

Pamphlet No. 03

## Persistent Patriarchy



Rachel Kurian  
Kumari Jayawardena

Social Scientists' Association

© Social Scientists' Association 2014

ISBN 978-955-0762-29-3

Published by  
Social Scientists' Association  
12, Sulaiman Terrace,  
Colombo 5, Sri Lanka.  
Tel: +94-11-2501339 / 2504623  
[www.ssalanka.org](http://www.ssalanka.org)

Printed by  
World Vision Graphics  
077 2928907

## Persistent Patriarchy: Women Workers on Sri Lankan Plantations

### Were they 'Slaves of Slaves'? \*

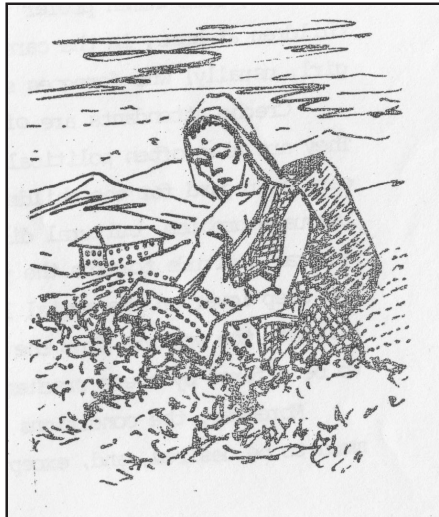
The early suffragists in the United States had decried the “prolonged slavery of woman” as the “darkest page in human history” with one of the leaders, Susan B. Anthony, stating on Independence Day in 1876

that “*Universal manhood suffrage*, by establishing an aristocracy of sex, imposes upon the women of this nation a more absolute and cruel despotism than monarchy; in that, woman finds a political master in her father, husband, brother, son” (Stanton *et al* 1887).

While countries all over the world have witnessed progress in gender equality and gender rights since that period, the recent UNDP

Human Development Report of 2014 has acknowledged that there is still “no country with perfect gender equality”.<sup>1</sup> In Sri Lanka, women on plantations experience much gender discrimination and many gender disadvantages, being ‘slaves’ to men who themselves are ‘slaves’.

The plantation sector has been the backbone of the economic development of Sri Lanka since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.



This pamphlet deals with the challenges faced by women workers on the tea plantations in Sri Lanka, who constitute the majority of the labour force in a sector that comprises the single largest working-class group in the country. Both under British colonialism as well as after Independence in 1948, these workers were subject to economic exploitation, social oppression and political exclusion. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they are amongst the most deprived and oppressed sections people in Sri Lanka with high levels of poverty, dismal living conditions, and comparatively low achievements in education and health, a legacy which marks their lives even today.

There have been some improvements since the 1980s as a result of the decision of the government to promote human development in the sector, resulting also from pressure by the increased numbers of plantation representatives in government, and demands from NGOs and civil society groups. The pamphlet argues however, that, in spite of this progress, plantations remain spaces of discrimination and disadvantages, with patriarchal norms and practices that were prejudicial to women workers. It is not surprising therefore that changes in basic capabilities for the women workers, where they have occurred, have not kept up with their male counterparts, as well as with women in the rest of the Island. Furthermore, while some women leaders have emerged, they continue to be marginalised in the plantation trade unions and political hierarchy. The status of the women workers on the plantations, in many ways, therefore remains that of 'slaves of slaves'.

Several questions concerning the position of women workers on plantations are raised.

- In which ways have women on the plantations experienced and responded to the colonial legacies of slavery, patriarchy, economic exploitation and social oppression?

- What methods have they used in their struggle to gain equality in democratic and labour rights with regard to citizenship, franchise and wages?
- Which are the major hurdles to women playing an active role in the political and trade union hierarchy and influencing policies in their favour?
- How effective has the state been in improving the working and living conditions of the women workers, as well as their levels of human development, while countering gender discrimination, domestic violence and abuse?

The following sections focus on the main theme of the pamphlet, namely **how have patriarchal norms and practices been incorporated into the life and labour regime on the Sri Lankan plantations, and what have been their implications for women workers?**

In subsequent sections the following issues are elaborated:

1. **Patriarchy and Plantation Production**
2. **Patriarchy on Sri Lankan Plantations**
3. **Struggles for Franchise, Citizenship and Equal Pay**
4. **Political Empowerment**
5. **Human Development Challenges**
6. **The future – still a long way to go**

## **1. PATRIARCHY ON PLANTATIONS**

The term patriarchy originally referred to the rule of the father, or the authority of the senior male as 'head' of a family or extended families (including other men, women and children). At its core is a gender division of labour with significant consequences for the opportunities and achievements of women

and men in the wider society. The patriarchal division of labour in the household regards all the caring, nurturing and other domestic chores as the 'natural duty' of women, on the grounds that women bear children and are therefore responsible for these tasks. Men on the other hand, are considered to be traditional 'heads of households' with authority and the 'obligation' to protect and control family members, even resorting to violence. Such attitudes are, in effect, gendered power relations, upholding male dominance and women's subordination.

When these ideologies are transferred to the public sphere of work and politics such norms and practices have often resulted in men assuming positions of authority with women remaining at lower levels of hierarchy, thereby disadvantaging women in policies, laws, employment patterns, income, education and cultural and religious practices. The Indian feminist, Kamla Bhasin, has argued that while patriarchy takes different forms and is subject to change it continues to justify lower wages and low education for women, as well as disadvantages in property rights and other entitlements, subordinate positions in religious and cultural practices and domestic violence (1993:9).

The links between private and public patriarchy were analysed in depth by the sociologist Sylvia Walby, who defined patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby1990:20). She identified six important structural components of patriarchy. These included (a) The Patriarchal mode of production, (b) Patriarchal relations in paid work, (c) Patriarchal relations in the state, (d) Male violence (e) Patriarchal relations in sexuality and (f) Patriarchal relations in cultural institutions (ibid). Walby's theorizing paid attention to the **links between private and public patriarchy** promoting a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which patriarchy can be manifested in different contexts.

The widespread and pervasive influence of patriarchy is why even when there are laws affirming equal rights for women and men, and protecting women for domestic violence and sexual abuse, these are often not adequately implemented, resulting in women not being able to participate in political life. According to Bina Agarwal and Pradeep Panda, harassment and violence hinders a woman's "ability to be an active citizen or seek her entitlements as a citizen" (2007:362). Martha Nussbaum has similarly argued that women experience a range of abuses and assaults, including domestic violence and rape within and outside marriage (2005:167) and this violence and its "on-going threat" diminish women's important choices and the quality of their political participation (ibid: 169-183).

