machine operators, as evident in the following ethnographic narrative can be viewed as estranged labour. For it is work that does not make them content but unhappy, work that is shunned by the women the minute the compulsion is removed. Further, these women can be seen as working at a pace set by others and as not in control of their own actions, during the times they work. For their time is not their own, but has been bought by others who have the money to buy it.

Methodological Approach

The prime methodological approach of this study is ethnography from a feminist perspective. The analytical endeavor takes on a narrative turn, in that it attempts to weave together elements of data to form coherent wholes or ‘stories’, rather than separate them into constituent parts. It is weaving together of different forms of ethnographic data, i.e. field notes, interviews, observations and integration of my own subjectivities and reflections into the ethnographic text that result in the telling of (untold) stories of ‘sewing girls’ of *SriKnit Garments*, my ethnographic site.

SriKnit Garments, an apparel factory situated within the *Katunayake* Free Trade Zone is was one of three factories owned by a large multinational corporation which had been in operation in the ‘zone’ almost since its inception in 1979. Accordingly, it had a long standing reputation as one of the oldest and most well established industrial units in the zone. I was able to successfully negotiate access to *SriKnit* which had a work force of 1048, 90 percent of whom were female workers who became the focus of the research. In the face of extremely restrictive access policies adhered to by all the companies operating within the zone, the ability to negotiate access was one of the main considerations in selecting *SriKnit* as the ethnographic site. However, its long history

as a reputed manufacturing entity, large scale of operations and the work force that could be considered as representative of apparel factory workers in general were also central to the selection decision.

Since permission to enter the shop floor was obtained under restrictive conditions time spent within this space was solely as a passive observer of the female sewing machine operators at work. Such passive observation of the shop floor focused on assessing the work environment both physical and emotional, observing the facial expressions and body movements of workers while they operated the sewing machines throughout the day, the level and intensity of supervision, verbal and non verbal behaviour of supervisors, including their tone of voice, choice of words and manner of addressing the workers and, workers' interactions with each other. Observation within the premises also extended to the workers' lunch and tea breaks, when they left the production floor and went to the canteens for short durations.

In addition I also interviewed the Group Personnel Manager, Production Manager, Company Nurse and Councillor, a Human Resource Executive, a Security Officer and a Canteen Keeper of SriKnit garments to obtain their views regarding the work life of female sewing machine operators. However, only my interview with *Jarnnarz*, the lady personnel manager is presented in this paper as I see her voice as most powerfully reflective of the issues under study.

A Journey of 'Storytelling Ethnography'

Companies operating within the 'free' trade regime of the Board of Investment of Sri Lanka, or BOI as the institute is popularly known, are extremely 'restrictive' when it comes to allowing 'outsiders' to enter through their closely guarded gates. Simply, none of the companies having factories within the 'zone' welcomes visitors asking how they run their enterprises. All of these companies have been given a mandate by the Sri Lanka government to operate more or less 'freely' within the boundaries of the 'zone'. Limiting access for 'outsiders' into their territory is one of the many concessions; exemptions from laws relating to inland revenue, exchange control and customs, to name a few, granted to zone investors. All such concessions, including ones related to 'limited access,' are fully utilized by these enterprises. Yet, there are ways and means of negotiating access to the 'zone', a strategy of using personal contacts being one that usually works - and works fast at that. With limited time within which to search for a vast amount of data, being one of my major concerns in field work I decided to embark on this tried and tested method of exploiting personal friendships for research purposes. It may be difficult to gain access to the 'zone', but it is not too difficult either, for within less than one hour of making our first telephone call to *Rajiva*, one of my husband's former classmates, who now held the position of 'Group Human Resources Manager' of a reputed garment factory (operating outside of the zone) I had managed to secure an appointment to meet one of *Ranjiva's* colleagues, *Kumar*, the 'Group Human Resources Manager' of *SriKnit Garments*—a group of companies situated inside the free trade zone (FTZ) premises. I was to meet him at half past ten the following Monday. Obtaining initial permission was followed by a prolonged tussle of getting security clearance to physically enter the 'zone', which proved to be much more difficult than the former. However, I was finally allowed to drive through the 'zone' gates which represented the entrance to a closely guarded prison house. Once inside, I took a deep breath of relief and looked around me; at the large buildings housing the seventy eight industrial units surrounded by their sky high walls, at the wide network of roads spanning an area of nearly 200 hectares and the very few people on them. For the 8.00 o' clock shift was already well under way and the 80,000 strong 'zone' work force was busy at their

