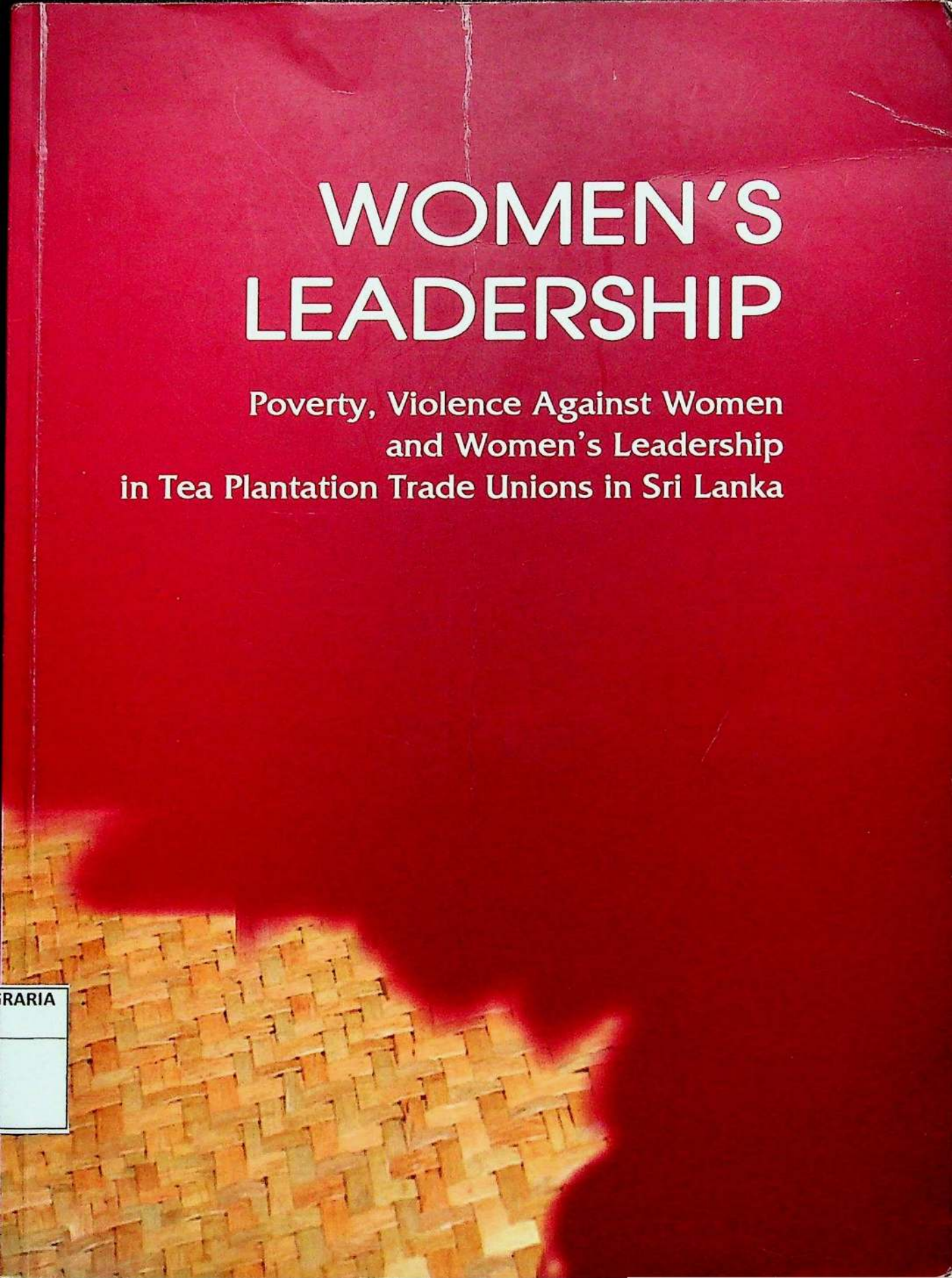
WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Poverty, Violence Against Women and Women's Leadership in Tea Plantation Trade Unions in Sri Lanka



RARIA



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RED FLAG WOMEN'S MOVEMENT - 2012

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We

dedicate this publication to the

plantation women workers

who continue to courageously stand up

for their rights and justice;

who continue to struggle

to establish gender equitable

power relations and

collective leadership...

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At first, we thought it would be an impossible task but through commitment and dedication of numerous individuals who worked tirelessly to see the completion of the action research study we achieved our goal. We cannot mention all by name but we extend warm thanks to all those who were involved in different ways in this task over almost two years.

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have challenged the social norms and values and changed the status quo in claiming rights. Without these women, this study, documentary and publication could not be realized.

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Red Flag Women's Movement

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The focus of the study is the nexus of poverty, violence and women's leadership and key issues and challenges faced in promoting women's agency in tea plantation unions. In particular, it looks at obstacles in the women's path of empowerment, the structures, related institutions and power relationships that impinge on women's leadership within trade unions at different levels - from micro-meso and macro. This study also explores how violence against women and poverty are serious bottlenecks for asserting women's power and agency. Further, it examines how gender- power relations shape the process, to '*democratize*' trade unions to reflect women's active representation and agency.

The post privatization[1] and globalization economic policies renewed a cycle of poverty and impoverishment of plantation labour especially women and children. Membership of the unions declined, employers introduced casual and contract work systems replacing the category of permanent workers. Moreover, women workers continue to struggle against ethnic majoritarianism, poor living conditions, unstable working conditions, varied insecurities and are vulnerable to violence against women and abuse.

We understand that women's agency [autonomous decision making, initiatives] and empowerment [ability to resist and challenge power relations] is crucial for women to move upward to leadership positions. On this premise, we locate the action research study problem and the framework of analysis. The plantation community is a minority Tamil community that is internally differentiated - socially and politically. The plantation people/workers have been marginalized by state political- economic policies shaped by post colonial social institutions and structures. In the last three decades they were also embroiled in majoritarian ethnic politics. The women workers form the core [62%] of the plantation labour force and a majority is unionized, but they are not visible in union leadership positions.

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[1] See Shanmugaratnam, N, 1997.

The patriarchal ideology cuts across the plantation community as other ethnic communities. For instance, women are subscribers to one union or other for years and have voted for sending their representatives to local as well as central government for reasonable years. But, issues specific to women's working conditions or living conditions have not been targeted as an agenda for serious trade union actions or political actions so far. This shows lack of representation of women's issues by the leaders who came into power with the support of these women. The fact is that the women were used as stepping stones to entrench given political agendas.

In this context, a strong need emerges for plantation women to be empowered with effective leadership qualities that would allow them to represent women's interests effectively at all the levels in the socio, economic, institutional and political sphere and win their rights as well as that of the working class. It does not mean that there is no potential among these women. In fact, women workers have taken leading roles in trade union activities in an effective manner in the past and in the present. Records reveal that there were effective women leaders who pioneered the trade union movement in the plantation and also incidents of brave actions those women had taken in the working class to agitate against the exploitative behavior of the estate management.