What is important to recognize is that the state is not an entity apart from society; rather its policies and programmes resonate existing power relations, attitudes and interests. In most instances, the state reflects male-dominant ideologies that exist in the household, community, political parties, trade unions and even civil society organisations. There is the tendency on the part of the enforcing agencies, including the different institutions of the state, to accept that men have the 'right' to 'punish' women which leads to not challenging the actions of male perpetrators, particularly if it is the husband who has abused his wife. In addition, women, who are the victims of rape and abuse are often stigmatised in society, deterring them from filing formal complaints on these issues. In such ways, 'private patriarchy' and 'public patriarchy' are linked and reinforce the subordination of women.

At the same time it is important to recognise that patriarchy is just one mode of domination in society, and that it 'intersects' with other forms of domination such as those based on **class, caste, age and ethnicity**. This 'intersectionality' perspective recognises differences between women, and how their positions in the different hierarchies affect their experiences

and perceptions. For example, women from marginalised minority groups experience patriarchy as well as disadvantages associated with their group status in society. Poor women from such a community have also, in addition, to deal with deprivation and unavailability of money and other financial resources. Caste, which was an important factor in controlling the mainly Hindu workers on the Sri Lankan plantations, is also patriarchal. Uma Chakravarti has demonstrated how caste and religion together with class and gender tended to maintain patterns of marriage, sexuality and reproduction that justify male dominance and female subordination in society (2003:27).

Patriarchy, in all these different forms, was historically embedded in plantation production and continues to play an important role even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Portuguese were the first to develop plantations in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, for the production of sugar in their colonies in the Atlantic. They based the structure on the prevailing feudal household in Spain and Portugal, which used slave labour for domestic and urban work; the household size could be easily expanded to incorporate greater numbers of slaves for the large-scale cultivation of sugar, which served as the “mode of the slave plantations in the Americas” in the subsequent period (Curtin 1998:23-24). The size of the plantation and its labour force could be expanded to incorporate greater numbers of slaves for the large-scale cultivation of sugar.

The ‘model’ of the slave plantations formed the basis of this production form not just in the Atlantic regions but also in Asia. Its essential features were the following:

- A male patriarch who exercised complete authority over all persons in the household headed the feudal household, exercising his masculinity.
- Women, children and all the workers were dependent on him and this pattern of control was carried over in plantation management.



- While the initial demand for plantation work was for male slaves, women became more in demand as the slave trade became expensive, and they were pressurised to have children so as to help reproduce the labour force.

*Thus from its historical origin, plantations were patriarchal in form and nature with little or no separation between work in the field and in the household. All the different tasks of women workers (paid employment & household chores), took place within the same geographic space of the estate allowing for highly intensive form of patriarchal control. Throughout its history, the basic patriarchal structure of the plantations did not change. The authority of the planter as feudal patriarch was absolute. There was a strict militaristic type of hierarchy between the different categories of workers, and divisions such as those based on race and colour were ingrained in the system of production and used to enforce the hierarchy and controls on the plantations. Women were at the bottom of the plantation hierarchy. Even after the abolition of slavery women were encouraged to migrate as indentured labour as well as 'free labour,' as they were viewed as cheap and controllable labour and were paid less than men. On the plantations themselves, they were subject to male domination at all levels and were regularly sexually exploited (Hyam 1990:14).*

## **2. PATRIARCHY ON SRI LANKAN PLANTATIONS**

Plantation production in Sri Lanka developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under British rule after the abolition of slavery in its colonies in 1833. In the early days, workers, usually from relatively poor and destitute circumstances from the Tamil districts of the Madras Presidency in South India were enticed through advances and other incentives to migrate to work on the coffee, tea and subsequently rubber plantations. They were incorporated into a work and life regime by planters and the management that had historically been developed, as noted in the previous

section, with the use of slave labour. It retained its hierarchical form as also its harsh methods of labour control. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly with the development of tea plantations that required more labour throughout the year, the workers were persuaded to stay for longer periods in the country, and ultimately took up more permanent residence on the plantations.

But the legacies of slavery, including the use of patriarchal and other forms of labour control, continued to influence labour relations on the plantations in Sri Lanka. Three factors contributed to the preservation of 'slave-like' practices. The first was that the Colonial Office was keen to promote capitalism and financial self-sufficiency in the island, and was aware of the profitability of plantation production. It provided many incentives for the planters to develop this form of production, often neglecting the basic rights and conditions of the workers. Second, there were several planters who had previously worked on the slave plantations in the Caribbean who were involved in setting up and running the plantations in 19<sup>th</sup> century Sri Lanka. They were familiar with the brutal methods used to control the slaves and to exploit female labour, and had found such practices effective in managing the workers. The third factor was that slavery existed in Sri Lanka and South India during this period, resulting in people in authority, often familiar with such relations, not challenging slave-like practices on the plantations.

Slave-like characteristics were also continued also through the recruitment of workers for the Sri Lanka plantations. While the latter developed after slavery had been abolished in the British colonies, and were viewed as a means of promoting laissez-faire capitalism, they employed workers who were 'unfree'. It was due to some extent by relying on what came to be known as the the *kangany* system. The kanganies were 'native' recruiters employed by the planters to obtain workers for the Sri Lankan plantations. The kanganies usually recruited poor and destitute workers from the famine-prone districts from South Indian villages, advancing money received from the

planters to meet transportation and other associated costs, which was to be deducted from their wages. The workers therefore began their lives in debt and very often remained so for decades, and thus 'bonded' to the planters. Although the initial workers were mainly men, the planters took special efforts to recruit women as they could be paid less – the lower level of wages for women was acceptable in Indian and Sri Lankan society. Women were viewed as more docile and therefore more controllable. From forming only 2.6% of the labour force in 1843, they were 27% by 1866. Their numbers steadily increased over the years until they comprised the majority of the workforce.