respective work stations inside the factories. *SriKnit* Garments Plant I, where the group HR department was located was not too difficult to locate. I went inside and sat down in the lounge and was told to wait awhile, by a person who came in from inside the office. *Mr. Kumar* was a bit busy, and would call me in as soon as he was free. I agreed to wait, and for the sake of doing something glanced through the note book in my hands where I had jotted down some facts about the company. Going by my notes, *SriKnit* Garments was a well established BOI company, and a pioneer investor in the zone - having opened up its first plant at *Katunayake* as far back as in 1978. It was a USA based trans-national company having a presence in New York, Hong Kong, London and China. The group owned seven factories—three inside and four outside of the zone, together employing a workforce of over 10,000 and producing a massive 800,000 pieces of garments per month for its major US and European markets. *Limited Stores, Sears, Marc Jacobs* and *Ann Taylor* are among the major buyers who retail marketed their ‘product base’ overseas—classified as ‘woven apparel women’s wear’ including any item from a tailored jacket to a sandblasted pair of jeans to all varieties of lingerie and sleepwear in various fabrics.

Evan though I interviewed *Mr. Kumar*, the ‘Group Human Resources Manager’ and some other executives of *SriKnit* Garments during my study it is my interview with the group personnel Manager that provided the most valuable insights to understand the issues addressed in this paper. Thus, the following narrative written around my experiences inside the factory begins with my meeting with *Jarnnarz* the group personnel manager, where I hear her views about the ‘sewing girls’ and their work. The ‘girls’ however, who incidentally makeup the vast majority of *SriKnit*’s work force, are kept hidden in the shop floor, working on their machines; ‘estranged’ labour on the global assembly line. My encounters with them are limited to ‘watching’, for I am not allowed to speak with any of them while at work. *Minsala*’s story as told later on in this narration is based on what I saw and sometimes over-heard while I stood at my corner at the end of line two, watching her, head bent low over her machine, tears pouring down her young face onto the garment in her hands.

I first met *Jarnnarz*, on my way to observe the shop floor. Her office was situated very close to where the actual production process was taking place. The room I entered was cluttered with letters, papers, files and white boards fixed all around its four walls. And its occupant seemed to be busy to the point of distraction. She was answering the telephone, glancing through a file in front of her and trying to talk with two workers who had come into the office to meet her all at the same time. She had already been told of my visit—so she greeted me, apologized for being so busy and asked me to sit down. Feeling almost guilty about troubling her further, I decided to wait a while for things to settle down a bit. They never did, for as soon as she had dealt with the issues at hand another couple of workers came into the room, this time about a disagreement with a supervisor. In spite of the never ending demands on her time, *Jarnnarz* somehow found time to talk with me as well. Only, she requested me not to switch on the recorder while she was talking, to which I readily agreed. In her hurried and excited tone, she told me her main concern was to ensure that there were enough machine operators to balance the eleven production lines of *SriKnit* Plant I on a daily basis. The white boards surrounding her on the walls all held figures, numbers and charts giving her information she needed: on the daily absenteeism rates, turnover figures calculated on weekly and monthly basis, the number of shop floor workers who were pregnant, the number on maternity leave at the moment and so on. She told me that the charts were updated daily to ensure timely action was taken. Action taken basically consisted of maintaining a pool of excess workers who covered up for absent workers on a line. Also the Personnel Department was running a widespread and ongoing recruitment campaign, covering far away remote villages to

attract new workers in place of the ones who left. *Jarnnarz* described how she herself went on ‘recruitment trips’ to find new ‘girls’ who were brought to *Katunayake* in company-owned buses and who after two weeks of ‘in-house’ training were assigned to work as machine operators on the lines. As at that date, Plant I had a daily absenteeism rate of 4% - four workers for every hundred, being absent on any given day—and a monthly turnover rate of 6%, which read as six out of every hundred workers leaving their jobs every month. These, according to *Jarnnarz* were figures rather on the high side, considering industry averages. She openly blamed the harsh conditions on the shop floor for the state of affairs saying:

They [meaning the production staff] derive very high efficiency rates²...when the ‘girls’ are unable to reach these targets they are scolded, sometimes even in filthy language. So they leave their jobs and go home, and I have to find workers to keep the production lines going. How am I supposed to do this? To make matters worse these ‘poor girls’ have a very hard time outside the factory - in their boarding houses. They should close down all the factories in the ‘zone’ and relocate them in the villages. That should solve most of these problems.