Therefore, it is important to for explore the causes for diminishing empowerment process and effective leadership among plantation women that existed at a point of time in order to address the given challenges through collective reflection with trade union and labor movements in the region. The rationale for this is to feed the findings of this research into a practical agenda of transformation of willing trade unions into entities that seek to include women in the leadership and to democratize the functioning of the trade unions.

Scope and Methodology

The Study is based on a purposive sample of 210 respondents that was selected in non-random fashion in order that the respondents were adequately represented in the specific location. Also the sample frame was the group of women trade union members so as to achieve the aim and approach of the action research study.

Given the dispersed geographical spread of the tea plantation estates in the up-country, low country and mid country in Sri Lanka[2] and also to collect data and information from different types of respondents, appropriate relevant tools were used in selected locations. Regular field reviews with the research team and the Red Flag Women's Movement/Red Flag Union research steering committee were also held during the data/information collection process. For the purpose of capturing the sensitivities of multi –faceted nature of gender relations in specific contexts, we have used a combination of both quantitative and qualitative tools – open ended ethnographic approach. Some random first hand observations together with the field notes complemented the information collecting process.

The selected tools for this study were: Survey- questionnaire, Focus group discussions [FGD], Case studies, Key indepth interviews, and Literature review.

A total of 210 families of women trade union members were surveyed of which 60 were from Kandy District, 30 from Badulla District, 90 from Nuwara Eliya District and 30 from Matara District. Among the 210 families, 141 (67%) were nuclear[3] families and 69 (33%) were extended[4]. According to the location of the estates where the survey was conducted, the families from the interior estates[5] are 105 and the families from the exterior estates (near the townships) are 105.

The survey attempted to get a reasonable sampling of women workers from plantations in up country, low-country and mid-country. The estates were chosen to meet this criterion. The number of 15 families to be surveyed in each estate was regarded as being reasonable and doable within the resources that were available in terms of time and finances. When the 15 families were added up, it gives total 210 families. Thus the survey was seen as being adequate in being representative of the various types of estates in the country and the proportion/distribution of plantation workforce.

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[2] The classification of up-country [> 900 ML], mid country [300-900 ML] and low country [<300 ML] is based on elevation.

[3] Nuclear family - a primary social unit consisting of parent and their offsprings.

[4] Extended family – a kinship group consisting of a family nucleus and various relatives or grandparents, usually living in one household and functioning as a larger unit.

[5] Interior estates are those are not easily accessible and where unions are not very active. Exterior estates are close to the towns and influenced by various trade unions. The estates were selected based on multi –ethnic and bi-lingual.

Secondly the survey questions were administered mainly to the women workers in each family. Thus, 210 women workers in total responded to the survey. At the same time questions pertaining to being leaders only applied to those among the 210 women who held leadership. In addition, questions were administered to husbands of the leaders who were available and thus the total figure was relatively low [38 persons]. These factors were left to mainly to chance, though all the 210 women were members of a trade union.

Thirdly the survey attempted to cover a number of the main trade unions in the plantations. Though a large number of the survey respondents belonged to CWC, small numbers came from other unions as well.

Overall Conclusions

Feminisation of the plantation labour force has opened spaces for women workers to organize, mobilize and assert through their own agency and their empowerment. However, in the current economic-political context [at micro, meso and macro], there are many disempowerment forces that obstruct the gains that women workers struggled over years to claim leadership. More specifically, the persistence of poverty and forms of deprivation and reduction of household incomes have had adverse consequences on the socio-economic power, linked with increased levels of violence against women [intra household and extra household-workplace]. Further, increasingly unregulated- oppressive labour relations have added pressures to women's emerging leadership.

Given this challenging environment, the Trade union seems to be the legitimate agency having the right to secure equity for women workers and address gender based discrimination at the workplace-societal. While there have been some success in getting women workers issues and leadership on top of the agenda of trade unions, the wide opportunities for trade unions to expand the democratic spaces within have not been understood or considered, as the study pointed out.

The research elaborated that there was ample evidence that women workers are struggled with poverty, family – societal – workplace violence, job security and personal security. The patriarchal structures embedded in

the plantation/estate management, the work place, the trade union and in the market – neo liberal policies very clearly reproduce power unequal relations in different forms and at various levels. In tandem, there is also evidence of women workers' agency, their empowerment and leadership, and the experiences of resistance and of diverse strategies that women adopt in given time and space.

The action research did not attempt to map a blue print for empowerment or developing women's leadership in the context of plantation sector unions, but hopefully stimulate alternative thinking and ways to address the questions the study raise. On the other hand, the questions and findings are compelling, as they are grounded in complex political economy, gender power relations issues that women workers live and work. In this context, the two fundamental questions to be taken up, being,

1. **How do we sustain the achievements the women worker-leaders that narrated boldly to address/change inequitable and unequal power relations?**
2. **How will Trade unions address the '*gender democracy gap*' within, not only at the grassroots but at middle and top levels?**

Key Findings

In keeping with the overarching analysis on poverty (and deprivation) and violence against women, which seriously impede women's leadership in trade unions, what follows are key research findings:

- **Political economy of poverty** in the plantation sector context and women workers is shaped by post colonial social institutions and structures and neo liberal policies at the macro, meso and micro levels. As we noted, the plantation workers and the women workers – their marginalization, reinforcement of oppression, regimented power structures, violation of human rights, violence against women – all point to human deprivation and struggle-conflict - ridden situation of this community.

- In the **current global context**, the trend is for informalisation and feminization of labour which allows capital to violate minimum wage regulations, implement coercive controls and 'unfree' labour relations and practice discrimination against women workers. Women's leadership cannot be addressed unless structural poverty – inadequate access to resources, the violence against women condoned by culture and unequal power relations and denial of human freedoms.

  Social positioning. The study showed clearly that poverty is pervasive in the plantations and workers naturally will leave the plantations if they can because they can earn more doing other jobs. This mobility is difficult for women, especially those with young children. Thus who remain need to struggle for changes in the plantation so that the issue of poverty in the plantations can be addressed Moreover, women's capacity to access public goods [drinking water, sanitation, housing, transport, health, education services etc] is hampered by lack of freedom, choice [lack of] to negotiate freer wage contracts and hence affects their collective agency.

- **The sexual division of domestic labour** and responsibility for domestic affairs does play a disempowering role in the lives of the respondents. The disempowerment comes because women have domestic tasks thrust upon them, giving them little or no room for choice. The poverty in their situation does not allow them to cast these tasks upon other women whose services they can hire. Secondly the disempowerment comes because these are tasks that are done every day. There is no annual leave for domestic work. In addition the tasks were time-consuming and energy-draining. Thus they have little time or energy for anything else – even leisure and entertainment. In fact women bear 'triple burdens' with domestic, workplace and union/community work.

