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## Producing and (Re) Producing? Untangling Multiple Labour Roles of Female Estate and Apparel Workers of Sri Lanka

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## Producing and (Re) Producing? Untangling Multiple Labour Roles of Female Estate and Apparel Workers of Sri Lanka

### Abstract

Inspired by the Marxist feminist thinking of women's "productive" and "reproductive" labour in this paper I attempt to unbundle the multiply interacting labour roles of female estate and apparel workers as they work within the third world (postcolonial) context of Sri Lanka. Drawing on the belief that "knowledge" of women's lives should be grounded in and informed by the material politics of everyday life, especially the daily life struggles for survival of women themselves, I employ ethnography from a feminist perspective as the prime methodological approach of this study. As such my paper unfolds as a "storytelling ethnography" where I narrate the daily life struggles of these female workers as they strive to balance the often conflicting demands on their labour as waged (productive) workers in the estate/factory and unwaged (reproductive) workers at home. Exploring the daily lives of female estate and apparel workers through the dual analytical lenses of Marxist feminism, I see these two groups of women, working under two different work regimes as negotiating the multiple interactions of their productive and reproductive labour in diverse ways; closely interwoven with each other at times and completely separated from each other at others.

### Keywords

Reproductive Labour, Female Workers, Marxist Feminism, Feminist Ethnography, Third World

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## Producing and (Re) Producing? Untangling Multiple Labour Roles of Female Estate and Apparel Workers of Sri Lanka

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### Introduction

As I walk with her to the crèche where she will leave her children before starting work, *Lakshmini*, a young mother who works as a tea plucker in *Ceylonita* estate, *Nuwara Eliya*, Sri Lanka, tells me of her burden of working in the estate and attending to her household tasks. She speaks hesitantly, her low voice carrying the distinct accent of her ethnic identity. It is with a sad smile on her face that she tells me she doesn't have much time to talk with me, because "she is always working." Her words echo in my mind as I watch her struggle through the many roles of mother, housewife and waged worker; walking down to the crèche with her children, working in and around the house, plucking tea leaves in the field—from sun up to sun down. Indeed, she seems always to be working. At another day and place, *Dishanthi*, a young girl who had been working as a sewing machine operator at *SriKnit* garments, *Katunayaka*, Sri Lanka for five years, tells me of her plans of leaving work: "We can't take care of a family while doing this work . . . the [sewing] machines drain all our energy . . . they [the factories] are slowly killing us." Voices of *Lakshmini*, *Dishanthi* and of many others like them, working in third world work regimes, have mostly remained unheard and "silenced" in the Marxist feminist debates on reproductive labour. It is with the aim of breaking this silence and creating a space for the voice of third world female workers to be heard, that I narrate the stories of their daily life struggles.

### **Theorizing Productive and Reproductive Labour**

In Marx's (1969) view, "Only bourgeois narrow-mindedness . . . can confuse the question of what is productive labour from the standpoint of capital with the question of what labour is productive in general, or what is productive labour in general" (p. 393). For Marx, the concept of productive labour is historically specific and he clearly distinguishes productive labour under capitalism from productive labour in general. The latter he calls useful labour "The production of use values through the labour process . . . a necessary condition of human existence" (Marx, 1961, pp. 42-43). It is clear that labour viewed from the standpoint of the labour process alone is useful labour, or labour productive of use value. On the other hand, productive labour specific to the capitalist mode of production is labour which produces surplus value. Defined by Marx (1961) as:

That labour alone is productive, who produces surplus—value for the capitalist, and thus works for the self expansion of capital. . . . Hence the notion of a productive labourer implies not merely a relation between work and useful effect, between labourer and product of labour, but also a specific, social relation of production, a relation that has sprung up historically and stamps the labourer as the direct means of creating surplus value. (p. 509)

We are left in no doubt of Marx's views on productive and unproductive labour as he repeats the fundamental property of productive labour as: "Only labour which is directly transformed into capital is productive" (1969, p. 393). "From the capitalist standpoint only that labour is productive which creates a surplus value" (1969, p. 153). "Productive labour, in its meaning for capitalist production, is wage-labour which, exchanged against the variable part of capital . . . reproduces not only this part of capital (or the value of its own labour power), but in addition produces surplus value for the capitalist" (1969, p. 152). Marx emphasizes that productive labour in the first sense, what he calls as useful labour—is a necessary but not sufficient condition for productive labour in this second, correct sense. He explains that if productive labour is exchanged with capital to produce surplus-value, unproductive labour is exchanged with revenue to produce use value (1969, p. 157). As Marx further states designation of labour as productive, has nothing to do with the determinate content of that labour, or the particular use-value in which it manifests itself (1969, p. 401). The same kind of labour may be productive or unproductive.

An actor for example, or even a clown, according to this definition, is a productive labourer if he works in the service of a capitalist (an entrepreneur) to whom he returns more labour than he receives from him in the form of wages; while a jobbing tailor who comes to the capitalist's house and patches his trousers for him, producing a mere-use value for him, is an unproductive labourer. The former's labour is exchanged with capital, the latter's with revenue. The former's labour produces a surplus value; in the latter's revenue is consumed. (Marx, 1969, p. 157)

Later writers (e.g., Gough, 1972; Meiksins, 1981; Savran & Tonak, 1999) have made vigorous attempts to clarify the Marxist categories of productive and unproductive labour and also to classify types of labour commonly seen in modern capitalist modes of production under these headings. Discussing of Gough's clarifications as done here is more an attempt at critiquing them from a feminist perspective rather than an uncritical adoption of such ideas. Gough (1972, p. 60) clarifies the Marxist analysis as: "productive labour is labour exchanged with capital to

produce surplus-value, employed in the process of production. Labour in the process of pure circulation does not produce use-value, therefore cannot add to value or surplus-value.” Alongside this group of unproductive labourers Gough places all workers supported directly out of revenue—public teachers, doctors and other state employees. However, this group differs from circulation workers in that they produce use-value (1972, p. 60). Drawing upon Marx’s analysis, Gough proposes a matrix of labour producing/not producing use-value as against labour producing/not producing surplus-value. He positions different types of workers of the present capitalist system within this matrix as follow:

	<i>Labour producing use-value</i>	<i>Labour not producing use-value</i>
<i>Labour producing surplus-value</i>	Productive workers in industry, agriculture distribution and services	
<i>Labour not producing surplus-value</i>	Unproductive workers: All state employees, domestic servants etc.	“Pure” circulation workers, salesmen, advertising workers etc. and “unnecessary” supervisory workers.
	<i>*Women as domestic workers</i>	

Adopted from, Gough (1972) Marx’s Theory of Productive and Unproductive Labour.  
(\* insertion mine)

Such a categorization is far from “critique free” and Gough (1972) himself draws attention to its many contradictions and ambiguities. However, the value of this matrix lies in its ability to achieve a certain amount of theoretical clarification and clear off some of the doubts and confusion surrounding the Marxist constructs of productive and unproductive labour. Even more importantly, in so far as the interests of this paper are concerned, it creates a space within which women’s unpaid domestic labour can be placed in relation to other types of work and workers. As such, going by Gough’s (1972) exemplification of Marx’s explanations, women’s domestic labour should be viewed as labour producing use-value but not surplus-value and therefore as unproductive. Relating this idea to the workers of this paper, it follows that their labour is productive only as long as they work within the boundaries of the factory and the field, creating surplus value for the capitalist by producing over and above the value of their own labour power. The moment they step out of the confines of the capitalist production process, their labour, according to the Marxian classification, becomes “unproductive.” Labour producing use-value necessary for human existence, useful from the point of view of the labour process. “Unproductive” labour nevertheless, when looked at from a capitalist standpoint. Thus, in so far as Marx’s theory of productive and unproductive labour stands uncontested, women’s unpaid domestic labour remains “unproductive.”

But Marx’s theory of productive and unproductive labour is far from being uncontested. Rather, it lies at the centre of discussions, debates and arguments that have given rise to much confusion and even controversy. Firstly, the Marxist categories themselves, especially their economic base, have been subject to close scrutiny in the form of discussions among scholars who are interested in the economic aspect of the Marxian analysis. (e.g., Harvie, 2008; Laibman, 1999; Mohun, 1996). Secondly, the place accorded to women’s unpaid domestic

labour within the Marxist framework has drawn widespread interest among scholars. This interest has manifested itself in the famous “domestic labour debate” bringing forth a rich theoretical analysis of the nature of women’s domestic work within the sphere of capitalist production (e.g., Dalla Costa, 1994; Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Federici, 2004; Fortunati, 1995; Gardiner, 1975; Secombe, 1974; Smith, 1978; Vogel, 1973;). Some of these writers, especially the feminist activists among them (e.g., Dalla Costa & James, 1992), critique the Marxist theory for labelling women’s domestic labour as useful but “unproductive” within capitalist production. Indeed, they propose alternative theoretical bases for understanding women’s domestic labour.