This was how she expressed her opinion about the extraordinarily chaotic situation she was dealing with. At the end of voicing her concerns, she double checked with me to ensure nothing she said was recorded. Our discussion was cut short as *Jarnnarz* got a call from The Group HR Manager asking her to come into his office straightaway. Before leaving she promised to meet me again if she could, probably over lunch, which was the only time she was free. I did not get an opportunity to talk with *Jarnnarz* again, even though I saw her many times on my visits to the shop floor which was through a corridor alongside her office. I never saw her alone, but always surrounded by one or more persons who seemed to have pressing issues to get sorted out. So I refrained from disturbing her and went past the ‘personnel office’ to my assigned place at a corner of the shop floor. The more time I spent in this corner, as a ‘silent’ observer of the deafeningly noisy shop floor, the more I understood what she had meant: about the ‘girls’ being driven to achieve impossible production targets, about how they were treated by the line leaders, about how their work was structured as cogs in an enormous operation.

***Minsala* and Others: Estranged Labour on the Global Assembly Line**

Marx describes estranged labour as “labour that is external to the worker, i.e. it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself” (1959:72). A worker performing estranged labour, argues Marx, “does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind” (1959:72). Marx sees such labour not as voluntary, but as coerced or forced labour and argues it is not the satisfaction of a need but merely a means of satisfying needs external to it. This alien character manifests clearly in the fact that as soon as the physical or other compulsions are lifted ‘labour is shunned like the plague’ (1959:72). Hartsock, using the Marxian concept of estranged labour to explain women’s work, argues ‘work that should be used for the growth of workers is used instead to diminish them, to make them feel like machines. Estranged labour distorts the lives of workers in a number of ways; workers are not in control of their actions during

² Number of items a worker has to complete per hour to be within the target production.

the times they work; their time belongs to those who have the money to buy it. Women's time in particular is not their own, but is almost always controlled by men' (1998:46). *Minsala's* story as told below shed light on how the labour of a newly recruited young 'sewing girl' and also other 'girls' on the lines are subject to rigid capitalist discipline on the shop floor and also how they react to such appropriation of their labour; working as 'estranged labour' on the global assembly line.

The time I visited SriKnit garments coincided with the time that all eleven assembly lines of SriKnit I were busy churning out garments, mainly winter clothes, to be shipped to their destinations in the Western markets, before the cold weather set in and Christmas shopping began in earnest. I was already aware that visiting the shop floor, which was the centre of this process of production, was not going to be an easy task. As I had anticipated, obtaining permission to visit the shop floor proved to be a somewhat sensitive issue. It was only after repeated assurances on my part to *Mahesh*, the Group HRD Manager, that I would not speak with the workers nor disrupt the production floor in any way did I obtain permission to actually go inside the plant. *Channa*, a young HR executive was entrusted with the task of showing me the way and together we made our way towards the production floor, which was in the same building complex as the Personnel Manager's office. At the door, *Channa* stopped and explained to an officer who was standing by it that he was taking me to see the shop floor. I later learned that he held the position of Production Manager, one of the most important and best paid jobs in the garment industry. At first he looked dubious, "*Mahesh* has sent an e-mail around about this", *Channa* explained further, and we were allowed to walk through, but not before I was given a closely scrutinizing look over by the overbearing boss of production. Inside the swing doors and on the shop floor, I was overcome by the deafening, repetitive and nerve racking sound of the machines which seemed never to stop. A loud music was played through the intercom as if to submerge the jarring sound of machinery that filled the air. But it only added to the confusion, and together with the harsh sounds of line supervisors shouting at the 'girls' and the production assistants shouting at the line supervisors—they had to shout to be heard—and so on, the whole place took on a demented atmosphere.