- **Supporting environment**. The times when the family especially the father or husband supported the development of the respondents have been very few. Yet when the women got the support of the father or husband they took up leadership because they had greater confidence and were more articulate. In these instances the family became an empowering agent. Thus families can make a choice to be empowering of women. At the same time the family can

be disempowering for women as study demonstrated that other factors compel the woman for example, to discontinue formal education and take up estate work.

- It is also evident that there are women who have qualities that make them leaders. Many of these were nurtured in supportive family environments but many developed **coping strategies** that helped their leadership abilities to be expressed and used. Their capability has been nurtured by **skills and knowledge through praxis.** Here, the women have moved beyond their socially prescribed role of nurturer and 'caregiver' in the family.

- **Women's capability and agency**. We see that the hostile environment to women playing leadership roles is challenged by the women's sense of justice. All the ten women in the case studies displayed a fierce sense of justice – fierce because many paid a high cost for this. They faced social isolation by some fellow-workers, discrimination by their supervisors who tried to break their spirit and thus attempt to force them to give up the role of champion of other workers. Many women also faced domestic violence and abuse by their husbands.

- **Work environment**. There are many workplace -issues faced by women workers in vulnerable employment, equal opportunities for skill development and claiming rights are highlighted. It also links these issues to violation of women's bodies and the neo-liberal policies that lead to exploitation of women's labour. Twin dimensions of the dominant '*patriarchal work- culture'* and the '*neo –liberal –culture'* was very clearly reflected at the meso and macro -national levels.

- The **administrative system is hierarchical** with the women workers found in the lowest and **least powerful position** in the system. Every day the women workers were at the mercy of management staff who decides on the fields where they work. Breast-feeding mothers face difficulty in getting fields nearer their homes or crèches so that they can go back to feed the child and return to work.

- The **management style is very feudal** with bosses who can speak with the workers as rudely as they please. Workers have little recourse to complaints as

complaint mechanisms do not appear to exist in the workplace except for Labour Day which is being practiced in many places. Complainants have to face reprisals against angered supervisors and so many women just put up with the abuse.

- Many challenges women workers face, such as **sexual harassment and violence** in the home and workplace, reflected their powerlessness in the plantation community. This too needs to be addressed as women constitute the majority labour force in the plantations. There is clearly a **cycle of poverty-violence-sexual harassment –powerlessness** among women workers in the plantations.

- Issues that women workers confront in their everyday lives in their family and at workplace [at micro and meso levels] and their capacity to negotiate with power relations are made complex by the **blurring of the boundaries of the workplace and homestead.** However, the diverse experiences, struggles of women workers and strong grassroots women leaders proved their **capacity to negotiate and resist the patriarchal culture and exploitative work culture** to change the power relations at the local-micro and meso levels.

- There are some **windows of opportunities** for women workers to interact in the public sphere to widen their public activism, break isolation, increase mobility, knowledge on societal issues and access other resources – informational base**.** Ensuring **social security and public entitlements** of women workers will also add value but needs direct state intervention. In the current political economic policy approach that is unlikely, especially in the plantation context.

- **Representation and interest**. The general picture here is that women's membership in the trade union is welcomed by the women members and leaders as well as by the men. There is also consensus that **women leaders are reliable and honest**. The case studies also showed that the women leaders have commitment and imagination alongside their ability to organize and lead. They have shown that they were able to concretely address many workplace issues. Thus it is clear that women have the **ability, commitment and skills** to lead in the trade unions. The immense capability of the

grassroots leaders and their resistance in the face of disempowerment also showed that they can **push the union boundaries/spaces to exercise rights and agency.**

- The trade unions have **not been succeeded in reaching out** to the women members and **educating** them about the basics of the trade union and the labour law, especially sections pertaining to women such as maternity leave and feeding time. The women have also not been educated on the use of the Labour Day to raise their issues. This appeared to be a very accessible way of raising issues by the estate committees, even more accessible then going to the trade union office for most women members. It is a pity that this avenue was not better used.

- Trade unionists in this survey said that they welcome women leaders and yet the unions have done little more than set up a women's wing. This wing does **not have much resources and influence over trade union decision making and policies**. Most of them act like little islands outside the trade union structure.

- It was also clear that male leaders do **not have a vision or a strategy** for involving women in the leadership. The women's section could contribute both towards increasing the membership of the trade unions as well as discovering and training **effective women leaders**. For example, their strategy of getting and training women leaders to use the Labour Day on the estate is something that can be easily used by all trade unions to increase participation of women leaders in union issues. The campaigns that they used such as collecting your own wages, keeping record of the daily harvest brought in by the workers themselves were concrete ways in which women can be made aware of and defend their rights. These are not difficult for any union to emulate. In fact the women's sections can be used strategically to transform gender power relations for women workers to **claim rights and benefits**.

- While the external forces of poverty, domestic responsibilities and violence continue to discourage women from public life it must be acknowledged that women workers have **tremendous leadership potential** that can and must be tapped in the interests of the plantation workers in Sri Lanka. Investment in women workers will greatly benefit the workers themselves as well as the

plantation unions.

- The Trade union as an institution is affected by the macro external political economic context – the inherent contradictions and it also carries the unequal structures and power relations within the union. The struggles and critiques of neo-liberalism and globalism, political economy and interrelated poverty, deprivation that Trade unions wage on behalf of plantation workers also equally applies to the unions as a political entity, ie, to **critique its own internal contradictions on democratic praxis,** changing unequal structures and power relations within. Then, the unions will be the effective legitimate voices of the marginalised plantation workers and more so of the impoverished and violated women workers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Vision and Structure

a) Women should have representation at all levels of trade unions. Representation involves reflecting the interests of the workforce, with the workers themselves being the ultimate decision-makers in the Union. In the plantation sector, women constitute 60% of the membership and the leadership of the unions needs to reflect this to sustain the union in the face of the current challenges.

b) The nature of leadership needs to be sustainable in the face of the global backlash and the failure of centralized trade union structures. Future leadership needs to be collective and reflective of the strength and solidarity of the grassroots in order to fight the global onslaught of capital.