In Dalla Costa and James’s view, the “true nature of the work of a housewife never emerged clearly in Marx.” They aim their critique at the heart of the Marxian analysis, saying “domestic work produces not merely use values, but is essential to the production of surplus values” (1972, pp. 31-32). Thus, they claim women’s domestic work to be productive not in the colloquial sense of being useful, but in the strict Marxist sense of creating surplus value. Further accentuating their argument, Dalla Costa and James (1972, pp. 45-46) state that domestic work is not necessarily “feminine” work; rather, is it exhausting work which the capitalist system has transformed into privatized activity, putting it on the backs of housewives. These are social services as much as they serve the reproduction of labour power. Capital has liberated man from this work so that he is completely free for direct exploitation, resulting in a situation where productivity of man’s wage slavery in the factory is based on women’s unwaged slavery at home. Thus, Dalla Costa and James (1972, p. 51) conclude that “women’s unpaid labour in the home has been the pillars upon which the exploitation of the waged worker’s wage slavery has been build and the secret of its productivity.” Again, going against the traditional Marxist thinking, they dismiss the belief that women’s emancipation lies in their participation in public industry.

To Dalla Costa and James “slavery to an assembly line is not liberation from slavery to a kitchen sink.” Believing that “liberation of the working-class women lies in her getting a job outside home is part of the problem, not the solution” (1972, p. 51). The solution, as Dalla Costa and James saw, was in arguing for “wages for housework.” This was a point of view which came under critique for buttressing women’s subordinated housework rather than attempting to eliminate the structural roots of sexual division of labour. In spite of its controversial nature, the analysis of Dalla Costa and James’ analysis eventually reshaped the discourse on woman, reproduction and capitalism. Its essence was that the exploitation of women has played a central function in the process of capitalist accumulation, insofar as women have been the producers and reproducers of the most essential capitalist commodity: labour power (Dalla Costa, 1994). As Federici (2004) reiterating this argument says:

The power differential between women and men in capitalist society cannot be attributed to the irrelevance of housework for capitalist accumulation—nor to the survival of timeless cultural schemes. Rather it should be interpreted as the effects of a social system of production that does not recognize the production and reproduction of the worker as a social-economic activity, and a source of capital accumulation, but mystifies it instead as a natural resource or a personal service, while profiting from the wageless condition of the labour involved. (2004, p. 8)

Returning to the stories of “tea plukers” and “sewing girls” of this paper in the light of the above discussion, I see these workers moving amongst their homes, fields and assembly lines, expending their labour as mothers, housewives and estate/factory workers. They alternate from being “productive” to “unproductive” labour during the same working day, often working

within hazy and blurred boundaries; thus, it is difficult to demarcate when their “productive” labour ends and “unproductive” labour begins. One clear difference, however, is the fact that they are paid a wage for some parts of their work while some others go unpaid. Thus, they are both waged and unwaged workers; “productive” and “unproductive” labourers at much the same time. It is using this waged and non-waged condition of women’s labour then, that the main research objective of this paper is crafted. That is, it seeks to explore the multiple interactions of “productive” and “unproductive” labour of “tea pluckers” and “sewing girls” as they work within two different work regimes of a third world/post-colonial context. However, in doing so, I draw upon the feminist redefinition of the Marxist categories of productive and unproductive labour and views women’s unpaid domestic labour not as “unproductive” but as “reproductive” in the sense that women produce and reproduce the most essential capitalist commodity: labour power.

Touching on the context of this paper, before moving on to a detailed discussion of its methodological approach, this paper draws on my PhD thesis submitted to the University of Leicester, U.K. Working as a lecturer attached to a Sri Lankan University I was awarded a government scholarship to peruse my doctoral degree in the U.K. Even though based in a U.K. University my research project was essentially woven around the lives of “tea pluckers” and “sewing girls” of Sri Lanka and their stories as narrated here stem from my extensive ethnographic experiences within a Sri Lankan tea plantation and an apparel factory.

### **Methods**

My attempt at exploring the multiple interactions of women’s productive and reproductive labour unfolds as a journey of storytelling ethnography where I narrate the daily life struggles of “tea pluckers and sewing girls” as they strive to balance the often conflicting demands on their labour—working within two different work regimes—a plantation estate and an apparel factory in the third world country of Sri Lanka. Access to these work settings was secured after extensive negotiations with the owners where I had to ensure the safety, privacy and confidentiality of the participants. Apart from such assurance the local context did not require me to obtain any third party approval. Before commencing fieldwork in Sri Lanka however, I had to obtain clearance from the Ethical Review Committee of the School of Management University of Leicester, U.K., giving specific details of how I intended to carry my ethnographic fieldwork in the chosen settings. As per these agreed upon guidelines, it was only after explaining the nature and purpose of the study and getting their “informed consent” that I commenced my fieldwork interacting with and observing the female workers and other research participants in the chosen settings.

Having thus explained the context within which this study is placed, I now turn to justify using ethnography as its main methodological approach, explain how the two ethnographic settings were selected, strategies used for generating data and finally to discuss how this data set was analyzed.

### **Why Ethnography?**

Mason (2002, p. 85) describes several significant reasons as to why a researcher might want to use ethnography as a method of data generation. Firstly, the researcher might have an ontological perspective, which sees interactions, actions and behaviours and the way people interpret these and act on them as central. The researcher may be interested in a range of dimensions of the social world (not just written responses to a questionnaire, or verbal responses to an interview or written texts) including daily routines, conversations, language and rhetoric used, styles of behaviour (including non-verbal behaviour) and the active

construction of documents and texts in certain settings. Therefore, observation, if not participant observation, facilitates the researcher to overcome the constraints and limits of questionnaires, interviews and so on while experiencing the real nature of “Being” in her/his research setting. The use of ethnographic observations and interviewing for data generation within the contexts of the “estate” and the “factory”—the research settings of my study—is based primarily on this ontological perspective. Within both these settings I saw behaviours, interactions and the way participants interpret and act on them as central. My interests lay not in obtaining answers to questionnaires, or even responses to structured interviews but rather to observing the daily routines, behaviour patterns, interactions and conversations of the participants’ working and living within these settings.

Secondly, a researcher might decide to use the ethnographic method, if she or he has an epistemological position which suggests that knowledge or evidence of the social world can be generated by observing or participating in or experiencing “real life” settings, interactive situations and so on because not all knowledge is articulable, recountable or constructible in an interview. This position is based on the premise that these kinds of settings, situations and interactions reveal data in multidimensional ways. The researcher can be a “knower” in these circumstances because of shared experiences, participation or by developing empathy with the researched. They know what the experiences of the social setting feel like, and in that sense they are epistemologically privileged (Mason, 2002, p. 85). Thus, the ethnographic method emphasises the fact that reality is socially constructed and indeed it facilitates the researcher to explore and understand multiple realities in her/his research setting.

The use of an ethnographic approach to generate data for my study draws on Mason’s argument as stated above. Accordingly, use of ethnographic observations and interviewing is firmly grounded in the epistemological position that knowledge can be generated by experiencing “real-life” settings and interactive situations. It is also believed that such experiencing allows the generation of multidimensional data on social interactions in specific contexts as it occurs rather than relying only on people’s retrospective accounts, and on their ability to verbalize and reconstruct a version of interactions or settings (Mason, 2002).

Mason (2002) highlights another reason for selecting ethnographic observation when she states,

Choosing to use observational methods usually coincides with the view that social explanations and arguments require depth, complexity, roundness and multidimensionality in data rather than surface analysis of broad patterns, or direct comparison of interviewee responses to a standardized set of questions.  
(p. 6)

In using this method, the researcher may claim that the data were situationally occurring, rather than clearly artificially manufactured. Accordingly, it is argued that experiencing the daily routines and interacting with the participants who live and work within these settings enables generation of rich, complex, in-depth and multifaceted data that are more appropriate for answering the research questions, than data that might be “artificially” made up by comparing the responses to a standardized questionnaire distributed among participants.

### **Selecting the Settings and Generating Data**

*Ceylonita* estate, the first site within which fieldwork of this research was carried out was a state-owned plantation located in the district of *Nuwara Eliya*. Identified as the heart of the plantation industry, *Nuwara Eliya* is home to the highest numbers of estate workers in the country. Thus, an estate located in its midst was thought to be reflective of the features specific

to the plantation industry as well as to be adequately representative of the characteristics unique to its workforce. Moreover, plantations in this part of the Island identified as the “up country” have resident workforces consisting of only workers of Indian origin. Having first been brought to the Island by its colonial rulers their origins are closely linked with the country’s colonial heritage. As this study sought to explore the enduring effects of colonial power relations on the plantation labour force, the location of *Ceylonita* was ideally suited for its purpose. Further, *Ceylonita* was a large-scale plantation consisting of some 200 hectares of land and 505 families, most of whom make a living as waged labourers in the estate. Out of a total resident population of 2062, 1044 were female, who became the focus of this study. Finally, I was able to obtain permission to enter the estate, to live within its boundaries and to interact with members of its work force without any limits or restrictions. All these factors contributed towards making *Ceylonita* an appropriate setting within which to carry out ethnographic fieldwork.