At the same time, the system of recruitment in kin groups was successful in retaining existing caste-based hierarchies among the different castes. These differences were used in the deployment of workers on the plantations. Thus, the caste system on the plantations, which originated in India, was "assimilated, appropriated and manipulated" by the colonial planters to control workers on the plantations (Silva and Thanges 2009:25). While caste was an oppressive system for those at the bottom of the ladder, it was, as noted earlier, also a form of cultural oppression for women that was more "dehumanizing" than economic exploitation (Chakravarti 2003:7). *The combination of class and caste, together with patriarchy and the legacy of slavery were important in creating an extremely exploitative situation for women workers on plantations.*

The planters and colonial state benefited from the wealth generated through plantation production. The close links between British colonial policy and the expansion of plantations in Sri Lanka resulted in what came to be called the 'Planter Raj', *reflecting the power of the planters in the economic development of the island under colonialism.* The planters lived like despots within the boundaries of their estates, often using physical force and other forms of compulsion to strengthen plantation structures and enforce their authority. The 'realm' of the 'Planter Raj', however, went beyond the confines of individual

plantations; through their pervasive influence on government policies, the planters were able to assert their dominance in the wider polity, and were provided state patronage and protection. Women were relegated to lowest levels of the estate hierarchy and were subject to male control in all spheres of work and life.

### ***Sexual Exploitation***

Planters not only extracted the maximum amount of work for the lowest pay, but also like other males on the plantation could subject women workers to sexual exploitation with impunity, with even special orphanages being set up to look after the children of these liaisons.

*In 1848, The Governor Torrington noted that the "habits of the [worst class]... of planters particularly with the women have been most objectionable and in the eyes of a Kandyan a coffee planter is a term of reproach" (cited in K.M de Silva 1965: 98).*

But rather than being confined to the 'worst class' of planters, the occurrence of rape, procuring of women, and liaisons with women workers and village women were also common among British bureaucrats, soldiers and minor officials. In the early years there were no British wives on the plantations, so often local women from the estates or nearby villages resided in the planter's house. The children of these liaisons were sent to Catholic convent orphanages, or to the Homes, established by the Paynter family for educating Eurasian children (Jayawardena 2007:70).

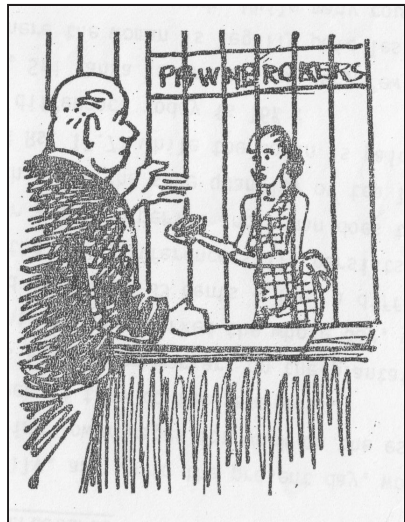
In sum, and as in many other plantation societies, women workers on the Sri Lanka estates were the 'slaves of slaves' experiencing discrimination and disadvantage with regard, amongst other features, to the following:

- They were recruited through the *kangany* system – which was essentially patriarchal in nature. The Head *Kangany*

had absolute authority over the workers, from the moment they accepted the advances for work, during the travel and after arriving on the estates. *He was, in effect, a patriarch, over labour and was key in enforcing hierarchy and patriarchy on the plantations.* With a few exceptions, *Kanganies* were male. There has been only one recorded instance of a female head kangany, Perumalammal, who succeeded her husband in 1896 (Muttiah 2003).



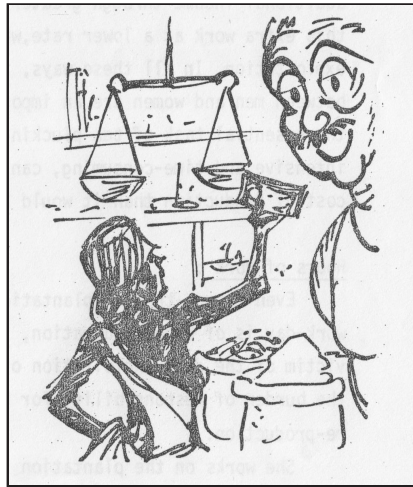
- Women workers were at the bottom of the caste, class and patriarchal hierarchies on the plantations.
- They were paid lower wages than men, even though they were involved in the most important work on the estates – the plucking of tea. While this work was tedious, difficult and required considerable



stamina to work long hours in the field, it was viewed as relatively 'light' work, and fit for women as it required 'nimble' fingers that women naturally were said to have. Even when minimum wage legislation was introduced in 1929 by the state, the wages for men were set higher than those for women and children.

- Like other workers women workers were under the ultimate authority of the superintendents. In addition, they were subject to male dominance in the field (male supervisors and estate staff) and in the household (male members). Thus all those in authority over women on the plantations were males.

- Their wages were usually paid to their husbands or other males; the latter finished their tasks, such as pruning, earlier in the day, and it was therefore viewed as easier if the money was given to them. The shopkeepers also overcharged their customers and women



were inevitably in debt, and often resorted to pawning whatever jewellery they possessed.

- In addition to plucking tea, women workers also did most of the cooking, nurturing and other household chores for the family. Girl children were taught to help their mothers as soon as they were able to do so.

### ***Repressive Laws***

Plantation workers, and particularly women, were also oppressed in several other ways with the support of the colonial government, including the judiciary and police. A repugnant law that captured attention and led to protests was the Labour Ordinance of 1865, which enabled magistrates to return workers including women and children to the estates if they 'bolted' from them.

Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, an eminent

retired civil servant, in the early 20th century protested locally and in Britain, against this law and cited cases of women with small children being sent back to their oppressive estate employers, and even being imprisoned for one or two months for "insolence" (Arunachalam, 1936). In 1916, following many protests, 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 a woman "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).

*The Police Magistrate of Hatton noted in 1898, that the prosperity of the agricultural districts depended "largely on the proper control and discipline of the Labourers," and judiciary was encouraged to "enforce vigorously provisions whereby the bolters would be reprimanded"*

S L N A . P F / 2 4 . P o l i c e  
Magistrate, Hatton, to Colonial  
Secretary, No. 20, March 11,  
1898 (emphasis added).

### ***Poor Education***

The state too provided little relief to girls and women workers in terms of education. The primitive estate schools were mainly for boys, and little effort was made to raise women's literacy. Female literacy on plantations was abysmally low, as reflected

in the statistics for 1911. Some improvement occurred in the following decades, but the rate always remained well below the national level.

**Proportion per cent. of Literates amongst the Indian Tamil Population in the Principal Planting Districts in 1911 (Denham 1912:409)**

Percentage of Literates, 1911.