Policies and Strategies

c) Trade unions need to provide support for women who are in or aspire to leadership so that they can deal with the social and institutional barriers that are stacked up against them.

d) The constitution and the election process should be tools of empowerment for the grassroots members; these should not just be there on paper nor should they be used as tools to perpetuate the power of a few individuals or political parties.

e) There is a need for women's structures in the trade unions that go beyond tokenism. These structures should be an integral part of the constitution with adequate resources.

f) Women should constitute at least 33% of the leadership at all levels.

g) The issue of equality should be evident also in collective bargaining. Women should constitute at least one-third of the collective-bargaining team. In addition, the collective agreement itself should reflect the issues of women in the plantations.

h) Trade unions should adopt a policy that is women-sensitive that makes it easier for women to take part in meetings. This would include not only the venues and timings of meetings but also how meetings are run, child-care during meetings, transportation for women to attend meetings etc.

i) Trade unions should adopt specific strategies to increase the numbers of women in their decision-making bodies. These can be in the form of affirmative action programs, targets, a time-plan, monitoring and assessment mechanisms.

j) As women in the research have indicated, the biggest problems they face are poverty and violence. The policies of the trade union should include strategies that address these two problems.

k) Trade unions should conduct campaigns and produce educational material in suitable formats to educate women about their rights in the workplace and the implementation of labour laws. These will include: collecting your own salary, taking note of the harvest that you bring in everyday, using Labour Day and so on.

l) Trade unions should adopt a systematic training program to prepare women to participate in trade union activity and leadership. Women and men must have equal access to awareness raising programs for example on gender power relations and training. Leadership training is also essential to help women take up leadership and it should be a continuing process.

m) A mentoring program would help women leaders immensely. Advice and support from experienced persons, both men and women would be an invaluable help for women trade unionists who want to take on union responsibilities.

n) There should be a trade union policy about care work, which recognizes that men and women have equal responsibility for reproductive, domestic and care work.

o) An inter-union solidarity forum to bring women from the trade unions together periodically would help to raise women's issues in the trade unions and in the country as well. It will build the solidarity of the women in the trade unions and strengthen them. This Forum can compile "*Good practices*" in terms of equality and the participation of women in trade unions that can be circulated to all the trade unions. The forum should also look at the possibility of reforms and policy advocacy for women in plantations. It would be a good place to lobby for actions and laws to address the issues of poverty and violence in the plantations.

A Call to Women in the Trade Unions

a) While recognizing that the nature of the union affects the lives of the women, women need to reclaim the unions by strengthening bonds among themselves and working together to transform the unions.

Future Direction:

a. The research findings should be discussed with as many trade unions as possible in Sri Lanka and the region. The problems of women's leadership in trade unions extend to all trade unions in the sector and only with their involvement can this issue be addressed effectively.

b. It will be helpful to conduct further specific action research to interrogate some of the key questions on the role of trade unions in different contexts and women's leadership. The research focus needs to underpin the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, class, poverty and violence against women in the analysis.

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Poverty, Violence Against Women and Women's Leadership

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> *"The mere women's presence in leadership does not change the democratic processes or the outcomes. The related questions are - What kind of women become leaders? What are their values, attitudes, beliefs? Do they speak as and for women? Do they give voice to the women as a group"?* [1]

The focus of the study is the nexus of poverty, violence and women's leadership and key issues and challenges faced in promoting women's agency in tea plantation unions. In particular, it looks at obstacles in the women's path of empowerment, the structures, related institutions and power relationships that impinge on women's leadership within trade unions at different levels - from micro-meso and macro. This study also explores how violence against women and poverty are serious bottlenecks for asserting women's power and agency. Further, it examines how gender- power relations shape the process, to '*democratize*' trade unions to reflect women's active representation and agency.

Problem Analysis

The global political landscape that has been reshaped by neo-liberal or free market economics continues to be a pervasive, powerful force. Worldwide, trade unions have experienced cycles of stimulation and also stagnation depending on the economic policies and priorities, structural adjustments, trade debt, privatization and labour standards, which have consequences for the rights and livelihoods of

[1] Cockburn., C 1995.

millions of people. On the other hand, trade union membership has dwindled, been weakened and fragmented while workers [both women and men] are struggling over labour standards, denial of basic worker rights and job security. A dominant overarching trend is feminization[2] and casualisation of labour – where women workers have to struggle with patriarchy and capitalism in both the 'formal' and the 'informal' sectors. Trade unions historically evolved to protect worker rights and struggle on behalf of workers but the typical 'male' leadership within the unions have not paid adequate attention to women's leadership and agency even though predominantly (more than 50%) the membership comprises women workers.

Leadership for women in trade unions is a problem faced all over the world. Both in the North and South, women leaders in trade unions have to juggle between the union work and their families. This is a sentiment echoed by Belgian trade unionists:

> *"In 2002, women remain under-represented in leadership positions in Belgian trade unions, and among members of employee representative bodies. The reasons most frequently advanced for this state of affairs are family responsibilities and social constraints. Female trade unionists are increasingly demanding better representation, particularly in decision-making roles, and the main unions are now seeking to change their attitudes and increase awareness among women workers".*[3]

In the USA, it is no different as quoted:

> *"There is a saying in the labor movement: The leadership should look like the membership. Substantial progress has been made toward including women and people of color in leadership positions. But somewhat like the gender wage gap, the leadership gap appears to be, at best, closing at a*

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[2](http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTMDG/0,,contentMDK:22666821~menuPK:7375101~pagePK:64168445~piPK:64168309~theSitePK:7210591~isCURL:Y~isCURL:Y,00.html). Also see What does the Feminisation of Labour Mean for Sustainable Livelihoods? Nazneen Kanji *IIED, UK* and Kalyani Menon-Sen *UNDP, India, 2001*

[3] Women in trade unions downloaded from in September 2011: http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2002/04/ article entitled: Belgium: Women in trade unions, 23 April

very slow pace, over decades. Women clearly benefit from union membership, whether they are leaders or not. They get economic benefits and access to a workplace justice procedure simply by being union members. But the labor movement suffers when a large portion of its members is excluded from leadership positions".[4]

The above observation reiterated by other analysts is also relevant to the traditional British trade unions that, "*.....In traditional trade union analysis, class has been symbolized by the male working-class, blue-collar worker. Thus, when class is held central, women and their specific needs are invariably neglected.*" [5] This meant almost exclusion of other aspects of power relations such as gender and 'ethnicity'[6], sans practicing leadership within a collectivist, democratic context.

Thus the key problems can be succinctly summarized as:

- Class analysis alone cannot reveal and capture the specificities of women's lived experiences, social processes and position of women workers in the labour market and workplace, exacerbating their deprivation and poverty status.

- Most Trade Union leadership typically takes on an individualistic approach - focusing on competence of persons and does not question the structural obstacles that women face. Trade union activities are most often organized with personal costs – time and energy. But it is always to suit male centred '*lifestyle*' patterns.

- Gender barriers to union leadership and under representation in almost all major unions – sexual divisions of domestic chores, violence, and gender segregation in developing skills and knowledge, men domination in union hierarchies. Leadership styles are also gendered as women have different vision of trade union leadership. Trade union agendas have more often failed to campaign and bargain on '*women's issues'* even though

[4] Michelle Kaminski and Elaine K. Yakura, Women's Union Leadership: Closing the gender gap in Working USA, Journal of Labor and Society. Downloaded in September 2011 from: http://www.law.harvard.edu/programs/lwp/

[5] Gill Kirton and Geraldine Healy, October 2008

[6] Ethnicity is relevant in the context of Sri Lanka, which is a pluralistic, multi-ethnic country.

women activists have acknowledge the diversity and complexity of women's lives.

- If '*representative democracy*' is what trade union professes, then the core issue is women's absence/under-representation in leadership in democratic structures. The critical mass of local women leaders who could make a difference at the grassroots level have not been put on the top of the trade union agenda[7].