*SriKnit Garments*, an apparel factory situated within the *Katunayake* Free Trade Zone was selected as the second site for this study. *SriKnit* 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. Similar to that of *Ceylonita* estate here again it was these 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 second 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.

As previously explained, *Ceylonita* estate at *Nuwara Eliya* was the first site within which field work was carried out. Once the initial decision of which estate to study was taken, it was necessary to identify units for analysis within the estate itself. Firstly, an overall understanding about the estates working patterns as an agricultural/industrial entity was sought. As households were seen as bringing together both the productive and reproductive aspects of women’s labour, households or families in residence within the estate were considered as cases to be studied in relation to the research questions. A strategy of purposeful sampling was adopted in selecting the cases. Information rich cases were selected by talking with the estate midwife who had close knowledge of each of the families in residence. In selecting the sample of households to be studied, the life cycle of the female workers was also taken into consideration. Women and girls at different stages of their life cycles that is, young girls, married women with young as well as grown up children, women who had no children of their own, mature women who were no longer of working age were all drawn into the sample. A major part of the field work consisted of *observing female workers during their work day*, and close and continuous intermingling and interactions with them during times after work. Even though centred around the households or cases included in the sample, fieldwork in the estate drew in a much wider and richer grouping of informants resulting from spontaneous opportunities that sprang up in the field. It also included engaging in informal discussions with other members (e.g., estate workers other than female tea pluckers) of the estate community.

In observing female tea pluckers at work I was required to take up the role of passive observer due to two reasons. Firstly, plucking tea leaves was a skilled task which I was unable to perform and couldn’t hope to master within a short period of time. Secondly, any attempt to interact with the workers while at work was not viewed favourably by the *Kanganys* (male supervisors of female tea pluckers) nor by the workers themselves since they worked to achieve a set target each day in terms of number of kilograms of tea leaves plucked.

However, there were many opportunities to interact and talk with the women workers while they walked down to their allotted slots in the field from their “line rooms” in the mornings and returned in the afternoons, on their way to and from the crèches with their children, on their way to the factory to weigh and record their daily harvest and so on. There was also time to talk with and listen to them during times spend in their homes after work. As such I intermingled with them while they engaged in their daily domestic work of cleaning the house and garden, cooking, tending to their children, fetching firewood and water. The focus of all these activities was to get an insight into what the female workers thought and felt about their life and work in the estate, to hear their voice about the dual roles imposed upon their bodies as waged productive labour in the field and as unpaid reproductive labour in the household.

*SriKnit* garment factory at *Katunayake* was the second ethnographic site selected for this research. Within this setting, the units of analysis were considered to be the boarding houses/rooms where the female workers resided. Here again the sampling strategy was one of purposeful sampling and was done with the help of an NGO activist who acted as a key informant. The sample or the cases to be studied were selected so as to include a cross section of workers who were at different stages of their work lives that is, workers who had just come to the “zone,” who had worked as sewing machine operators for a few years, who were about to leave their jobs in the “zone,” and those who were no longer working in the “zone” but still living in the boarding houses. In addition, one worker who no longer worked in the “zone” but who came to visit her friends was also included. Further, diverse “cases” were also drawn into the sample by including workers who had young children and who were pregnant.

Similar to that of the estate field activities took the form of observing female workers during their work day; close and continuous intermingling and interactions with workers during their non-working times, interviewing other members who make up the social fabric of these sites and gathering supplementary data from the sites.

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. Out of the shop floor, in canteens and wash rooms, I searched for evidence of the expression of feelings of workers (i.e., lyrics written on walls, newsletters or posters written by them), the way they interacted with other workers who were not from the shop floor and their mannerisms and behaviour patterns (i.e., did they appear tired and stressed or relaxed and energetic).

However, due to the impracticality of engaging in lengthy and drawn out conversations with workers while they were within the factory premises, such interactions were mainly carried out in the vicinity of the boarding houses. It was possible to meet and talk with the workers outside of their working hours in the factory, that is, on their way to and from work, at the boarding houses after work while they engaged in cooking, cleaning and washing clothes and even while they were chatting with each other about the day’s events. Weekends, especially Sundays when most of the workers did not go to the factories but spent their time in preparing daily meals, cleaning the rooms and washing clothes, shopping for essential items and so on provided a good opportunity to closely interact with them. Such times were made use of to observe their activities, listen to their interactions and conversations with each other and sometimes to ask questions. The focus of all activities within this setting was to gain an insight

into how these workers viewed their productive role as waged labour in the factory and their reproductive role as mothers and housewives at home.

### **Narratives as a Way of Analyzing Ethnographic Data**

Over the recent past social scientists (e.g., Bamberg, 2007; Cortazzi, 2001; Czarniawska, 2004; Gubrium & Holstein, 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008; Tedlock, 2000) have increasingly focused on the usefulness of “narratives” for reporting and evaluating human experiences. Accordingly, the power of narratives as a tool in analysing ethnographic data has come to be strongly established in the literature. As suggested by Richardson (1990) a narrative mode is equally important to the organization of everyday life—in the form of mundane stories and accounts of personal experiences—as well as to the organization of ethnographic accounts themselves. Adams (1990) points out that the narrative mode is especially important to the character of ethnographic inquiry since it furnishes meaning and reason to reported events through contextual and processual representations. In narrating events ethnographers can show how people act and react in particular social circumstances (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This approach allows ethnographers to “display the patterning of actions and interactions, its predictable routines and unpredictable . . . crisis . . . show the reader both the mundane and the exotic” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 199). Finally, the overall significance of the ethnography can be conveyed through its narrative structure for as Atkinson (1992) argues, “beyond the fragmentary narratives persons and circumstances are the meta-narratives that shape the ethnography overall” (p. 13). Ethnographers can carry out their task of transforming material from “the field” into “the text” by constructing narratives of everyday life. For this, ethnographers need to critically develop the craft of storytelling. By arming themselves with this powerful intellectual and aesthetic tool, ethnographers can effectively engage with the task of *storing other people’s stories* (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

If we wish to understand the deepest and most universal of human experiences, if we wish our work to be faithful to the lived experiences of people . . . or if we wish our privileges and skills to empower the people we study, then we should value the narrative. (Richardson, 1990, pp. 133-134)

As discussed above there is an increasing interest in “narratives” among ethnographers as a way of analysing ethnographic data. However, “narrative” is employed by them to signify a variety of meanings. Such multiple uses have caused a certain amount of ambiguity over the term leading to a lack of clarity and precision in its use. Employment of “narratives” for the purpose of this thesis draws on Polkinghorne’s views on the concept. Polkinghorne (1995, p. 5) defines a “narrative” as “a type of discourse composition that draws together diverse events, happenings and actions of human lives into thematically unified processes.” Further, he identifies narrative configuration as “a process by which happenings are drawn together and integrated into a temporally organized whole.” Accordingly, the term “narratives” is used here to refer specifically to texts that are thematically organized around events and plots. The whole analytic endeavour therefore, is grounded in crafting such “narratives” and emphasising its reference to a specific kind of prose text—the story—and to the particular kind of configuration that generates a story-plotment (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5).

Drawing upon Bruner’s (1985) distinction between the paradigmatic and narrative mode of thought, Polkinghorne (1995) distinguishes between “analysis of narratives” and “narrative analysis. The former he describes as “studies whose data consists of narratives or stories, but whose analysis produces paradigmatic typologies or categories” while the latter is

seen as “studies whose data consists of actions, events and happenings but whose analysis produces stories.” It is the second of these two approaches, namely narrative analysis, which was used in putting together the following ethnographic text where particular emphasis was placed on the use of emplotment and narrative configuration as primary analytical tools. Drawing on the writings of Polkinghorne (1995) and Ricoeur (1991) “narrative” was thought of as a particular kind of discourse: the story. Further, as “stories” are specially suited textual forms for expressing experiences of people as lived (Ricoeur, 1991), working with “stories” was viewed as holding significant promise for this particular ethnographic endeavour. “Stories” are used in its general sense, to signify narratives that combine a succession of incidents into a unified episode. A storied narrative as described by Polkinghorne as:

A textual form that preserves the complexity of human action, with its interrelationship of temporal sequence, human motivation, chance happenings and changing interpersonal and environmental contexts. (1995, p. 7)

The outcome of narrative analysis as attempted here was a story that is, a historical account, a life story or a storied episode of a person’s life. In this sense, my task in using narrative analysis in this research was to combine elements of data into a story that gave meaning to them thereby contributing towards reaching the final purpose or goal of the research. The analytical task undertaken was to “develop or discover plots that displayed the interrelationships among elements of data as parts of an unfolding temporal development culminating in the denouement” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15). Thus, it was attempted to combine elements of data gathered through ethnographic interviewing, observations, visuals and documents and work towards integrating and interpreting them through emplotted narratives. Further, this task was carried out in a way that revealed the uniqueness and particular complexities of each story while bringing out the common threads among them. Accordingly, narrative analysis was a way of synthesizing data rather than separating them into constituent parts. The term “analysis” was used to refer to the configuration of data into a coherent whole, the final outcome of which as pointed out by Polkinghorne being:

The storied production. . . that is the retrospective or narrative explanation of the happenings that is the topic of the inquiry. . . . The plausibility of the produced story is in its clarification of the uncertainty implied in the research question. . . . (1995, p. 19)

Narrative analysis as used for the purpose of my ethnographic study is a way of weaving together elements of data to form coherent wholes or “stories,” rather than separating them into constituent parts. Analysis is shaped in such a way so as to shed light on the uncertainty implied in the research questions through such storied productions. In so doing, this paper moves away from the popular analytical tradition of “separation and fragmentation” of data towards a way of bringing together and synthesizing data to form coherent wholes. This approach is based on a belief, as advocated by Mauthner and Daucet (2003) among others: “that the researcher, the method and the data are not separate entities but reflexively interdependent and interconnected.” As such, analysis, is not seen here as “as a series of neutral, mechanical and decontextualized procedures that are applied to the data and that take place in a social vacuum” (Mauthner & Daucet, 2003, p. 415). Rather, this work acknowledges the role played by the researcher as an “embodied,” subjective and situated person who makes “choices” (i.e., how to interpret the voices of participants, which transcript extract to present as evidence and so on), and who works within specific interpersonal, social and institutional spaces which in turn influence these choices.

As such, “knowing” about the lives of estate and factory workers—marginalized women of the third world—as attempted through this thesis, takes on a position of “embodied subjectivity-knowledge as thoroughly located in our embodied selves, as against objectified disembodiment,” as argued by Dale (2001, p. 58). As Dale further points out, seeing “knowledge as standing apart from the (embodied) person who knows” (2001, p. 58), and believing that it is only by objectifying, fragmenting, and splitting into its constituent parts that we can hope to understand something tends to “replicate the dominant and marginalize the different” in knowledge creation (Dale, 2001, pp. 26-27). “Women and people of colour” clearly fall within such marginalized spheres, and knowledge about them continues to remain buried in the backgrounds; away from the dominant discourses. If so, adherence to an objectified, disembodied approach would only lead to continuous marginalization of “women and people of colour” in the realm of “knowledge.” It is in the light of such thinking, that my study which seeks to explore the multiple interactions of women’s productive and reproductive labour within a third world/postcolonial setting, moves away from an objectified, fragmented approach towards a subjective, embodied way of “knowing.”

## Results

### Of “Tea Plukers” and “Sewing Girls:” Tales from the Field

“Tales from the field” as I recount below is extracted from my ethnographic narrative where “women and girls” of *Ceylonita* estate tell me the stories of their lives; moving through the different stages of their life cycles, working and living within this closely-knit plantation enclave. Beginning with the birth of a baby girl, these stories go on to describe the lives of “little girls” like *Poornima* and *Radha* as they grow up in the estate. *Rani* and *Madhavi*, two “young girls” born and grown up in the estate tell me of their dreams for the future. The daily lives of *Lakshmini* and *Sita Devi* “young mothers” who work as “tea plukers” makes clear their struggle to combine the multiple roles of mother, housewife and waged worker. Though less burdened than their sisters, “middle aged” women like *Rajeswari* and *Parameshwari* continue their struggle as estate workers and each woman has her own story to tell, about life in the estate. *Krishna Devi*, an “elderly women” of over eighty years of age reminisce her memories giving me a picture of life in the estate in days by gone.

My “tales” continue to capture the daily lives of “sewing girls” of *SriKnit* factory beginning with a journey to the “other side” of the town, where they live, away from their homes and in temporary boarding houses. *Tamara* who no longer works as a “sewing girl” tells me of her “new” life as a mother and a housewife. Stories of *Ramani* and other girls in a boarding house inform me not only of their lives as “sewing girls” in the “zone” but also as mothers, daughters and sisters at their homes. What they tell me and what I see around the “zone” make me rethink the dual burden of women as applies to these workers. *Sureka* and *Sakuntala*, a young mother and a mother to be, both tell me of the impossibility of taking care of their families while working in the “zone.” *Dishanthi* and *Dilrukshi*, two sisters, one about to leave her job and the other a “new girl” on the shop floor, tell me of their reasons for leaving and coming to the zone respectively. My ethnographic journey also takes me inside the factory, where I meet Managers of these workers and others and hear their voices about the “sewing girls” and their work.

However, the results section of this paper is primarily woven around the stories of *Lakshmini* and *Dishanthi* as I presume the stories as they told me to be powerfully reflective of the stories of *Sita Devi*, *Rajeswari*, *Parameshwari*, *Krishna Devi* and *Lechchami*, all of whom are “tea plukers” of *Ceylonita* estate and *Dilrukshi*, *Sureka*, *Sakunthala* and *Ramani*, “sewing girls” of *SriKnit* factory. Thoughts and feelings as shared with me by these female

workers and others involved in this ethnographic journey are touched upon towards the latter part of the paper to draw up a more conclusive picture of the multiple interactions of women's productive and reproductive labour as happens within the estate and the factory. It is to hear the hesitant voice of *Lakshmini* as she struggles to combine the many labour roles of mother, housewife and waged worker plucking tea leaves in *Ceylonita* estate that this paper now turns.

### *Lakshmini's productive, (re)productive labour*

In the morning I stealthily opened the front door and stepped out of the house, so I would not disturb the household still in slumber. *Ganesh*, who worked as the gardener, was already waiting for me on the door step. He had wrapped himself up to against the morning chill and was carrying a torch. *Ganesh* had been assigned the task of escorting me to the "line" rooms that morning. From our vantage point on high ground I could clearly see the "line" rooms far down below. It looked as if dawn had reached this part of the valley long before it did the buildings up on the mountain. People, mostly women, were already up and about, some of them sweeping the small yards in front of their homes, some fetching water from the taps by the road side and some inside the kitchens lighting up the fire to prepare meals for the family.

It took us only a few more minutes to reach *Lakshmini's* house, she knew I was coming to visit her that morning and was expecting me. I peeped inside the house and saw her busy inside the tiny kitchen. Her daughter was already up and was waiting patiently for her cup of morning tea. *Lakshmini*, like all other workers was given a free quota of processed tea leaves for use, which consisted of the lowest quality tea known as "labour dust." Now she poured the tea she had prepared into the plastic cups kept on a rickety wooden table. She offered me some; I took a cup and stood by the kitchen door watching her going about her work at a great speed. It did not take her much time to finish making the few *roti* that was going to serve as both breakfast and lunch for the family. She told me she was going to use some curry left over from dinner with them. While going about her tasks *Lakshmini* managed to tell me that she had to finish a lot of the housework before going to work in the field. It would be late afternoon when she returned home, and she still had to prepare dinner. *Lakshmini*, like most other women in this estate, worked as a labourer in the field.

She was a tea plucker; her job was picking tender tea leaves to be processed as tea dust. In this sense she was an active participant in public industry: a waged worker engaged in the production of marketable produce. She did this waged work in addition to the unpaid domestic work she did, as she was doing this very moment I stood watching her. This made me interested in finding out how *Lakshmini* combined the dual roles of her waged work and housework. I also wanted to understand how these combined roles affected her life as a woman living in this estate. Here my interest is inspired by the views of Mariarosa Dalla Costa presented in *Capitalism and Reproduction* (1994). In this paper, Dalla Costa builds upon her previous work and re-establishes her argument against the traditional Marxian belief that women's emancipation lies in their participation in public industry. She dismisses outright the view that women can achieve liberation by engaging in work outside of the home. Rather, as she sees, the belief "liberation of the working-class women lies in her getting a job outside home" is part of the problem, not a solution. As I watched *Lakshmini*, busily tending to the numerous chores during the early hours of this cold morning, and as I stood watching her working under the glare of the scorching sun throughout the day, I began to realize that to explain her life as emancipated through participation in public industry, would indeed be a problematic. Thus, like Dalla Costa, I too saw a problem rather than a solution in this phenomenon, where *Lakshmini* struggled to combine her waged work with housework. *Lakshmini's* daily tasks, as I describe below, further illuminate my thoughts.