District.	Males.	Females.
Kandy	20.7	1.4
Matale	19.9	2.3
Kurunegala	19.3	2.6
Nuwara Eliya	18.6	0.9
Badulla	17.2	0.9
Kalutara	14.8	1.9
Kegalle	14.8	1.0
Ratnapura	13.3	1.2

***The Role of Religion***

One feature of patriarchy on the plantations, from the earliest years to the present day, is the acceptance at all levels of the plantation hierarchy that religion is not only a permitted activity for plantation women, but one to be encouraged. In Sri Lanka, religion was recognised by planters as a key form of labour control and a suitable type of social gathering that provided no threat to the Planter Raj. Planters thus helped in temple building and funding, recognising religion as an important factor in plantation life, which could be monitored. For the women workers themselves, burdened by drudgery in the field and in the household, temple activities provided a diversion and escape, becoming “the heart of a heartless world.”



Certain beliefs, especially that one was born a woman due to bad karma, leads to the normalization of patriarchal practices, as well as class and caste-based oppressive structures which were considered to be divinely sanctioned and inescapable. Women themselves often internalize these as part of their 'fate'. Plantation women also have faith in a series of strong female deities – from Kali to Sarasvati and Lakshmi, who could give consolation in times of distress. Women also help in organising religious festivities and observances, which often involve cultural expressions through song and dance. The fact is that for women especially, participation in religious practices was considered a meritorious deed that would enable them to have better karma and be born a man in the next life. There has been a wave of religiosity in recent times that has attracted thousands of women from the plantation community into further involvement in rituals and temple ceremonies. No doubt these too have also played a role in entrenching caste practices, including the retention of caste-based marriage and the ascribed subordination of women.

The close links between colonial policy and the expansion of plantations resulted in what came to be called the 'Planter Raj', reflecting the power of the planters. The planters lived like despots within the boundaries of their estates, often using physical force and other forms of compulsion to strengthen plantation structures and enforce their authority. The 'realm' of the 'Planter Raj', however, went beyond the confines of individual plantations; through their pervasive influence on government policies, the planters asserted their dominance in the wider polity, and were provided state patronage and protection.

### **3. STRUGGLES FOR FRANCHISE, CITIZENSHIP AND EQUAL PAY**

Trade unionism on the plantations began in 1931 with the formation of a union led by K. Natesa Aiyar, a journalist and political leader active from the 1920s. The workers were increasingly involved in subsequent years in struggles not only for their labour rights but also for their franchise and democratic rights. Franchise had hitherto been restricted to a small elite, based on income, property and literacy qualifications, with only 4% of the population being qualified to vote. The Colonial Office appointed a commission named after its chairman Lord Donoughmore in 1927 to reform the constitution of Ceylon.

The issue of franchise led to a heated discussion, where both class and gender concerns were addressed. The leaders of the Ceylon National Congress wanted franchise to be “restricted to those earning at least Rs. 50 a month” and were concerned that “if they went a grade lower,” there was a danger “that they might get a class of person who would not use the vote with any sense of responsibility and whose votes might be at the disposal of the highest bidder.” They were prepared to give franchise to women who were older than 25, with “either a rigid literacy test or a property qualification” (de Silva 1981:419-20).

#### ***Women’s Franchise Union and Meenachi Ammal***

In opposition to conservative male politicians, the campaign for women’s franchise was led by the Women’s Franchise Union (1927), which in giving evidence on political reform to the Donoughmore Commission said that its demands for women’s franchise included giving these rights to women on plantations. Meenachi Ammal, who, with her husband K. Natesa Aiyar, had been active in developing unions on the plantations, wrote strongly in favour of female franchise, indicating that “Ceylon

has been considered more advanced than India. But if people say that voting rights should not be given to women, how can it be considered advanced?" (*Desabhaktan*, 13 April 1928). She was a speaker and singer who at public meetings could thrill plantation women and men with songs on workers' oppression. Nine of her songs were published in 1940 under the title "The Conditions of the Indian's Life in Ceylon", and were directly concerned with



exposing "the sufferings of the Indians." Her photograph shows "her forceful personality." (M. Chitralka)

Meenachi Ammal was also strongly critical of important politicians such as P. Ramanathan, who had opposed women's franchise on the grounds that women's lives had to be "devoted to the home," and that the grant of female suffrage was like "casting pearls before swine" (cited in de Alwis and Jayawardena 2001:7, 11). She wrote that, "If Ramanathan thinks that women should not be allowed to engage in public activities he should try to enact a law against the presence of women outside the home" (*Desabhaktan*, 13 April 1928). She also urged the Women's Franchise Union to consider the high cost of its membership fees, as working women could not afford to pay them (*ibid*, 26 January 1929).

In spite of objections from conservative politicians in the country, the Donoughmore Constitution in 1931:

- broadened the democratic base by granting universal suffrage to all men and women over 21,
- allowed plantation Tamils with a five-year residence in the country to vote in national elections.

Although there was some criticism on this issue, about 100,000 plantation workers, including women, won the right to vote, and many exercised this right and voted at the general elections in 1931, 1936 and 1947.

### ***Support by 'Outsiders'***

This period also saw several middle-class Tamil women, and writers and politicians from India, speak out on the oppression on the plantations. They included:

- Indian Congress women politicians Sarojini Naidu and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya who visited Sri Lanka.
- the famous South Indian poet Bharati, who lamented the cruelty perpetrated on estate women in Fiji and the British colonies.
- Jawarharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi who, during their visits to Sri Lanka, spoke out clearly on women's emancipation and the need for women to join in political protests.
- E.V. Ramasamy from Chennai – popularly known as 'Periyar' – who raised the question of caste oppression and women's subordination in Hinduism during his visit to the island.

### ***Citizenship Acts***

The Citizenship Act of 1948, passed shortly after the independence of Sri Lanka, deliberately and effectively disqualified the vast majority of plantation workers from gaining citizenship. It implicitly affirmed a lower status for women as citizenship was granted by descent only along the male line, and depended on whether the father, or paternal grandfather and paternal great grandfather, were born in the country. *No mention was made of the mother or grandmother, thus reflecting a gender bias against women in the formulation of the Act.* In 1949 the Ceylon (Parliamentary) Amendment Act disqualified people who were not citizens from voting in elections, effectively disfranchising the vast majority of plantation workers.

The governments of Sri Lanka and India were involved in subsequent years in finding a solution to the problems of statelessness and citizenship of the plantation workers. Several agreements were made, the most important of these being the Sirimavo-Shastri Pact of 1964 and the Sirimavo-Gandhi Agreement of 1974. The workers and their unions were rarely consulted on these discussions and the process of registration was slow.