Channa smiled at my look of distress saying "You will get used to it after a while". He proved to be correct for slowly, as my ears adjusted to the unfriendly sounds and my eyes learned to see through the haze of women, men and machines, I began to visualize the patterns emerging from among parts of the structure that seemed unconnected at first. I soon realized that nothing was out of place within this seemingly disordered place. In fact, everything was in order, everything was within the system and working in precise accordance with the carefully laid out production process: the classic example of what textbooks called 'the process layout of production'. It started from the store room, where piles of material were stored up waiting to be brought down to the cutting area. The cutting area was basically a space for male workers, who were in charge of the enormous cutting machines. Women were employed here only on minor tasks such as rolling down layer after layer of fabric on the cutting table and collecting and labeling the cut pieces. Once the fabric was laid on the long cutting tables to a height of over one foot the men used the machines to cut them according to the blocks already laid on top of the pile. Designing, pattern making and even laying out the blocks on the fabric were highly skilled jobs some of which were supported and/or supervised by specially trained staff flown in from overseas. Once the fabric was cut and labeled, the pieces were 'fed' to the lines.

Plant I had eleven assembly lines each with a workforce of 25 to 30 machine operators—all female. Altogether there were 328 sewing machine operators, 447 helpers (the younger, inexperienced 'girls') and another 273 male and female workers in charge of cutting, ironing,

finishing and packing, who made up the one thousand strong shop floor work force. Once the cut pieces were 'fed into the lines' (brought there by the helpers), it was time for the sewing 'girls' to get on with their part of the process. Each 'girl' was assigned with sewing up one small part of the garment (today they were sewing a winter jacket), usually starting from the collar. Each 'girl' had a plastic box near her machine containing the pieces allocated to her. Once she had finished a few items they were passed up the line to the next 'girl'. Thus, the process continued until the finished garments went through the stages of checking for defects, ironing, finishing and packing—all performed by women and supervised mainly by men—until they were finally ready to be shipped. A fabric which came out of its place in the store room only that morning would find itself turned into a finished garment, ironed and labeled, neatly packed into a cellophane cover and stacked inside a shipping container stationed outside the rear entrance of the factory door, ready to reach the port of *Colombo*, all within one working day. It was an amazingly efficient operation—a management wonder to say the least.

But my interest lay not in this frighteningly efficient and chillingly mechanized process itself, but in the workers who made it happen. The female workers outnumbered their male counterparts nine to one on the shop floor. From my corner at the end of line two I could see how they worked on all too clearly. At first I tried to focus on all the workers—for I could see the whole of line two from where I was standing, but soon I realized it was a fruitless effort which would only serve to confuse me. So I fixed my gaze on the machine nearest to me, handled by a young girl, who had never once looked up since we first came in. So engrossed was she in what she was doing, she was most probably unaware of our presence there. I watched her for a long time, bent over her machine, one foot on the energy box, managing the power supply to the machine, right hand on the wheel of the machine controlling its speed, left hand holding the piece of cloth at its place under the needle. There was nothing strange in the posture itself; it was how any of us would sit at a machine. But what was unbelievable was the sheer speed at which she worked, never once lifting her head, never moving an extra muscle, other than for the precisely measured movement of hands, tossing one after another partly sewn garment into the box by her side on the floor, for hours no end—that was what made the whole set-up look incredible. It seemed as if she was part of the machine herself, the human arms which gave it life. Yet, how did she do it, how did her slender body cope with the tremendous strain of this, strenuous, repetitive, continuous work for eight hours a day, for six days a week, for four weeks a month, for months and for years? For how long could she actually go on doing this before everything became too much to bear, when she could no longer absorb this tension, this sheer force of work and the noise which was almost unbearable? More importantly, why did she have to work at this breathless pace?

It was *Channa* who provided me with answers to these questions. The 'girls' were given daily production targets, predetermined after meticulous 'time and motion' studies conducted by qualified staff who sewed sample items inside a room nearby. Each morning the lines were balanced according, allocating the workers and machines among them to achieve the desired rate of efficiency. For the workers it meant having to finish a minimum number of items per hour. Today they were working to achieve a target of seventy items per hour, which gave them under a minute to complete one item. From their stations adjacent to the lines, special monitoring teams filled up and tallied production records on an hourly basis. It was the responsibility of the line supervisor to ensure that everything went on smoothly, without delays, breakdowns or bottlenecks. To achieve this, the line supervisors, the majority of whom were men, were directly dependent on the 'girls' to sew up their quota for the day. This dependence gave rise to somewhat peculiar and even vicious patterns of work relations on the floor. If the 'girls' lagged behind target it was the