Once she had finished cooking, *Lakshmini* took the children; her son was about two years of age and was up by now, to the water pipe near the house to be washed. It was freezing cold outside, but they seemed to be used to the cold. *Lakshmini* had to take her daughter and son to the crèche before starting work. While we made our half an hour or so walk to the lower division crèche, *Lakshmini* told me about her life as a young girl, growing up in this same estate where her mother and father had worked as “labourers” before her. She had stopped going to school at the age of ten. She didn’t give me any reasons for this and I did not ask her. But she did tell me that she had gone to work as a “domestic servant” to the house of an affluent family in the city. Whatever money she had earned had been used for the survival of her family. “There were days when neither of my parents was given work . . . that is how things are here,” *Lakshmini* told me, explaining the precarious and seasonal nature of estate work. At the age of eighteen she had returned to the estate to get married to her cousin as was the tradition in her community. She was twenty-five now and had given birth to her first child at the age of twenty-one. It was only after the birth of her daughter that *Lakshmini* had started working in the estate. She described her experience of finding work as “the little money we had was not enough anymore. . . . So one day I went to the bungalow and asked the superintendent to give me work in the estate.” *Lakshmini* had first become part of the estate labour force when her daughter was ten months old. At this point I asked her if all women who wanted to work had to go and meet the superintendent. She looked surprised before answering “yes, that is how we go to work in the estate.” What *Lakshmini* described was how women started work as “pluckers” in the estate. They had to go and ask the superintendent, telling him why they had to work. If the Superintendent thought the women should be given work, they were made part of a plucking gang, and thus became paid labourers of the estate, like *Lakshmini* had become. Two years after she had first started working *Lakshmini* had given birth to her son. “I worked in the field until the last day before I had him,” she told me proudly. But what she recalls most vividly about the whole event of her sons’ birth is the sum of money, equal to three months’ salary,<sup>1</sup> which was paid to her by the estate after his birth. Again, *Lakshmini* is proud of the “benefits” she had been entitled to, which she describes as:

They paid me nearly Rs. 16,000 at once. I was asked to stay home with my son for three months. Once he was old enough [three months] I took him to the *pulle kamaraya* [crèche]. I was asked to work nearby and was allowed to go into the crèche to breast feed him during the midday break.

*Lakshmini*, like all other estate mothers who worked, had left her children at the crèche and gone to work in the field. She is not unduly concerned about this arrangement of child care. She thinks it is a useful way of taking care of young children while their mothers go to work in the field. Her main worry, however, is the fear that she might be taken out of the “pay roll” if there were not enough leaves for the women to pick; as was the case at the time I visited the *Ceylonita* estate. At the time she was given only three days per week to work, which meant only three days wages, as the women were paid daily. *Lakshmini* was extremely worried about how she was going to buy the daily rations she needed if working days were reduced even further. She was already in debt and told me that the owner of the small shop from which she got rice, flour, sugar and other basic things would not give her any more credit. As I listened to her, I did not notice that we had already reached the crèche and would have to go back very quickly down the same road we had come, if *Lakshmini* was to be in time to start work.

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<sup>1</sup> It is a legal requirement in the estates that every woman who gives birth while in employment be paid a sum of money equal to three times her monthly salary and be granted three months maternity leave, up to the number of three children.

During one of our conversations while I stood watching *Lakshmini* and her gang in the field, I was informed by a field officer that, if the women stayed away from the tea bushes for more than a few days the leaves matured and became unsuitable for processing as tea. This would result in great financial losses to the estates. In this sense, women's labour was essential for the survival of the estate as much as the wages earned by selling their labour was essential for the sustenance of women and their families. Yet, in order to obtain work, women had to plead with the superintendent like *Lakshmini* had to do. Like *Lakshmini*, they were made to feel as if they were being granted a favour by allowing them to work. Thereby effectively devaluing and degrading women's labour at the very beginning of their entry into the public sphere. Thus, women entered the labour force as a group of marginalized workers who had little or no bargaining power over the conditions governing their work. The fact that, without their so called "nimble fingers" to tend to them daily, the tea bushes would soon become valueless, is kept safely hidden away from the women. Thus, as *Lakshmini* works among the tea bushes, giving life to and adding value to the lifeless tea leaves, the value of her own labour remains hidden from her, buried beneath the great mass of tea leaves she plucks and carries on her back all day. Likewise, *Lakshmini* does not see the "benefits" given to her at childbirth and after as apparatus facilitating the dual functioning of her body as waged productive labour and unpaid domestic labour at one and the same time. Again, the fact that the estate needs her to work as a "producer" in the field and as a "reproducer" at home, producing and sustaining the future labour force, essential for the survival and growth of the capitalist enterprise, remains out of sight, concealed in the ploy of capitalist welfare.

By the time we reached the area where *Lakshmini* was to work that day, the cold mist that had covered the valley was slowly giving way to the warm rays of the August sun. Women were coming out of their houses and walking towards their slots in small groups. They were of all ages; all wore brightly coloured *sarees* and carried long sticks which they lay on the tea bushes to ensure they plucked only the new tender leaves. Some of them carried huge wicker baskets while some had only plastic bags. A field officer later told me that women were finding it difficult to buy or repair wicker baskets which were used traditionally to collect the tea leaves they picked. So now they used left over plastic bags instead. As *Lakshmini's* gang assembled on the road before beginning their ascent up the steep mountain where the bushes grew, I noticed the two *kanganys* who were in charge of this group of about eighteen women. They were from the same community as the women, Tamil, but male. There was one field officer, *Jayawerdana*, who was the overall supervisor of several "gangs" working in the vicinity. He was again male but from the majority Sinhalese community. I was soon to learn that this was a pattern of work that did not vary, women working as "pluckers" and men working as overseers or supervisors across the estate.

Before they began work, the women were told their plucking targets for the day would be twenty kilograms. This meant each woman had to pluck tea leaves up to a minimum of twenty kilograms of weight if they were to earn their full pay for the day. If they failed to achieve this, they were paid only half the daily rate in spite of working in the field the whole day. If they plucked more, they got a bonus. I stood by a tree and watched as the women plucked the leaves in silence, their hands moving among the leaves as if they had a will of their own. Every 1-2 minutes they threw the leaves over their heads into the baskets hanging behind their backs, never once looking back. The baskets were tied to their heads by a rope that was secured around it. As the yield grew, the baskets became heavier and the women's shoulders sagged in an effort to carry the growing weight. I attempted to set up a conversation with a *Kangani* but had to give up because he was not very fluent in Sinhala. I was later introduced to one who was, but for the moment I decided just to watch. Around one and a half hours into their work the women were given bottles of warm tea—brewed on a fire place along the road side using tea leaves from the factory—which they drank gratefully. I remembered *Lakshmini* had had no

breakfast, even though they were allowed to gather around and chat over the tea I did not see her taking out her small parcel of food.

Soon it was time for the women to go to the weighing shed, to have their pick weighed and recorded in the small card they carried securely hidden under the multicoloured blouses they wore. Each woman had to empty her pick onto a mat on the ground; the leaves were then put back into a plastic bag used as the weighing bag. The anxiety on *Lakshmini's* face was almost tangible as she gazed at the hands of the scale in the hands of the *kangani*, who read out the number aloud. *Lakshmini* took out her precious bit of paper and gave it to the second *kangani* who wrote down the number for her. She put the card back inside her blouse and went to sit down on a nearby rock. She had managed to pick only eight kilos so far and was behind target. One of the *Kanganys* shouted rudely at *Lakshmini*, accusing her of being lazy. "Don't expect to be paid without having enough leaves." *Lakshmini* got up from where she was seated and walked back silently towards the tea bushes. Her face was expressionless as her hands started to work even faster than before. The final count would be taken in the afternoon, and this time near the factory. I decided to go back, and return later, after the women had had their lunch break. I was not sure if they would like to have me around while they had lunch, sitting on the ground in the shade of a tree that grew among the tea bushes. Only *Lakshmini* knew me well and even though she had introduced me to the "gang" I did not want to intrude too much on them. So I turned to leave, promising to meet them again near the factory at the end of the day. Some way up the winding path I could see *Lakshmini* slowly taking off the basket and sitting down in the shade of a tree. She would be free of the weight of the baskets for some time, but a few women in *Lakshmini's* gang, as soon as the baskets were taken off, began to rush down the road in the direction of the crèche. I knew they had young children and were on their way to feed them before starting the afternoon shift.

It was late afternoon now and I could see the members of *Lakshmini's* gang slowly descending from among the tea bushes at the mountain sides where they had been working all day and taking the path leading to the factory. They were followed by the *kanganys*. The field officers were waiting for them in front of the factory. The women queued up to weigh and record their daily pick, and I could see that the long hours of working in the hot sun had left its mark on them. They looked listless and tired and seemed eager to go home. I was relieved to see that *Lakshmini* had managed to reach her required pick for the day. She smiled with me as I joined her on her way home. Several other women, who had worked alongside *Lakshmini* in the field, also fell in line with us, and we walked down the narrow roads towards the line rooms. I could sense that no one was in the mood for lengthy conversations; it looked as if all they wanted was to reach their homes before sunset. We took the last bend in the road by the rocks, and were greeted by the sight of *Lakshmini's* son, sitting on the ground in front of the house, patiently waiting for his mother to come home. His sister had gone to a nearby house to play. Both of them had been picked up from the crèche by their father, who had left them at home and had gone down to the town nearby. The little boy smiled happily as he saw his mother and looked eagerly towards her hands. "Every day he hopes I will bring him a sweetmeat from the boutique, but I do so only very rarely," *Lakshmini's* words were spoken to no one in particular. Her first task upon reaching home was to light the fire and prepare some tea for herself and the children. She sat down for a while to drink the hot cup of tea which seemed to give her some energy as almost immediately she got up and carried the things she had used for cooking in the morning to the tap outside the house for washing. She told me the children got hungry early and she had to start preparing dinner for them immediately—this by way of an excuse for not having much time to talk with me. Also, she wanted to go to sleep as early as possible to save on electricity. The "line" rooms were supplied with electricity recently, but they found the bills forbidding, and some households still preferred to use the oil lamps. *Lakshmini* had decided to cook some rice and make a curry from some potatoes she had got from a neighbour who grew

them. As she took out the rice from its bag under the table she quietly glanced inside the bag—making sure there was enough left for tomorrow, for pay day was not near and price of rice was high. As *Lakshmini* finished cooking and sat down on the stone steps in front of the house to wait for her husband, night had already fallen on the estate. It was dark outside, and I knew it was time for me to go back. I would not be coming back tomorrow morning to *Lakshmini*'s house. Yet, I knew *Lakshmini* would get up and light the fire and begin her work just the way she had done today. She would do it for many days, months and years to come, for this was her “way of life” in the estate.