1.1 The Research questions related to Poverty, Violence and Women's Leadership in Tea Plantation Unions in Sri Lanka

In spite of some cosmetic measures to 'integrate' women's leadership and recognize women's agency within trade unionism, there is much that needs to be done. As pointed out by Biyanwila [2007], regarding women workers' struggles in Sri Lankan tea plantations,

> *".. while women are a majority of union members, their capacities for collective action remain restrained by patriarchal practices within and outside unions. The specific nature of women's work in the plantation labour regime and the ways union were integrated within political parties are central to shaping women's collective agency."* [8]

This apt comment captures the complexity and multi-layered problem of decisive factors in developing women's agency. We argue that it could be further extended to encompass the social positioning of women workers, the systemic and structural constraints within the political –economic regime [macro, meso and micro], and the inherent internal trade union democratic praxis, and of course the global political economic policies.

The action research attempts to interlink the issues of poverty, violence and women's leadership in Lankan tea plantation unions. At the same time, the research hopes to offer insights into the interactions not only between these three

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[7] These are excerpts and adapted from Kirton and Healy, October 2008

[8] See Biyanwila Janaka, Ethnicity and women worker struggles in the Sri Lankan tea plantations, Annual Conference on Feminist Economics, Bangkok, Thailand, 2007.

in a dynamic- dialectic frame of reference, but also the impacting structures and power relations in the path of women worker's agency-empowerment and thus leadership in unions. We understand that women's agency [autonomous decision making, initiatives] and empowerment [ability to resist and challenge power relations] is crucial for women to move upward to leadership positions.

Following this premise, we locate the action research study problem and the framework of analysis. The plantation community is a minority Tamil community that is internally differentiated - socially and politically. The plantations people/workers have been marginalized by state political- economic policies shaped by post colonial social institutions and structures and in the last three decades they were also embroiled in majoritarian ethnic politics. Women workers form the core [62%] of the plantation labour force and a majority is unionized, but they are not visible in union leadership positions.

The post privatization[9] and globalization economic policies renewed a cycle of poverty and impoverishment of plantation labour especially women and children. Membership of the unions declined, employers introduced casual and contract work systems replacing the category of permanent workers. Moreover, women workers continue to struggle against ethnic majoritarianism, poor living conditions, unstable working conditions, varied insecurities and are vulnerable to violence against women and abuse.

The patriarchal ideology cuts across the plantation community as other ethnic communities. For instance, women are subscribers to one union or other for years and have voted for sending their representatives to local as well as central government for reasonable years. But, issues specific to women's working conditions or living conditions have not been targeted as an agenda for serious trade union actions or political actions so far. This shows lack of representation of women's issues by the leaders who came into power with the support of these women. The fact is that the women were used as stepping stones to entrench given political agendas.

In this context, a strong need emerges for plantation women to be empowered with effective leadership qualities that would allow them to represent women's

[9] See Shanmugaratnam, N, 1997.

interests effectively at all the levels in the socio, economic, institutional and political sphere and win their rights as well as that of the working class. It does not mean that there is no potential among these women. In fact, women workers have taken leading roles in trade union activities in an effective manner in the past and in the present. Records reveal that there were effective women leaders who pioneered the trade union movement in the plantation and also incidents of brave actions those women had taken in the working class to agitate against the exploitative behavior of the estate management.

Therefore, it is important to for explore the causes for diminishing empowerment process and effective leadership among plantation women that existed at a point of time in order to address the given challenges through collective reflection with trade union and labor movements in the region. The rationale for this is to feed the findings of this research into a practical agenda of transformation of willing trade unions into entities that seek to include women in the leadership and to democratize the functioning of the trade unions.

Empowerment/Disempowerment of women

The term "empowerment" is frequently used by many people – activists, development practitioners, donors and others, but with different understandings. This is an apt quote here, "*....Given the root word in 'empowerment ' is 'power', it is logical that any examination of 'empowerment' should entail some analysis of the power dynamics that are implicit in all social, economic, cultural and political relations".*[10]

Empowerment thus is a process, where a person or a group with little or no power is enabled to make choices to change a situation or is enabled to exercise greater control over their lives. Thus empowerment is about making changes to structures of power by individuals and groups that have little or no power.

In order for a woman to be empowered, she needs access to the material, human, and social resources necessary to make strategic choices in her life. Not only have women been historically disadvantaged in access to material resources like credit, property, and money, but they have also been excluded from social resources like

[10] WEMC – 2008, Women Empowering Themselves, A framework that interrogates and transforms.

education or insider knowledge of some businesses. Access to resources alone does not automatically translate into empowerment or equality, however, because women must also have the ability to use the resources to meet their goals. In order for resources to empower women, they must be able to use them for a purpose that they choose. Naila Kabeer uses the term agency to describe the processes of decision making, negotiation, and manipulation required for women to use resources effectively.[11] Women who have been excluded from decision making for most of their lives often lack this sense of agency that allows them to define goals and act effectively to achieve them. However, these goals also can be heavily influenced by the values of the society in which women live and so may sometimes replicate rather than challenge the structures of injustice.

In the context of leadership of trade unions by women, it means the ability of the women to see the choices for leadership and take a decision to lead. Often in the gender rhetoric of many organizations that purportedly support women's leadership, women are "put" into leadership positions. Yet having women in positions of leadership does necessarily translate into empowerment. For instance, a trade union with some individual women leaders negotiating and achieving a pay increase does not constitute "empowerment" for women, who do not have much control over the family finances and as a result the pay increase is used by the husbands to spend more on alcohol rather than on food for the family that the women want to spend the increase on. That is why this study puts together gender equality and democratization as two important elements that have to work together.

1.2 **The Framework of Analysis**

Refer **Figure 1: A Framework to Map Women's Leadership in Trade Unions via lens of Structure and Power**

The framework has been worked out based on activists' own experiences, multi-disciplinary learnings and interaction with global-local allies and supporters. It has been adapted as a conceptual tool from this collaboration[12] and expanded to

[11] Naila Kabeer 1999.

[12] WEMC,.2008. Women Empowering Themselves, A framework that Interrogates and transforms.

interpret and critique structures and power relations, conflicts and struggles at different levels.

It is important to understand what we mean by women's leadership before we map women's leadership and related structures and power relationships. Women's Leadership has several meanings but for our purposes, it is: when women are active participants, able to identify their own problems, analyse systemic discrimination, articulate needs, demand rights, make informed choices and decisions that affect their lives, while nurturing collective leadership and push for social change. However, we must underscore that this continuum frame is not linear but will have its own ups and downs, moving back and forth depending on the context and specific power relations.