The gender bias in citizenship, which granted citizenship only along male descent, was retained for over four decades. This injustice was removed after women's organisations, women lawyers and the National Committee of Women took up this issue in the 1990s, demanding a rectification of the conditions of citizenship. This change was resisted by several groups, and most particularly by the Department of Defence and Emigration, which dealt with citizenship issues. In 2002 the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) shadow committee took up the issue of maternal descent for citizenship at the United Nations. The pressure for change thus increased nationally and internationally. When protests occurred again in 2003, President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge's government changed this law.

### ***Fighting for Equal Pay***

The exploitation of women workers on the plantations was taken up in the 1970s by the new wave of Sri Lankan women fighting for liberation. Women's groups, civil society organisations and international labour organisations took up their cause as part of the campaign associated with the UN 'Decade of Women' (1975-85). The Voice of Women, a women's organisation started in 1978, in its first magazine referred to the case of plantation women workers, demanding equal pay and treatment, improvements in their work and living conditions, and the removal of discriminative practices, highlighting exploitation involving unequal pay, long hours of work and male domination (*Voice of Women*, January 1980:6-7). The Women's Education Research Centre also published a pamphlet on the oppression and exploitation of plantation women.

### ***Strike of 1984***

In April 1984 a nine-day strike took place on the plantations, with the support of the vast majority of trade unions in the plantation sector and of several unions and groups outside the sector. In what could be viewed as the most significant labour strike on the plantations in the post-Independence period, wages were improved and the government granted equality in wages between women and men and monthly wages.

The formal equalisation of wages, while noteworthy, did not challenge patriarchal relations on estates, or even result in the equalisation of work. The gender division of



work in the field remained unchanged. Women plucked the tea – which was a task that took eight or more hours per day. Men, on the other hand, were largely involved in piecework – which usually took between three to five hours per day. As women continued to also do the care and work in the household, this meant that women, in effect, still worked longer hours than men.

### ***Campaign for Citizenship***

In 1986 the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) led a 'prayer campaign' to end the problems of statelessness in the plantation community. This non-traditional form of labour protest was supported by nearly all unions on the estates to end 'statelessness.' Women workers on the plantations participated fully in this 'spiritual' exercise. The government, under pressure from the unions, concerned about the potential financial loss, and keen to avoid a further deterioration of the prevailing Sinhala-Tamil tensions, agreed to the demand. As a result, it passed the Grant of Citizenship to Stateless Persons Act of 1986 and agreed to grant Sri Lankan citizenship to the remaining persons. In 1988 a further act was passed to speed up the process so that there were legally no stateless persons in the country from November 1988. There continued however to remain problems of accessing the proper legal documents to claim many of these rights.

## **4. POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT**

The attainment of formal citizenship and the removal of 'statelessness' were major advances for plantation politics. From a situation of zero representation in local and national government in 1952, the plantation workers in 2010 had 11 members in the national Parliament, and representatives in key regional government institutions such as the Central, Uva and Western Provincial Councils and *Pradeshiya Sabhas* (local bodies). Did these changes also result in the political empowerment of women from the plantation community?

### ***Political and Trade Union Representation***

In general, women in Sri Lanka have a low representation in government; in 2013 they comprised 5.8% of members in parliament and 3.8% in the Provincial Councils, Municipal Councils and *Pradeshiya Sabhas* (ADB 2008:6).<sup>2</sup> The situation of women workers on the plantations is comparable, with only five to six members out of over 150 representatives being women (CWC 2012). What is particularly ironic about these figures is that nearly 100% of plantation women workers belong to trade unions, with their membership dues automatically deducted from their paychecks. They also vote regularly in elections – often as directed by their union and party leaders – although they are rarely included on the nomination lists. According to Amali Philips, the activities of *matha sangams*, which are women’s wings of the trade unions, are limited to traditional religious, cultural and ritual events (2003:27).

We can conclude therefore that although gains were made in terms of citizenship and franchise rights, only a few women have made inroads into the political leadership of trade unions and political parties. Some of them include:

- **Betsy Mathews** worked with the CWC for some 30 years from the 1970s, becoming the director in charge of the Women’s Department and taking up women’s issues with international trade unions and labour groups.
- **Merinal Rose** of the CWC became a member of the *Pradeshiya Sabha* in 2002 and was its chairperson for a year.
- In 2010 **M. Yogeswari**, also of the CWC was elected as a member of the Nuwara Eliya *Pradeshiya Sabha*.
- **Arulnayagi**, who was a women’s coordinator in the CWC, rose from the position of trade union office clerk



to trade union representative, and became an elected member of the Ambagamuwa *Pradeshiya Sabha*.

- **Anushiya Sivarajah** of the CWC became a minister in the Central Provincial Council and was the first woman minister from the plantation community.
- **Menaha Kandasamy**, daughter of A.K. Kandasamy, a former plantation trade union leader, is the first woman to lead a plantation trade union in the country, namely, the Ceylon Plantation Workers' (Red Flag) Union. She is also a founder of the Red Flag Women's Movement (RFWM) as part of the main trade union dealing with issues such as women's oppression and domestic violence, which she saw as major obstacles to women in politics. She also formed a Domestic Workers Trade Union, the membership of which included women from the plantation community.
- **Saraswati Sivaguru** was elected to the Central Provincial Council in 2013 where she has highlighted women's concerns including sexual harassment and exploitation.

The participation of women in trade union leadership and local, regional and provincial councils, even if minimal, has brought about discussion and debate on the obstacles that women experience in politics.

### ***What has the state done?***

The Sri Lankan state has:

- Laid down principles of gender equality and non-discrimination in an amendment to the Constitution in 1978.

- Ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1981.
- Subscribed to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) which re-affirmed that the rights of women and girls were an “inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights.”
 

*According to Menaha Kandasamy, estate unions are male dominated and women’s leadership is essentially a “non issue” for them (2002: 37, with women being “active members and ‘nominal’ leaders”, and of “use value only so far as it suited the male agenda of the trade unions”(ibid: 5)*
- Created state institutions that are directly involved in supporting women and protecting them in the public and private spheres. These include the Women’s Bureau of Sri Lanka, National Committee on Women, Centre for Gender Complaints at the National Committee on Women, and Women and Children’s bureaus in police stations.
- Enacted the 1995 Act on Sexual Harassment: according to Section 345 of the Penal Code of 1995 “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.”
- Passed the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act of 2005. This was the result of years of struggle by women’s groups in the country, and includes punishments and Protection Orders as well as intervention of Police to protect those subject to this violence.