The experiences of *Lakshmini* and other “tea plukers” as observed by me while they engaged in their daily lives, working simultaneously as waged worker in the field and mother and housewife in the home, defies easy explanations in the light of existing theoretical notions of women's productive and reproductive labour. Firstly, the life experiences of these women problematizes the traditional Marxian belief of seeing women's unpaid work in the house as “unproductive” in so far as they do not create surplus value. Rather they reinforce the Marxist feminist view that women's domestic labour in the house does create surplus value by producing and reproducing the labour power needed for the continuous existence of the capitalist enterprise. Furthermore, they re-establish the Marxist feminist belief of seeing working class women's entry into the public sphere not as a means of achieving emancipation but as a way of increasing her oppression through placing a dual burden on her body. However, the unique managerial apparatus deployed by the capitalist enterprise to facilitate the dual functioning of women's body as productive and reproductive labour, as applies to this specific third world/postcolonial location is not fully explained through the existing theoretical notions. For instance, when Marxist feminist writers argue that engagement of working class women in waged work, in a situation where childcare and housework is not socialized, increases their oppression, the daily lives of *Lakshmini* and others like her, while within this argument in a general way, also falls outside of it in several specific yet significant ways. For as far as this particular group of women is concerned “socialization of childcare” in the form of the crèche where their infant children are taken care of during the day time while they work in the field, works as a managerial mechanism through which their bodies are appropriated into two distinctly stages as productive and reproductive, simultaneously expending their labour for the benefit of capital. This is not an explanation directly derived from the existing theoretical frameworks. Rather it is an extension of the Marxist feminist argument to embrace the work and life conditions of a group of third world, proletarian women, who have, for a very long time been labouring to earn a living, outside of the theoretical notions surrounding women's productive and reproductive labour.

It was a just a few days after my stay at the estate that I undertook my first visit to *SriKnit* factory, my second ethnographic site. The familiar sight of women clad in multicolored *sarees* plucking leaves from lush green tea bushes spread out across the misty mountain ranges was still very much fresh in my mind. These somewhat pleasing memories made me unprepared for the sights that met my eyes as I entered the area popularly known as the “zone”—where the garment factories producing apparels for the export market were centrally located.

The relief I felt at finally reaching my destination after a long drive turned into dismay as my eyes took in the strange landscape before me. This was different from anything I have ever experienced in my life. Families living in slums were a sight I was very much familiar with. But this was different. There were no families here, only young girls around the age of 18-25 could be seen in and around the small rooms, built of concrete blocks and roofed with asbestos sheets. These were small blocks of land—fenced in by barbed wire—each holding some 30 to 40 rooms, and hardly anything else. There were no trees, no free land, no breathing space, nothing but heaps of concrete, asbestos and barbed wire. The entire landscape was dotted with makeshift structures of varying shapes and sizes, all serving as boarding houses or rooms

for the “girls.” At first glance the whole place appeared to be unreal, a scene out of a movie maybe. It was too overcrowded, too congested, too appalling to be real. But it was, this entire set-up and most of all the scores of young “girls” I saw outside their “rooms” this Sunday morning were indeed real. This was how they lived. These were the “homes” to which they returned after eight or more hours of arduous work at deafeningly noisy factories at the other side of this land. It was around 11:00 o’clock in the morning by now, but I could see some of these “girls” had only just got up as they were washing their faces near a common water tap by the road. I later learned they had worked the night shift and had come back only at 2:00 o’clock in the morning. Some others had piles of clothes to wash, some were chatting with friends, and the few who were inside the rooms were getting ready to cook lunch. I got to know this because once the doors were opened everything that was happening inside the rooms could easily be seen by anyone walking down the road. Thus, my first glimpse of *Dishanthi*, as I describe below was through the open doorway of the tiny room where she lived.

### **Dishanthi: Untying Reproductive from Productive Labour**

When I first saw *Dishanthi* through the open door of her room, she was standing in front of a small table washing some rice, and the first thought that stuck me on seeing her was, how pretty and refreshing she looked even within these seemingly unpleasant surroundings. Her boarding house, for which she paid (as she later told me) one third of her monthly wage, consisted of a single room; which served as the bedroom, the living room and the kitchen. It had a single window and a wooden door in front, through which *Pramila* directly walked into the room, calling out in her loud cheery voice, “I have brought a visitor to see you,” whereupon *Dishanthi* who was standing by the table on which she had all her groceries and cooking utensils including a small cooker, looked up.

Why didn’t you tell me you were coming *Pramila Akka*, I would have postponed cooking, now that I have put the rice in the water, I will have to finish washing it and keep it on the cooker, or it will get spoiled.

Both *Pramila* and I told her to finish what she was doing, and she asked us to come inside and sit down on her bed which was only a few feet away from where she stood cooking. There was a small television set on a stool, a fan that stood near the bed, a chair and a suitcase, in addition to the bed and the table in the room. So far *Dishanthi* hadn’t asked what I was doing inside her room. I looked at *Pramila* inquiringly, she understood my anxiety and replied “Don’t worry, *Dishanthi* is one of my best comrades, she had been great at organizing “girls” inside the factories against this appalling system, and we have won some of the battles we have fought together.” I saw a slow smile of satisfaction spread across *Dishanthi*’s pretty face at these words of praise, and I knew this slender girl who stood before me in her simple cotton dress was no ordinary “garment girl”- this was someone who wasn’t afraid to fight and given the socio-political contexts within which their battles were fought it also meant not being afraid to die. *Dishanthi*’s story as I narrate below is a story of incredible courage, of living the hard present and dreaming of a better future, for herself and for others like her.

*Dishanthi* was the eldest daughter of a family of five children; she had two brothers and two sisters. She told me she had gone to a primary school near to her home but had later gained admission to a better school in the town as a result of passing the government scholarship examination. “I was very good in mathematics; all my teachers said I could go to University.” In addition to being good in her studies *Dishanthi* had represented her school in singing and dancing competitions and had won prizes at regional level competitions. “Like all poor children we had many economic hardships, but we were happy living in our small house with our

parents” was how *Dishanthi* described her life to me as a young girl in her village. When she was seventeen years old her father who worked for a timber merchant had had an accident at work. For *Dishanthi* this was a turning point in her life:

Everything changed after that . . . my mother tried her best to feed us by working as a domestic servant. . . . We had well to do relatives, but nobody helped us and I soon realized I had to help my mother . . . my sisters and brothers were still very young.

What followed was a heartbreaking story of a young girl coming to the “zone” in search of work; going from factory to factory, moving from room to room, in search of some relief, but always ending up with the same cruel treatment. “At first I thought I would die of exhaustion. I couldn’t bear the hard work inside the factory . . . but after some time, I just got used to things.” *Dishanthi* had met *Saman*, a young boy who worked as a mechanic in the “zone” as a result of this work a few years ago. They were married now and were living in this room where we sat talking. I met *Saman* later that day, when *Dishanthi* got him to pose for a photograph I wanted to take.

All the time she was talking with me *Dishanthi* went on cooking, explaining that she had to prepare lunch for her sister who had to go in for an “overtime” shift that Sunday. I was told she was sleeping in the next room, having worked a night shift yesterday. “She is only eighteen years old *miss*, and I tried my best to stop her from coming here, but she didn’t listen to me,” *Dishanthi*’s voice, for the first time in our conversation, held a touch of regret, as she talked about her sister. *Dilrukshi* had woken up by now and came in to see what was going on, she was younger and even prettier than *Dishanthi*, but most of all I could see that she was not as thin as her sister. She came in and sat down near *Pramila* near the bed. “*Dishanthi* was just like this when she first came here, but look at her now,” saying so, *Pramila* took the younger girl’s hand in hers. I saw her glancing down at her fingers. “She had a rash in her right hand, it is better now,” she told me. “Yes, thanks to you *Pramila Akka*,” and *Dilrukshi* explained how her right hand had got infected as a result of sewing rubber gloves; *Pramila* had taken her to see a doctor. She no longer worked for this company, but had joined another, one that supplied branded ladies’ garments for the European market. I asked *Dilrukshi* why she had decided to come to the zone, in spite of her sister’s attempts to stop her:

What else can we do *miss*, there are no jobs in our villages. I couldn’t let *Akka* [elder sister] go on suffering . . . she had done enough for us . . . now it is my turn.