The action research aims to encompass the core themes on the basis of this framework of analysis:

- Global- national political economic context
- Nexus of '*Poverty- Violence Against Women and Women's Agency/Leadership*'
- Empowerment /Disempowerment factors – [that impacts directly/indirectly at multiple levels]
- Collective reflection to meet current challenges – [democratisation / transformation of Trade Unions]

Firstly, in order to simplify our approach, we have identified four levels, though these are very much interlinked and related; and the relevant actors/policies that shape/instrumentalise the political environment ie, the global –international level, the macro-national, the meso- local, and the micro self-individual levels. The far - right hand vertical axis shows the structures and power relationships at different levels, while the far left- hand vertical axis shows the disempowerment /empowerment factors that impinge on women's agency but very much also depends on individual women's own social positioning. We must haste to add that these factors are not a complete composite set; there will be more many influences that can be identified depending on the contexts we refer to.

- **The global –international level** – this level of interaction and the political economy has its own specificities. As stated in the figure, these are the global policies, the international treaties/agreements, international agencies, transnational corporate entities/interests, and solidarity networks and alliances. It is possible to expand these if needed but we have mentioned a few.

- **The macro-national level** – the national policy interactions may be unequal/equal but reciprocally linked to the global and reproduced through the relations. The national regime also embodies historically evolved power relationships and political –economic-cultural structures, whether open or closed, the distribution of resources/conflicts, political – legal frameworks, freedoms, regional disparities etc... State legislation to eliminate gender based violence- its formulation, implementation and monitoring. Corporate interests and state support systems, protective legislation – workers' rights, labour laws, trade unionisation, collective bargaining agreements etc, will form part of the institutional environment. Solidarity networks and alliances are also a component of this macro picture.

- **The meso- local** - this level is crucial as it is the interface of the state and society. The power relationships and the structurations[13] embedded in the meso; that situate between the individual woman and the macro. At this level that the gender system/regime is constructed, class, ethnicity and conflicting interests with specific power dynamics and structures that immediately affect the lived realities of women. The important actors at this level are the family, community, para-state actors, non state actors, plantation companies' management/systems, workers' unions / organizations, social networks, civil society lobbies and women's organizations and representatives from political parties and so on.

- **The micro self-individual level** - the reference point here is the specific context and social – economic positioning of the individual – self-woman-

[13] We understand 'structures' and their formation as a process of 'structuration', that structures are not static and play instrumental roles in shaping power relationships in different contexts and at multiple levels. I am grateful to WEMC to use this terminology in this framework.

worker. Woman's self worth, her subjectivity and internalized ideologies that will have a bearing on her own assertion, determination and capacity, agency and empowerment. Once mobilized (can resist and challenge), women as a collective can reshape gender and unequal power relations.

1.2.1 Mapping Structures & Power relationships and Empowerment /Disempowerment factors

'*Women's leadership in trade unions in tea plantations*' is the central thesis/argument of the analytical framework. The entry point is the individual - woman's social positioning, that influence and shape her gendered subjectivity, her active or passive resistance in the face of the oppression in the specific contexts. The individual woman lives within a set of constraints /opportunities that may be open or closed spaces to her to negotiate and re-negotiate power relations. The woman has to claim her leadership-spaces in these political, economic, social and cultural arrangements which may allow her to be empowered or disempowered. We have highlighted some of these factors [not in any order] in the Figure are:

- Poverty – poverty cannot be defined in economic terms only. Poverty is linked with vulnerable and deprived social groups and power differentials of the different groups. Deprivation has dimensions other than income as well[14].

- Violence against women – VAW is a manifestation of historically evolved power relations between men and women and one of the social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position.

- Access to resources - these can be economic, social, political - also educational and health facilities, employment opportunities, gender relations, personal security , access to social networks that will help women to upscale their move to leadership.

[14] See Amartya Sen, 1999 – Development as Freedom, for readings on wellbeing and capabilities Also N. Shanmugaratnam for poverty and exclusion

- Informational resources/base - women-workers need knowledge, information capacity in order to reflect and effect changes in their thinking and practical actions.

- Labour power – negotiating and bargaining, knowledge and employable skills, job security to mention a few that will affect the individual worker-woman's ability to bring out positive changes or reinforce the disempowerment push.

- Mobility/choices/opportunities – these are democratic rights for workers to help their upward/downward mobility, and expand/narrow the spaces for opportunities.

- Freedoms/claiming rights/women's agency – Women should be free as full human beings to exercise their rights, to struggle for making decisions and freedom and take collective action to defend rights.

- Dominant culture, ethnicity, religion – through the overarching dominant culture, voices of marginalized groups and the oppressed can be silenced.

1.2.2. Structuration and Sites of struggle

The approach that we have developed to interpret the conceptual framework can be used, assessed and adapted depending on different contexts. The sites of struggle (see far right axis - being political, social, economic and cultural structures, political –legal framework, gender system/regime, class, ethnicity, VAW, collective identities, spaces for democratization, etc.) we have captured here are dynamic, dialectic, interlinked, contradictory and overlapping. Moreover, we know that these formations can operate at multiple levels [from the global to the local and individual] at the same time.

Why we are talking about '*structurations*'? When we situate 'women's leadership in trade unions', we need to emphasize that structures and power relationships and their formations are not static. By viewing these formations as in a process of '*structuration*' will help us to understand better their interrelations, combinations,

the institutions, agencies, actors, interests etc, that are acting in conflict or in concert.

Trade unions are located at the meso and macro -national levels too. The union as a workers' organization to negotiate and bargain on behalf of the workers' rights is also influenced by the external economic - social –political contexts at these levels. At the same time, their instrumentalist role at the meso level will depend on whether the trade union is open or closed in terms of practising internal democracy and inherent values to engage with women workers and their agency. On the other hand, the individual – woman- worker [by herself and/or with co-workers] can exercise her/their capabilities, thus agency and actions to push for internal autonomy depending on her/their relative power [empowerment / disempowerment] and social arrangements. In this contestation – new spaces for negotiation, bargaining through women's resistance and challenge, they can claim leadership.

The trade union has its own internal/external vested interests, together with the leadership and collaborators/allies that may obstruct the path of women to win their legitimate spaces. If women are able to negotiate with the local power relations in their day to day lives at micro and meso levels, they can push the given [inherent] union boundaries. Women can then reshape and transform the power relations (*'structurations')* to their advantage and cause. Even so, VAW can push women back from their empowerment path to claim leadership especially if it occurs at the home, community and work place. Sometimes when the individual woman has managed to overcome all the internal social barriers, developed self worth , confidence, skill and knowledge within herself, but at meso level - the workplace, where the woman may have to cross many new hurdles, VAW can withhold the path of the potential leadership if a supportive system/context does not prevail at the workplace/unions. So a woman frequently has to traverse from one gender system at the home to another for example the workplace - where different rules/norms prevail.