These are important policies and laws. Unfortunately, they are not widely known in the plantation sector, where violence against women continues to be widely pervasive. Some of the issues of concern include:

- Women continue to be 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” (Kamalini Wijayatilake and Faizun Zackariya 2001:17).
- Prevention of domestic violence and dealing firmly with sexual harassment do not appear to have high priority for management and unions, with women even losing confidence in unions to take up their cause (Ibid.:26).
- The most common reasons for violence appear to be alcoholism, relationships, suspicion and vulnerability of women.
- Women on plantations are treated like children who need to be controlled and guided by men at home and at work (Philips 2003:21).
- Expressions of masculinity and male violence justified.



Many factors thus contribute to the low participation of women from the plantation community in politics.

## 5. HUMAN DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES

Inspired by the visions of the Indian Nobel Laureate and economist Amartya Sen and the Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq, human development was an approach that viewed people rather than the economy as the wealth of a country. Development within this framework was more than just the Gross National Product but also on the achievements of the people. The first Human Development Report under the aegis of the UNDP was

“Human development, as an approach, is concerned with what I take to be the basic development idea: namely, advancing the richness of human life, rather than the richness of the economy in which human beings live, which is only a part of it.”  
- Amartya Sen, 1998

launched in 1990. It included a Human Development Index (HDI), which was which was a composite of three basic dimensions of human development -health, education and income. While subsequent reports have elaborated further on the different dimensions of human development, the discussion below focuses on the achievements in these basic dimensions for the plantation sector in Sri Lanka and their implications for the wellbeing of women workers on the estates.

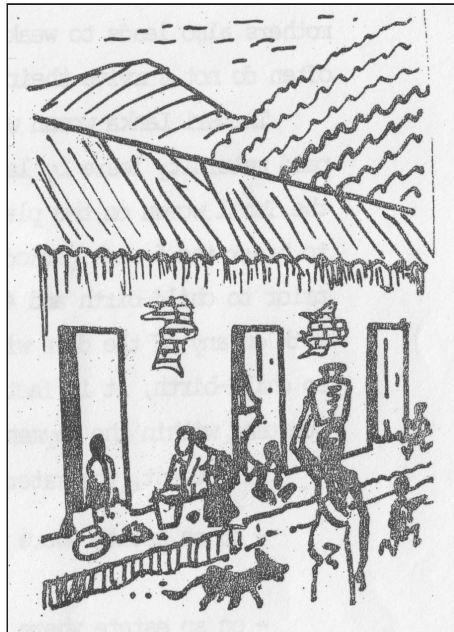
“The objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives.” - Mahbub ul Haq.

Statistics relating to the achievements of women workers on the plantations are often not available, while some figures such as those relating to the recent improvements in poverty in the estate sector in 2010 have been contested. But

they do reflect longer term and durable characteristics of deprivation in basic needs and welfare that have been the lot of these women, both in relation to the male workers as well as their female counterparts in the rest of the island.

### ***Income and Poverty***

Historically, the estate population was always the poorest in the Island, and the plantation women workers had, till 1984, been paid less than the men. While there have been wage increases since the 1990s, studies suggest that the rate of poverty remained significantly higher on the estates than in the other sectors well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (National Plan of Action 2007: vi; Gunatilaka *et al* 2008:3). According to the Department of Census and Statistics in 2009, 26% of the households on the estates were categorised as poor (2009: 2; Table 1.1). But poverty also has a gendered dimension with men tending to control women's wages and expenditure. This is because, as women work long hours plucking the tea and undertaking various chores in the house, it is easier for the men to



collect their wages. In reality, this practice has led to men spending substantial amounts of women's wages on liquor and to repay debt. The net effect is also a reduction in the quantity and quality of food and other items that are consumed by the women and children, which also impacts on their nutritional

status as discussed below. This pattern of male control over the wages has remained even when management had arranged for the payments of wages near their residences, as in most cases women continue to give the men the right to collect their wages.

### ***Housing and Health***

Unfortunately, the plantation sector continues to significantly lag behind the rest of the Island with regard to standards of housing and health (NPA 2007: vi). There continues to be problems of housing, water supply and sanitation”, as well as “over-crowding of line rooms”, and “obsolete housing ... unfit for human habitation” (ibid: 2). As women are involved in taking care of the work in the household, such dismal conditions of living have a serious impact on their lives. The more recent report “Poverty and Human Development” (2009) published by the Asian Development Bank suggests these trends have not been radically changed (Gunatilaka *et al* 2008: 3: Table 2). Furthermore, 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”. Moreover public health preventive facilities are not always available to plantation workers (World Bank 2007: vii).

Women from the plantation community also continue to be worse off than their counterparts in the Island with regard to health (National Human Development Report 1998: 11; 31). In Nuwara Eliya - the main district for the up-country tea plantations – women had the lowest levels of maternal and child health in the country (ibid: 37). In 2002 the maternal mortality rate on the estates was 88.1 per thousand as compared to the all island figure of 14.4 while infant mortality rate was also the highest in the country (Gunatilaka *et al* 2008: 10, Table 5). Girls experienced intra-household discrimination with regard to nutrition and health services with the estate sector being “by far the worst off” (ibid: 6). According to the Sri Lanka Demographic

and Health Survey (DHS) of 2000, 48% of estate mothers had a low body mass index as compared to 23% of rural mothers (World Bank 2007:xvii).

### ***Education and Literacy***

The last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have witnessed improvements with regard to education in the plantation sector. The influence of S. Thondaman, the leader of the CWC, who had become a Minister in the government in 1978 in the UNP government, was, no doubt, important in this progress. He put great effort into improving the educational opportunities for children on the estates, even mobilising foreign donors for supporting schools on the plantations (Little 2003:254). 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). This increase in education has opened up opportunities for the youth outside the plantations, and encouraged them to participate in trade unions. There is, however, still a great deal to be improved, with just 24% of estate children attending preschools compared to the national rate of 62%, the figures for secondary education of 58% vs. 69%, and the post-secondary extremely low rate of 3% for plantations as compared to 9% island-wide (Ibid: 2007:2). While the performance of women continues to lag behind that of men, these figures suggest girls also benefitted in this process and are likely, if provided the opportunities and the time, to make greater advances in time.