line supervisors who got the blame. So it was a continuous struggle on their part to keep the ‘girls’ working, sewing on and on, achieving the given target at whatever cost. Many methods: ranging from production bonuses and incentives, to persuasions, to shouting at ‘girls’ at the top of their voices were used by the stressed supervisors to keep things going. It was one mad rush, to ensure shipments were made in time and goods delivered as promised, to adorn the retail outlets in far off countries. The logic underpinning the speeding up of the production process was simple. A higher rate of efficiency meant greater productivity which brought down the ‘cost’ of producing an item thereby increasing the profit margin. Since availability of low cost labour was the basic reason why trans-national firms such as *SriKnit* had located their assembly lines on third world shores in the first place, it was only rational that they sought to keep labour costs down. They achieved this by paying higher salaries to a fewer number of people such as the production manager and some of his more senior staff and by using them as ‘tools’ to exploit the majority work force who had to work more for less pay. It was a strategy that had achieved the desired results over the past thirty years and was still doing so with remarkable success.

There was some fifteen minutes to go before the lines broke up for lunch and the ‘girls’ got a precious twenty minute break. I could see that one ‘girl’ less than half way down the line had more unfinished items by her side than the others. Her face looked anxious as she glanced up at the clock on the wall and attempted to sew faster, apparently she was not as skilled at her job as some of the others around her. The supervisor of the line, who had been watching her for some time now came down the aisle towards her, she did not look up as he approached, but bent down even lower as if to hide her face. “What do you think you are doing? You will not get up from the machine today until you finish this lot”. The shouted words were audible even where we were standing, and a few heads went up at the unwelcome sound. There were no replies, not from the offender, nor from anyone else in the room, but the look on their tired, drawn out faces was of one of deep resentment, even anger. It was lunch time now, and one by one the ‘girls’ got up from their cramped up places by the machines to go out and join the lunch queue inside the canteen. All but one young girl, who sewed on, bent low over her machine.

The canteen staff was ready to receive the first batch of girls, who were from the lines one to three. The ‘girls’ went to lunch in groups, over twenty minute slots spanning from twelve noon to two o’ clock. They had to stand in a long line to collect their aluminum plates. With plate in hand they moved towards the long table where three people were standing behind the huge containers of rice and curries ready to serve them. Once their plates were filled the next step was to find a place to sit. The room was quickly filling up, but each girl somehow managed to find a space on the rows of benches. They didn’t talk much but quietly ate up their share of rice and curries before getting up to wash their plates and hands. At last free from the noise of the machines, I asked *Channa* the reason for the multi coloured headgear the ‘girls’ were wearing. All of them had on the same dull green uniform—which made them look colourless and drab- over their normal set of clothing, but the caps which covered up their heads were green, blue or orange. I was told it was designed for ease of identification—green meant regular machine operators and blue was for helpers. Orange caps were worn by the pregnant shop floor workers and were seen few and far between. Interestingly enough, male shop floor workers did not have a uniform, nor did they wear caps of identification. I had seen a few other female staff on the floor, who as *Channa* later informed me, worked either as quality controllers, time study officers or in some rare instances even as production assistants. None of them were in uniform, but were dressed fashionably in whatever way they seemed to fancy—in *sarees*, dresses, jeans or trouser suit. Everything they wore from the high-heeled shoes to the glittering gold earrings spoke of a higher purchasing power.

As they walked up and down the aisles among the uniformed ‘sewing girls’ it was apparent that they knew of their powerful positioning within the organization. In the same way the ‘uniformed girls’, who at this moment were having lunch sitting down on the wooden benches, knew of their powerless standing.

Most of the first batch of ‘girls’ had finished eating by now, and after a quick visit to the rest room, returned to their machines. I was rather surprised by their behaviour as I thought they might prefer to spend some time outside. I soon understood why they had gone back, for inside the room it was cool, and one by one the ‘girls’ who had gone inside stretched down on the cement floor by the side of their machines—to sleep for five minutes—to rest their tired bodies before the afternoon session started. I quietly came out of the production floor and walked towards the HRD unit, feeling I had seen enough for one day.