1.3 Subsequent Chapters and Structure of the report

This report covers eight Chapters. The second chapter outlines the **Methodology, Approach, Tools, Scope and Limitations**, while the third gives a brief **Overview of the Sri Lankan Plantations sector- Context and Status of Workers** followed by the fourth Chapter – **Socio-economic Profile of the study sample**. Chapter four provides a more specific context of the research – respondents interviewed and their socio-backgrounds. The subsequent chapters concentrate on the research findings; Chapter five on **Women Workers and the Family** attempts to situate the woman worker – her capabilities, social positioning, self worth and inner subjective values, beliefs and lived struggles. Chapter six deals with **Women Workers and the Workplace,** the women's work related problems, individual/collective initiatives, negotiating and strategising and violence against women, while Chapter seven on **Women Workers and Trade Unions**, looks at its internal democracy, the barriers, opportunities and challenges that women cope with. The final Chapter eight contains the **Conclusions** of the study followed by **Recommendations**.

Each chapter has a brief introduction of the context/theme that is the research focus and then moves to the empirical findings and the analysis. It includes some relevant highlights of the findings in order to enrich the study. Every chapter has a synthesis at the end – wrapping up the issues which are taken up in the conclusions.

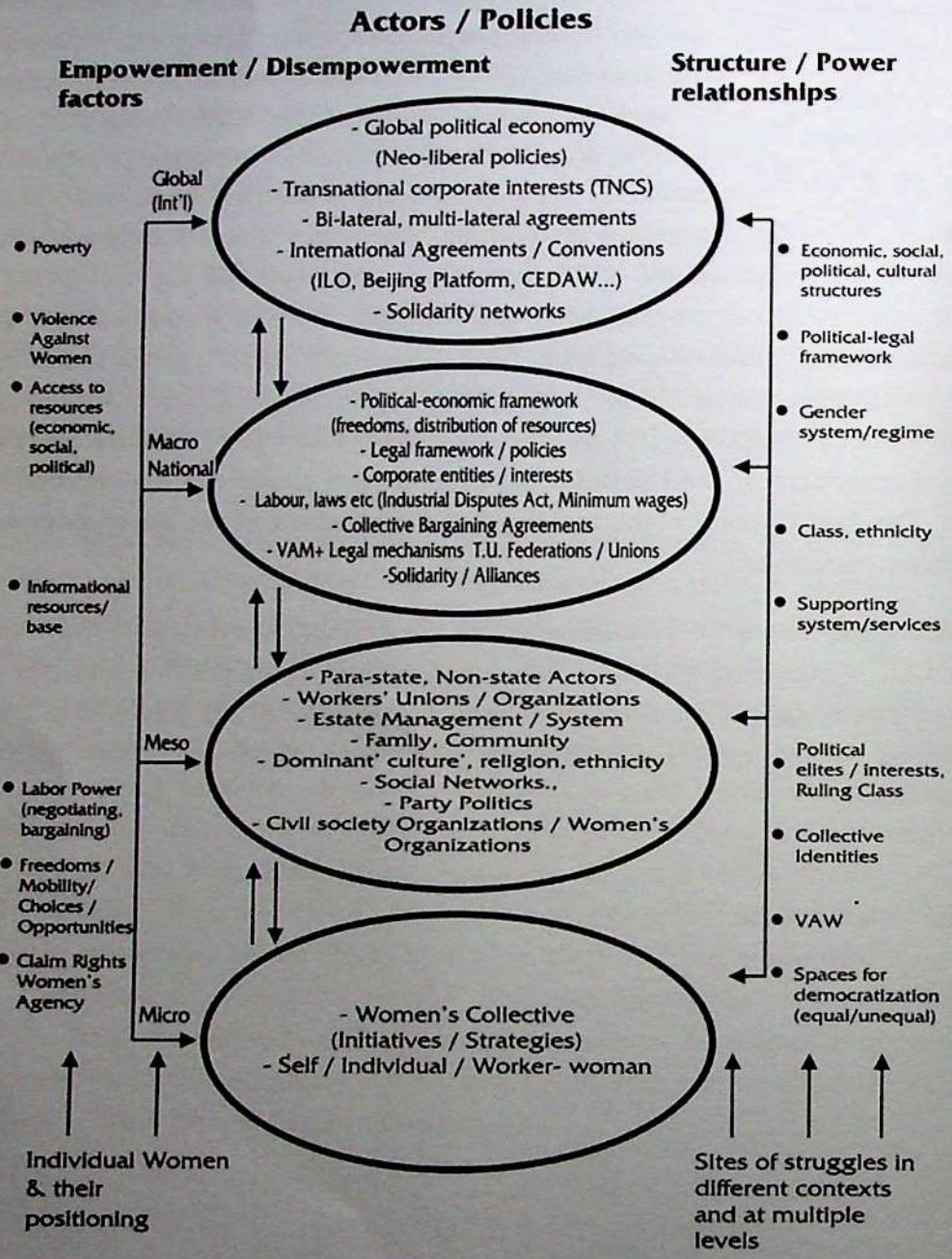


Figure 1 : Framework to Map Women's Leadership in Trade Unions via lens of Structure and Power
(F. Zackariya 2011, Adapted from WEMC, 2008)

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Research Idea

A brief backdrop of the action research and the initial catalyst will help in understanding the process in developing women's leadership by Red Flag Women's Movement and nascent women leaders in the plantation trade unions.

For the last 7 years Red Flag Women's Movement [RFWM], which is the women's section of the Ceylon Plantation Workers Union [CPWU] popularly called Red Flag Union has been working with a focus on - **"Women's leadership and mainstreaming women's issues as workers' issues within the trade union movement".** RFWM's initial activities were to enhance the capacity of the women workers to solve day to day workplace problems and to deal with social issues including domestic and workplace violence. During this process, RFWM was able to mobilize women workers from different sectors especially domestic workers, garment factory workers [from the plantation] and tea plantation workers to challenge their oppression and power deficits. They found that there was a big question confronting them, —ie, Can capacity building alone help develop women's leadership without addressing the systemic roots of unequal power relations in women's life situations? How do we address this knowledge vacuum? Lack of concrete evidence to prove the fact that there were many constraints - internal and external; the trade union leaders' attitudes; the '*male trade union culture'* and also the entrenched poverty within the plantation sector; various forms of violence - family and workplace, that all were interlinked to women's leadership. Consequently, RFWM embarked on an action -oriented research with the goal to promote women workers to take leadership positions at all levels of the Trade Union, to disentangle the complex interrelationships of interests/actors and the emerging challenges for women's agency – empowerment and leadership.

Before launching the action oriented study, RFWM/RFU [Red flag Union] held a preliminary planning consultation with regional labour activists, trade unionists and national-local unionists on, *'Tea plantations workers in the context of the financial crisis in the region and implications for workers/women's leadership'*. The main purpose here was to map the context, scope and focus of the nature of the research and direction.