### ***Reproductive Rights***

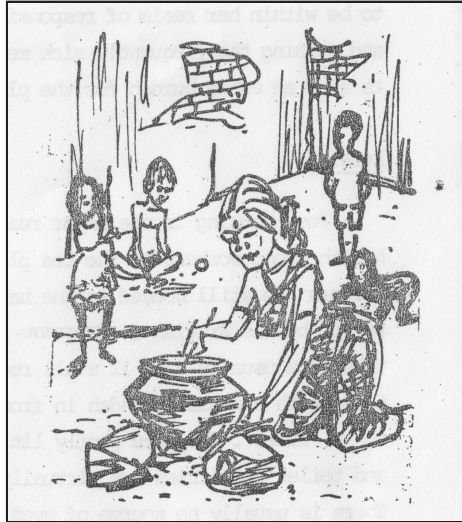
The reproductive rights of women are also often denied through management practices and the state. There have been cases when the management have not paid their due maternity benefits if the women have relocated to the husband's estates. Where newly married women were hired as tea pluckers, a pregnancy test

was sometimes used to prove that they were not pregnant, and if the tests were positive they were not given available maternity benefits (Philips 2005:134). Maternity benefits for the first two pregnancies include 84 days of paid leave, while this number is reduced to 42 days with three or more children.

The CEDAW shadow report of 2010 also commented that lack of education amongst some of the women on the estates could make them less aware of the “full significance” of sterilization, and they were “susceptible to be pressurized by the husband or the economic benefit of the incentive payment” (Women and Media Collective 2010: 23). Women were also often under pressure to undergo sterilization so that the money could be used to pay for debts and other financial needs. At the same time, women on the estates also feel the need to control their own fertility and are keen to have adequate contraception.

### ***The ‘double burden’***

In addition to doing a full days paid work on the estates women are also mainly responsible for a wide range of household tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, caring for the children and other family members, as well as fetching the water and firewood. These different tasks are taken on throughout the day, in the household and in the field, both of them in close proximity within the boundary of the estate. While parents (usually retired plantation workers) help out with some of the tasks, the bulk of the work





is done by the women themselves, leaving little time for rest, recreation or politics.

A woman's day begins at around 4 a.m. when she fetches the water, prepares the morning and mid-day meals, gets the children ready for school and crèche, and reports for 'muster' at 7 a.m. where she is allocated the workload for the day. On days of 'cash plucking,' a system by which extra money can be earned by working outside of the regular working hours, a woman arrives for work at about 6 a.m. She completes her work day around 4 pm when the 'norm' of tea has been plucked after which she undertakes the various household chores, including collecting firewood and fetching water, preparing the evening meal, and taking care of the children. Most of the washing of the clothes is also done in the evenings. After feeding the family and herself, she usually sleeps between 10 and 11 pm.

Overall the nature and intensity of estate and household work have placed women in a well-defined, limited and highly controlled situation. There is, in effect, little time for women to participate in trade unions or politics, and even her normal social contacts are with people from the close-by line rooms. Under these circumstances, there is pressure on girl children to take over some of the burdens placed on women – thus resulting in a pattern of female subordination and marginalisation.

Men are more involved in task jobs, such as pruning a certain number of tea bushes per day. This work is completed by about 2 p.m. They do most of the marketing for the household, as well as collect their pay, as well as that of the woman. Giving the wages of the women to their husbands is usually done as the wages are given out early afternoon, when the women are still in the field. This practice, while rationalised as being convenient for both men and women workers, has, as noted earlier, also meant that the husband makes the decisions on how her wages are spent – often on alcohol, as it is quite common for a large amount to be bought and consumed on pay day.

This division of work, the different tasks involved as well as the length of working day for women workers, do not always make it easy for them to get involved in trade union or political work. Many of the meetings are also held in the afternoons and evenings, when they are too busy to participate in them.

### ***Women moving out of plantations***

In recent years, increasing numbers of women (and men) from the plantation community have sought a better life by taking up employment outside the plantations, mainly as domestic workers in the Island and abroad, and as semi-skilled workers in garment and other factories. While the expectations of these women were that they were not only earning more but also improving their social status, in reality they could be viewed as merely moving from one form of exploitation to another where they had little freedom of movement and continued often to be victims of gender discrimination, violence and sexual abuse.

## **6. STILL A LONG WAY TO GO**

Overall, it is clear that, in spite of progress on different fronts, patriarchy is still firmly embedded in plantations. It is manifested in:

- **Gender division of labour**, which continues to subject women to long hours at work and within the household.
- **Unpaid labour** in the household, done mainly by women allows management to pay lower wages as workers would otherwise have had to buy these services.
- **Domination** by male planters, supervisors and male family members promotes patterns and ideologies of female subordination, and masculinity.

- **Domestic violence** and sexual abuse experienced by women.
- **Caste and religious practices** that encourage women to accept their fate and male authority.
- **Lack of adequate female leadership** in trade unions and political parties, in spite of the large membership of women workers.
- **Disadvantages** experienced by women from the plantation community with regard to education, health, income and reproductive rights.
- **The inadequate implementation** by the state of laws promoting gender equality and women's human rights, including protection against discrimination and violence.

It is clear that male workers also experience class, ethnic and caste discrimination in the plantation hierarchy. But women, in addition, face the disadvantages of patriarchal relations on the estates, which effectively render them 'slaves of slaves.' It is important to recognise that these different aspects of patriarchy, hierarchy and masculinity reinforce one another, leaving women in highly controlled and male-dominated spaces and structures in all spheres of their lives.

There is increasing recognition that the struggle against these multiple forms of oppression requires women from the community to create alliances with like-minded individuals, movements and organisations, while ensuring that their voices are heard and taken into account in the existing power relations on plantations and in political parties.

It is therefore of critical importance that trade unionists, politicians and those who write on the plantations to systematically raise the concerns of patriarchy and oppression that continue to be the reality faced by many women from the plantation community.

### **Endnotes**

\* The term ‘slaves of slaves’ was coined by feminists to refer to women who are the slaves of men, who in turn, are the slaves of the employer.

<sup>1</sup> <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/how-gii-calculated-and-what-are-its-main-findings-terms-national-and-regional-patterns>

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> There is, however, still a great deal to be improved, with just 24% of estate children attending preschools compared to the national rate of 62%, the figures for secondary education being 58% and 69%, and the post-secondary extremely low rate of 3% for plantations as compared to 9% islandwide (World Bank 2007:2).

<sup>4</sup> The World Bank cites figures from the DHS (2000) indicating that 37% of estate children were stunted as compared to 14% of rural children; and 48% of estate mothers had a low body mass index as compared to 23% of rural mothers (World Bank 2007:xvii).