Seated on the bed in between *Pramila* and myself *Dilrukshi* told us how *Dishanthi* had taken the sole responsibility of their family on her slim shoulders for many long years. How she had sent her entire salary home, working hours and hours of overtime to earn more so they could continue going to school. “Some way or other we managed to live through those horrible years . . . we are older now. But *Akka* had to sacrifice the best years of her life for us.” *Dilrukshi* made no attempt to hide the tears that ran down her cheeks as she told me more about what their lives had been. “I couldn’t stay at home and let her go on suffering . . . and I am not going back either, however much she might scold me,” her young voice was firm as she told me this. None of us had anything more to say about her being too young to work in the “zone” after that. Having thus established her right to stay, *Dilrukshi* sat with us on the bed and joined in the conversation; she had some time to spare as the afternoon shift started at 2:00 o’clock. *Pramila* stayed on as well and we had a friendly chat for about another one hour or so, until it was time for *Dilrukshi* to go to the factory. By this time her sister had finished cooking, and

we decided to go back to *Pramila's* office. I asked if they would mind me taking a few photographs, they agreed to my request smilingly.

As I took several more photographs of them, my gaze fell on the pictures of beautiful babies, pasted on the rough concrete walls around the room. *Dishanthi* caught my gaze and smiled, both of us knew of this local practice of married women keeping pictures of babies inside their bedrooms. "I love kids, but we have decided not to have any until I quit my job next year." She had already told me of her plans of leaving her job in another year; once she had collected some money for herself. She had worked for five years in the zone yet didn't have a cent to her name so far. Given below are *Dishanthi's* reasons for not wanting to become pregnant while working:

We go to the factory every morning . . . we struggle with [production] targets all day. We get back to our rooms at night . . . only to go back the next morning. It is slowly killing us. I used to be healthy, but now I get tired very soon. . . . I don't think I have enough strength in my body to carry a child while working at a machine all day.

What *Dishanthi* described as a "day in their lives" is further illuminated in this poem, written by *Menike*, a sewing machine operator at *SriKnit* garments. The company had fired her for writing this which had mistakenly been published in a workers' magazine under her true name. She was later reinstated, and her poem entitled *life* gained wide publicity as portraying the lives of "garment girls." Below is a translated version of it:

### **Life**

*I wake at 4.30 before dawn  
gather courage to light up the fire  
I wash my face  
gulp down some tea  
and leave for work in the early morning  
I start work at 7.00 am  
my supervisor (miss) calls me  
and orders my production for the day  
I regret my inability to give  
the full production  
miss scolds all of us and leave*

*at 10.30 we get a sip of tea  
with neither flavour nor sugar  
we take it because we are hungry  
we bear all this because we are poor*

*I fell ill the other day  
miss didn't allow me leave  
struggling to work while sick  
I might fall dead at 'SriKnit garments' one day  
I sit at the machine at 7.00.am  
miss comes to me at 8.00 a.m.  
she asks me what my production is  
I tell her what I am able to give*

*I get a pain in my chest  
 miss asks me to go to the sick room  
 I stay there for 15 minutes  
 I come back again and sit at the machine  
 My mother is not aware how much I suffer  
 only I know how much I suffer  
 I go in the morning and return at night  
 I suffer so much pain in my body*

*We are not given leave  
 other than in an emergency  
 even then it is after much scolding  
 we who are poor are hurt in this way*

By: K. P. Jayasundara Menike  
 Source: *A Review of Free Trade Zones in Sri Lanka*,  
 Dabindu Publication, 1997.

As *Dishanthi* and other “girls” I met at the factory setting repeatedly told me at some point in their work lives they have to make a choice between being a “waged worker” and being an “unwaged housewife.” Choosing the latter, like almost all these “girls” seem to do, would inevitably result in her returning to the isolation of the monogamous family. As Dalla Costa (1975) in her essay *Women and the Subversion of the Community* argues, this is a situation working class women should strive to avoid. In Dalla Costa’s view “necessity and search for economic independence had reverted women to the typing pool or to the assembly line, in which there is no salvation. . . . But the struggle for the working women is not to return to the isolation of the home” (1975, p. 14). Rather, as she sees:

Women must. . . discover their own possibilities. . . . The challenge for the women’s movement is to find modes of struggle which, while they liberate women from the home, at the same time avoid on the one hand a double slavery and on the other prevent another degree of capitalist control and regimentation. (1975, p. 15)

Writing nearly a decade later and drawing special attention to the plight of third world women working global sweat shops, Mies (1986) reiterates the views as first articulated by Dalla Costa. Accordingly, in her view,

The mystification that women are basically housewives, is not an accidental side effect of the new IDL, but a necessary prerequisite of its smooth functioning: it justifies low wages, prevents women from organizing, keeps them atomized, and gears their attention to a patriarchal image of women. (1986, p. 120)

Reflecting on the lives of *Dilrukshi* and others in the light of such assertions, if they are to achieve the “liberation” aspired to by feminist writers they should neither return to the isolation of the home nor be subjected to the control and regimentation of the capitalist work organization. However, these “girls” as explained by Mies, confronted with patriarchal images of women seem to be driven by a (false) hope of a better future as mothers and housewives at home. Indeed such “dreaming” diluted efforts of organized resistance against capitalist controls

work. Most of these “girls” saw waged work only as a transient stage in their lives, until they got married and had families of their own; thus, at least for the time being they seemed to prefer the “isolation of the home” to the capitalist regimentation at work.

## Discussion

### Demystifying Women’s Productive and Reproductive Labour

As stories of *Lakshmini*, *Dishathi* and others illustrate, these women workers of the third world are trapped into a situation of having to balance their “labour” between productive and reproductive roles. Feminist scholars have already problematized certain aspects of women’s reproductive labour, as they work on the global assembly lines and plantation estates. However, they do not specifically address the issue of why and how women deal with their multiple labour roles within these settings. Nor do they attempt to look for differences, if any, between such interactions as happens within these different work regimes. This results in an apparent mystification of women’s reproductive labour, through its definition as natural and therefore frequently outside of social and economic studies. By searching for patterns of interactions between women’s productive and reproductive labour as happens within estates and factories, the following discussion attempt to demystify this phenomenon.

Federici (2004) claims that her description of primitive accumulation includes a set of historical phenomena that are absent in Marx, and yet have been extremely important for capital accumulation. She identified these as:

The development of a new sexual division of labour subjugating women’s labour and women’s reproductive function to the reproduction of the work-force; the construction of a new patriarchal order, based upon the exclusion of women from waged-work and their subordination to men and finally the mechanization of the proletarian body and its transformation, in the case of women, into a machine for the production of new workers. (p. 12)

These historical phenomena as identified by Federici (2004) then, subordinate women’s labour by placing it outside of waged work, limited to reproduction of the work-force. The proletarian body, specifically the female proletarian body has been transformed into a machine for the production of new workers. Watching *Lakshmini*, a young mother working as a tea plucker at *Ceylonita* estate struggle through her daily routine: rushing through her household tasks at day break, walking down the rugged estate paths to the crèche with her children, plucking tea leaves in the scorching sun and returning home with the last rays of the setting sun to attend to the remaining housework, I wonder whether her way of life is fully accounted for in Federici’s argument. Not only the stories of *Lakshmini* and *Sita Devi* as they struggle with the multiple burdens of being mother, housewife and waged worker at one and the same time, but the stories of, *Rajeswari* and *Parameshwari*, whose children are grown up but who still work to support their families, and of *Krishna Devi* and *Lechchami* who continue to work into their old age simply because they have no other way of surviving, seem to be left outside of Federici’s argument.

Simply, Federici’s words when she states that, “women have been left out of waged work” (2004, p. 8), fail to fully explain the way of life of women workers who have always been, (and are still) working for a wage, in plantation estates in Sri Lanka. That said her thinking is reflective of the lives of these women, in so far as her assertion about the mechanization of the proletarian body and its transformation into a machine for the production of new workers is concerned. In fact, in so far as these women workers are concerned, their

bodies seem to be mechanized not once, as argued by Federici, but twice, for the production of surplus value *and* for the production of new workers for the capitalist enterprise. If someone is left out of waged work at all within these settings, it is not women but men, for as I happened to witness during my stay at the estate, men could often be seen walking around freely while their wives worked both as waged workers in the field and as unpaid workers in the households.

Returning to my experiences at *SriKnit* factory in the light of this same theoretical assertion, here again Federici's words fail to fully reflect the lives of *Dishathi*, *Dilrukshi*, *Sakunthala*, and *Ramani*, all of whom are "sewing girls" working for a wage in the global garment factories of this third world/postcolonial location. These "girls" like the women plantation workers are compelled to work, selling their labour power to make a living for themselves and for their families. However, Federici's argument about the female body being transformed into a machine for the production of new workers seems to relate to these "girls" in a different way than it does for female estate workers. Such differences and probable causes for them are explained below.