As long as I did not talk with the ‘girls’ my presence among them was more or less tolerated by the executives in charge of production. So I came and went as I liked, but always playing the part of dumb observer. However, as I was not deaf nor blind I could hear and see a lot of things that went on daily on the production floor. Some of these incidents, however, made me wish I could neither hear nor see them. My last few memories of the shop floor were especially unpleasant. Then, again, the whole experience of watching some three hundred or more ‘girls’ struggling with their machines daily had been a painful and a sad experience to say the least. I loathed it when *Sarath*, the extra-obnoxious supervisor of line two, started shouting at the ‘girls’ who were slow or who made mistakes. As a rule the ‘girls’ never reacted to his rude behaviour but silently got on with their work. But once during my stay with them, their tolerance finally gave away, and I could glimpse a fragment of the flaming anger that must have been carefully hidden away in their aching hearts and souls. It was when *Minsala*, the young girl who had not been able to reach her target the other day, was asked to continue working through lunch for the fourth time in the week. By now I knew her by name, for she was being constantly pulled up and shouted at by *Sarath*, who seemed to derive a sadistic pleasure in doing so. Today, she was behind time again and just as he was walking down the aisle after cruelly reprimanding and threatening her *Sarath* was confronted by an apparently more mature and experienced worker of line two who challenged him—unafraid, and uncaring of all possible consequences. “How dare you keep harassing her? You know full well she is new and can’t sew as fast as the rest of us”. And to my utter amazement others down the line joined her in the outburst adding:

We know why you are so tough with her, it’s because she doesn’t tolerate your advances. *Ruchira*, in line four is also new, but *Mala Akka* [line four supervisor, who was the only female supervisor on the floor and who had been promoted from among the ‘girls’ themselves], never scolds her but sits at her machine and helps her finish the work. If you do this ever again we will go to *Perera* sir and tell him we can’t work with you.

Their shouting was disturbing the entire floor and subsided only after the production assistant came rushing in to calm them down. I saw *Sarath* walking away to the furthest end of the room, where he remained for quite a long time, before gathering up enough courage to come anywhere near line two again. But he let *Minsala* alone, who during the whole nauseating scene had gone on sewing, her head bent low over the machine.

As Anna Pollert, explaining the lives of women tobacco factory workers argues, ‘a vicious circle between gender oppression and working-class exploitation is set up which both perpetuates

women's relegation into the domestic sphere and intensifies their exploitation as workers' (1983:98). Even though placed in a vastly different context, experiences of *Minsala*, as described above is closely reflected through Pollert's argument; for in addition to being exploited as low waged labour on the global assembly line *Minsala* is also subject to gender oppression resulting from being a 'young girl'. Likewise there are similarities between how women worked in tobacco factories in Britain in the 1970s, as explained by Pollert, and the lives of women apparel factory workers of this third world setting. Pollert, bringing in examples of what happened inside the tobacco factory during a strike explains how women workers organized against capital. Even though not as organized as Pollert's workers, the 'sewing girls' of SriKnit factory, while being closely surrounded by multiple dominating structures are not passive victims but are engaged in a continuous struggle against them. Indeed the angry outburst of 'girls' of line two against *Minsala's* harassment was one situation where their 'anger', mostly concealed beneath a facade of subservient behavior, came to be surfaced. Finally, as argued by Pollert, it is only by organizing against capital in their role as working class woman that these workers can hope to be freed from the multiple oppressive forces surrounding their lives.

Finally, viewing the work of *Minsala* and others through the Marxian conceptualization of 'estranged labour' gives insights as to why these girls almost always leaves their jobs in the factories and return to their homes in the remote villages after a short span of work. Labour of 'sewing girls' on the eleven assembly lines of SriKnit plant I, as observed from my vantage point at a corner of the shop floor, has many of the characteristics of estranged labour as identified by Marx embedded into its process. Their work, as portrayed in the narrative above, can be explained as external to their essential beings, work that does not make them content but unhappy, work that 'mortifies their bodies and ruins their minds' and work that is shunned the minute the compulsion is removed. Also they work at a pace set by others and are not in control of their own actions during the times they work. The time they spend on the shop floor is not their own, but bought by others who have the money to buy it. Thus, just as these 'girls' are pushed into the factories as a result of poverty and lack of choice they are again pushed out of them; the multiply oppressive structures and the capitalist regimentation surrounding them at work, making them not happy and contended workers but estranged labourers on the global assembly lines.

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