**The late Yunoos was Sri Lanka’s leading political cartoonist who, in an earlier pamphlet in 1984, illustrated the exploitation of women workers in the plantations. In tribute to his talents, we are using these sketches which remain valid even today.**

## References

- Agarwal, Bina and Pradeep Panda. 2007. "Towards Freedom from Domestic Violence: The Neglected Obvious", *Journal of Human Development*, vol. 8, no. 3, 359-388.
- Arunachalam, Ponnambalam. 1936. *Speeches and Writings of Sir Ponambalam Arunachalam*, Colombo, H.W.Cave & Co.
- Asian Development Bank. 2008. *Country Gender Assessment: Sri Lanka*, Philippines: Asian Development Bank.
- Bhasin, Kamla. 1993. *What is Patriarchy?* New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- 2004. *Exploring Masculinity*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited
- British Anti-Slavery Society. 2010. *Emigration from India: The Export of Coolies, and Other Labourers, to Mauritius*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC). 2012. Interview with Harry Chandrasekera (Senior Vice President of the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) and Mathi Yugarajah (Vice President and Director International Affairs, Ceylon Workers' Congress) at the CWC office in March 2012.
- Chakravarti, Uma. 2003. *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, Calcutta: STREE.
- Curtin, Philip. 1998. *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- de Alwis Malathi & Kumari Jayawardena. 2001. *Castling Pearls: The Women's Franchise Movement in Sri Lanka*, Colombo, Social Scientists' Association.
- de Silva, K.M. 1981. *A History of Sri Lanka*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- (ed) 1965. *Letters on Ceylon, 1846-50. The administration of Viscount Torrington and the 'Rebellion' of 1848. The private correspondence of the Third Earl Grey and Viscount Torrington*. Kandy & Colombo K.V.G. de Silva & Sons.

- Denham, E.B. 1912. *Ceylon at the Census of 1911: Being the Review of the Results of the Census of 1911*, Colombo, Government Press.
- Desabhaktan. 13 April 1928
- Gunatilaka, R., G. Wan and S. Chatterjee. 2008. *Poverty and Human Development in Sri Lanka*, Manila: Asian Development Bank
- Hyam, R. 1990. *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Jayawardena, Kumari. 1972. *Rise of the Labor Movement in Ceylon*, North Carolina, Duke University Press
- 2007. *Erasure of the Euro-Asians: Recovering Early Radicalism and Feminism in South Asia*, Colombo, Social Scientists' Association.
- Kanapathipillai, V. 2009. *Citizenship and Statelessness in Sri Lanka: The Case of the Tamil Estate Workers*, London and New York: Anthem Press.
- Kandasamy, Menaha. 2002. *The Struggle Continues...Women's Leadership in Plantation Trade Unions in Sri Lanka*, Kandy, Institute of Social Development.
- Kurian, R. 1982. *Women Workers in the Sri Lanka Plantation Sector: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis*, Geneva: International Labour Office.
- Kurian, R. and K. Jayawardena. 1984. *The Exploitation of Women on the Plantations*, Colombo: Women's Education Centre.
- Labour Commission. 1908. *Report of the Labour Commission*, Colombo: Ceylon Labour Commission Handbook, 1935.
- Leitan, Tressie, G.R. July 2010. Context Study and Actor Mapping in the South Asian Region: Over-view of Decentralization and Local Governance in Sri Lanka. Colombo: Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC).
- 1979. *Local Government and Decentralized Administration in Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Lake House Investments.

- Little, Angela. 1999. *Labouring to Learn, Towards a Political Economy of Plantations, People and Education in Sri Lanka*, Colombo, Social Scientists' Association.
- Meenachi Ammal. 1940. "The Conditions of the Indian's Life in Ceylon" (Inthiyarkalathu Ilankai Vaalkaiyin Nilaimai).
- Ministry of Estate Infrastructure and Livestock Development. 2007. *National Plan of Action (NPA) for the Social Development of the Plantation Community (2006-2015)* Colombo: Ministry of Estate Infrastructure and Livestock Development.
- Muttiah S. 2003. *The Indo-Lankans, Their 200 year Saga*, Colombo, Indian Heritage Foundation.
- Natesa Aiyar, K. circa 1925, *Under Planter Raj: The Standard Wage in Ceylon*. Desabhaktan, Colombo.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 2005. "Women's Bodies: Violence, Security, Capabilities", *Journal of Human Development*, vol. 6, no. 2, July, 167-183.
- Philips, A. 2003. "Rethinking Culture and Development: Marriage and Gender among the Tea Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka," *Gender and Development*, vol. 11, no. 2 (July 2003), 20-29.
- Silva, Tudor and Thanges, Paramsothy. 2009. "Caste Discrimination in Sri Lanka: An Overview" in Silva, Kalinga Tudor, Sivapragasam, P.P. and Thanges, Paramsothy (eds) 2009, *Casteless or Caste-blind?, Dynamics of Concealed Caste Discrimination, Social Exclusion and Protest in Sri Lanka*. International Dalit Solidarity Network (Copenhagen Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (New Delhi), and Kumaran Book House (Colombo)).
- Stanton, Elizabeth Cady et al. 1887. History of Woman Suffrage available on line at <https://archive.org/details/historyofwomansu05stanuoft>

- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 1998. *National Human Development Report 1998: Regional Dimensions of Human Development*, Colombo: United Nations Development Programme Sri Lanka.
- United Nations Organization. 1979. *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. New York. United Nations Organization.
- Voice of Women. 1980. *Journal of the Voice of Women*. vol. 1, no. 1: Colombo
- Walby, Sylvia. 1990. *Theorising Patriarchy*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wijayatilake, Kamalini and Faizun Zackariya. 2001. *Sexual Harassment at Work – Sri Lankan Study on Plantation Sector*, Colombo: ILO.
- Women and Media Collective. 2010. *Sri Lanka Shadow Report to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, Colombo: Women and Media Collective.
- World Bank Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Sector Unit. 2007. *Sri Lanka Poverty Assessment: Engendering Growth with Equity: Opportunities and Challenges*. Report No. 36568-LK, Manila: World Bank Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Sector Unit.

Acknowledgments – we would like to sincerely thank B. Skanthakumar for his comments on this pamphlet and Rasika Chandrasekera, Buddhima Padmasiri and M. Mithun Rahul for their help in its production.

Rachel Kurian & Kumari Jayawardena have done research on issues related to class, patriarchy and ethnicity in the Sri Lankan plantation sector.