The lives of "sewing girls," while being similar to that of "tea pluckers" on one hand, as women working for a wage, are also different from them on the other. Unlike women in estates, none of these girls seemed to be coping with the multiple roles of being mothers, housewives and waged workers at one and the same time. In fact, if and when they wanted to get married and have families of their own, they nearly always thought of giving up their jobs in the "zone" and returning to their villages. This apparent separation of waged and family work seemed to be common in the "zone," just as it was customary to see women combining their waged (productive) and unwaged (reproductive) work in the estates.

When *Dishathi* told me of her decision to stop working as a "sewing girl" so that she could have the baby she dreamed for; when *Sureka* spoke to me of her life, first as a sewing girl and now as a young mother living temporarily in the "zone;" when *Tamara* described her life away from the "zone" taking care of her daughter; when *Sakuntale* explained her plans of returning to her village at the end of her pregnancy, all of them, in their own way, were telling me of the difficulty or the near impossibility of combining their productive labour roles as "sewing girls" working for a wage and reproductive labour roles as mothers and housewives. Living as they were at a specific location in history and forced into working as "sewing girls" on the global assembly lines these girls were indeed struggling to cope with the conflicting demands on their labour. Their struggles were as varied and diverse as the expressions passing over their faces when they spoke to me of their lives: eager and hopeful at times and distressed and sorrowful at others. Their struggles however different in style, and strength, seemed, sooner or later to lead on to the same inevitable end of causing a rift or separation between their productive and reproductive labour roles as waged "sewing girls" in the "zone" and unpaid housewives/mothers at home.

Explaining this argument further, when *Kumar*, the Group Human Resource Manager of *SriKint* Garments told me shop floor girls usually left their jobs after working for three or four years; when *Jarnnarz*, the Personnel Manager expressed her concern over the higher than average turnover rate of shop floor workers; when *Mahesh*, the HRD Manager described the wedding ceremonies of "sewing girls" after which they did not come back to work; when *Aruni*, the female Counselor showed me the photographs of babies whose mothers no longer worked at *SriKnit*, all of them in fact were reinforcing what I had already been told by the "girls" themselves: that it was nearly always impossible for them to combine their productive and reproductive labour roles and that many of them sacrificed one for the other. Still resonating in my mind is the Company Nurse *Chandrika's* account of how a "sewing girl" had left her job, "She came back to the factory at the end of the maternity leave period with her baby, asked me to hold the child and went in and handed in her letter of resignation....She told me she needed this job desperately, but had no way of taking care of the child while working." Besides

explaining the difficulties of combining productive and reproductive labour roles where these “sewing girls” were concerned, these stories also reveal the subtle ways in which managers of these apparel factories seemed to justify and even celebrate the event of “girls” leaving their jobs after getting married. Indeed, throughout their conversations with me *Kumara*, *Mahesha* and even *Chandrika* to some extent, all made an effort to convince me that it was best for the “girls” not to be working any more once they were married and had children. The “girls” on the other hand had a different story to tell; as shown in the story above, as well as reflected in the stories of *Diahnathi*, *Sakunthala* and others, they left their work as sewing machine operators not because they did not want to work anymore, but because they found it impossible to combine their waged productive labour with their reproductive labour.

Returning to my experiences at *Ceylonita* estate when I walk with *Lakshmini* to the crèche where she leaves her two children before starting work; when I follow *Sita Devi* home from the field almost dragging her two sleepy children behind her who had been at the crèche all day; when I listen to *Paremeshwari* and *Rajeswari* telling me of their experiences of leaving their young children in the care of the crèche attendant during their infancy and most of all when I hear the laughter in the women’s voices when they tell me they get pregnant to earn the sum of money paid to them at the birth of their children, there is indeed a marked *difference* between the stories of these women and the stories of “sewing girls” as I heard while at *SriKnit*. These two groups of women, working under two different work regimes were negotiating the multiple interactions of their productive and reproductive labour in diverse ways; closely interwoven with each other at times and completely separated from each other at others.

Differences in the ways in which women’s labour roles interact within estates and factories can be seen as closely bound up with the inherent nature of these work settings. Being immigrants of Indian origin estate workers have always been (and still are) marked out as stigmatized in ethnic terms, but as such highly suitable for work which is also stigmatized as of the lowest order-agriculture and production of raw material for more advanced economies. In a situation where immigration of Indian workers no longer happens, and *Sinhalese* women are reluctant to work as “tea pluckers,” the workforce of an estate has to be regenerated from within the estate itself. This results in a situation where estate women have to work as productive workers *and* reproductive workers, “reproducing the future estate workforce” at one and the same time. Also, living as they are confined within the plantation enclaves, their working and living spaces are situated in close physical proximity to one another, resulting in a close intermingling of their productive and reproductive labour roles. Such close intermingling of work roles facilitated by free child care facilities in the form of crèches seems to conceal, at least to some extent, the multiple exploitative demands placed on their labour.

In complete contrast to this set-up, within the garment factory setting, the working and living spaces of “girls” are separated from each other. Their homes are situated in far off remote villages, to which they return after a short span of work life. When girls like *Dishanthi* and *Sakuntala* return to their homes to fulfil their dreams of becoming mothers and housewives engaging in the reproductive phase of their labour, they are replaced by new workers, who take up their places on the assembly lines. Thus, the factories have little reason for attempting to retain these workers, neither are they dependent on them for regenerating the future “factory work-force.” Unlike estate workers who belong to a minority ethnic group, apparel factory workers are mainly from the majority Sinhalese community. As such, there is always a large group of young girls with little or no job opportunities elsewhere, from among whom the factories easily draw in new workers in place of those who leave.

This vicious circle of young girls working as productive workers on the assembly lines for short times periods and thereafter as reproductive workers at home has been happening ever since the inception of global garments factories in post-independent Sri Lanka. Likewise, “tea pluckers” being bound to work both as productive and reproductive labourers at one and the

same time has been the practice in the estates from the days of the colonial rule. While being different from each other in certain ways as discussed above, the work regimes of plantation estates and apparel factories are also similar in certain other ways. Prominent among these is the fact that within both settings, women make up the vast majority of the work force. Not only are these workers women, they are also proletarian women of the third world. The lives of these women workers then are closely affected by their gender, class and ethnicity.

Elaborating on the limitations of my study, as explained under the methodological approach, observing and interacting with female estate and factory workers at their work places, homes and lodging houses made up a major part of the data gathering efforts of this study. However, at each encounter, my presence among them altered the daily routines and disturbed the equilibrium of the setting, at least to some extent. If and to what extent these disturbances occurred—simply if the women and girls would have behaved and talked differently if I had not been there—will remain unknown. This is an important but also an inevitable limitation of the study. Also, my ethical political sympathies may have encouraged me to focus on some aspects of their lives more than others, making me see one side of their story rather than another. Undeniably this is another important yet inevitable limitation of my study. Partial and closely guarded access that was given to me within the premises of the *SriKnit* factory, language barriers that came up within *Ceylonita* estate, as a result of my inability to speak Tamil, possibility of minor errors in translating the interview transcripts from Sinhala to English can be cited as additional limitations of this study.

The most significant limitation of my writing however, stems from the issue of whether it can change, even in a small way, the lives of these “women and girls.” As history reveals, in so far as these workers are concerned, any change for the better has come slowly and often painfully. If anyone is to be applauded for bringing about even these trivial changes it is women like *Pramila* who even today lives with “her girls,” helping them in whatever way she can, and indeed girls like *Dishathi* and *Ramani* who are fearless enough to struggle against forces which more often than not are too powerful to be defeated. Simply writing about their lives as I have done here, though perhaps better than totally ignoring their existence, is far from sufficient to help them in their struggles.

Finally, irrespective of whether my writing can help them or not, struggles by these women workers will continue, and change, however slowly, will come. There are reports of female garment factory workers of Cambodia and Bangladesh, nearby third world countries, being engaged in violent street struggles against low wages and poor working conditions. As a newspaper reporter writing of one such incidence says,

Thousands of Cambodian garment workers have mounted a series of strikes over low pay, loss of jobs and poor working conditions . . . riot police used electric shock batons to beat women workers after charging protesters at a factory. (Braddock, 2010, p. 3)

Another reporter in an article entitled “*Machinists against the Machine - Bangladeshi garment workers' struggles*,” describes garment factory workers of Bangladesh and their struggles as, “85% female, paid some of the lowest wages in the world; expressing some of the highest levels of class struggle in the world at present, trade unions have very little influence or restraint on these struggles, they are self-organized by workers on the job” (Marut, 2010, n.p.). Such “militancy” on the part of working class women, specifically working class women of the “third world,” while strengthening some of the arguments of this study, perhaps guides us towards a path for further research on women and their labour.

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