2.1 The Research Approach

The four underlying reasons why this approach was adopted to enlighten unionists, researchers, policy makers and activists were:

a) That creating knowledge is not only for '***knowledge for understanding***' but *for* ***'knowledge for action'*** that will reconcile research and theory with the practical demands so as to make appropriate strategic interventions[15]. For this purpose, we developed a useful conceptual framework for unionists, for workers and for activists to analyse their own life circumstances and possible strategies for action.

b) The research methodology can pose a challenge to bring new concepts and interpretations of social processes that can influence society at large and more specifically the unions, the working class and women workers. Given the socio-political context of plantation unions and that RFWM/RFU is anchored in the working class and women-workers struggles, we tried better to integrate theoretical –political understanding and practical concerns.

c) In order to initiate changes '***from below***' [actions of local groups themselves], we applied an '***actor-oriented***'[16] approach as it is grounded on day-to-day life experiences and understanding of women and men. Here, we attempted the social enquiry or methods that will allow integration of actors' interpretations and strategies. Such an approach places the actors at the centre stage in the process of their role as negotiators and strategists.

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[15] Norman, Long,. 1992.
[16] Ibid 1992.

d) To elucidate the multi - faceted complexities that relate to issues of women's leadership in tea plantation unions, we allowed the field activists, community and the researcher teams together to interact, to enrich and valorise the field data and information. Therefore, this perspective[17] was used during the research process by the researchers and field activists recognizing the context, diverse realities and social practices. Hence the research conclusions were all shaped by individual and collective [activism] field experiences, as evidenced by women's own narratives.

2.2 The Research Methods

Given the dispersed geographical spread of the tea plantation estates in the up-country, low country and mid country in Sri Lanka[18] and also to collect data and information from different types of respondents, the study used appropriate relevant tools in selected locations. In order to help the field data assistants to familiarize the research study aims, the ethical concerns, field observation-listening conduct, selected tools, keeping data and records and cross examination strategies[19], there was an orientation discussion together with the principal researcher. Regular field reviews with the research team and the RFWM/RFU research steering committee were also held during the data/information collection process. For the purpose of capturing the sensitivities of multi –faceted nature of gender relations in specific contexts, we have used a combination of both quantitative and qualitative tools –open ended ethnographic approach. Some random first hand observations were also done to get more insights, together with the field notes; all this complemented the information collecting process.

In addition to the approach elaborated above, the rationale and selection of tools for this study were:

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[17] We hasten to add that the actor concept/perspective is a social construction and not simply a notion of individual, but is interpreted in different settings and meanings and of course the interpersonal power relations/interests.

[18] The classification of up-country [> 900 ML], mid country [300-900 ML] and low country [<300 ML] is based on elevation.

[19] O'Brien, Rory., 1998 for readings on Theory and Practice of Action Research.

1) Survey, questionnaire and purposive sample: The purposive sample of 210 respondents was deliberately selected in non-random fashion as we wanted the respondents adequately represented in the specific location. Also the sample frame was the group of women trade union members so as to achieve the aim and approach of the action research study.

2) Focus group discussion [FGD]: In the focus group discussion, we wanted to consciously seek out respondents to insure that all different viewpoints are adequately represented. Some FGDs had both women and men.

3) Case studies: In combination with other different methods, it was valuable to get a good understanding and precise account of reality. As women and men have varied narratives of power relations and facts in different environments, we documented these using case studies.

4) Key indepth interviews: This was more emphasis on individual information. This was useful in the research to probing key informants using open ended and semi-structured interviews. This also helped to cross check information and build on previous knowledge and also in particular when leaders of national Trade Unions who were not willing to discuss sensitive issues.

5) Literature review: A brief literature review was conducted on the situation of plantation workers in Sri Lanka, poverty in Sri Lanka/plantation, violence against women in Sri Lanka, women in the leadership of trade unions in Sri Lanka and other parts of the world to support the analysis and information gathered.

2.2.1 The survey and sample families

A total of 210 families of women trade union members were surveyed of which 60 were from Kandy District, 30 from Badulla District, 90 from Nuwara Eliya District and 30 from Matara District (Refer Table 1). Among the 210 families, 141 (67%) were nuclear[20] families and 69 (33%) were extended[21] (refer Chapter 4).

[20] Nuclear family - a primary social unit consisting of parent and their offsprings.

According to the location of the estates where the survey was conducted, the families from the interior estates[22] are 105 and the families from the exterior estates (near the townships) are 105.

The survey attempted to get a reasonable sampling of women workers from plantations in up country, low-country and mid-country. The estates were chosen to meet this criterion. The number of 15 families to be surveyed in each estate was regarded as being reasonable and doable within the resources that were available in terms of time and finances. When the 15 families were added up they gave 210 families. Thus the survey was seen as being adequate in being representative of the various types of estates in the country and the proportion/distribution of plantation workforce.

Secondly the survey questions were administered mainly to the women workers in each family. Thus, 210 women workers in total responded to the survey. At the same time questions pertaining to being leaders only applied to those among the 210 women who held leadership. In addition questions were administered to husbands of the leaders who were available and thus the total figure was relatively low [38 persons]. These factors were left to mainly to chance, though all the 210 women were members of a trade union.

Thirdly the survey attempted to cover a number of the main trade unions in the plantations. Though a large number of the survey respondents belonged to CWC, sizeable numbers came from other unions as well. {see Annexure 1}

The survey questions were initially formulated by the researcher in consultation with the activists who acted as experts on the issue of women, plantation workers and research. After the questions were formulated they were tested on 15 families by a team of 5 field researchers who received training prior to this. After the pilot test in the field, the questions were finalized and used in the survey.

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[21] Extended family – a kinship group consisting of a family nucleus and various relatives or grandparents, usually living in one household and functioning as a larger unit.

[22] Interior estates are those are not easily accessible and where unions are not very active. Exterior estates are close to the towns and influenced by various trade unions. The estates were selected based on multi –ethnic and bi-lingual.

Table 1 - Number of Households Surveyed

Districts	Name of the Estates	No. of Families covered in the Survey	Interior/exterior (Int/Ext)
Kandy	Batagala	15	Ext
	Kobonilla	15	Int
	Kenilworth	15	Ext
	Queensbery	15	Int
Badulla	Queenstown	15	Ext
	Solance	15	Int
NuwaraEliya	Abbotsleigh	15	Ext
	Agrawathe	15	Ext
	Banniyan/Morray	15	Int
	Pedro	15	Ext
	Ramboda	15	Int
	Ouvakelle/Vellikelle	15	Int
Matara	Deniyaya	15	Ext
	Ensalwatte	15	Int
Total		**210**	

The survey questions covered the following areas:

1) Socio-economic background (family members, type of housing, etc.)
2) Roles and responsibilities of women
    a. As a woman (in the household, community, trade unions, political parties)
    b. As an employee (details of work, problems, use of complaint mechanisms, harassment, wage collection)
    c. As a community member (involvement in community-based organizations)
3) Participation in Trade Unions (when they joined the union especially in relation to marriage, why they joined the trade unions, knowledge of the trade unions, participation in trade union activities and leadership, details of husband in relation to the trade union and its activities, etc.)

4) Participating in the trade union committees (as members and leaders)
5) Women's perception on politics
6) Husbands of the respondents who held leadership positions in the trade union committees (their perceptions about the wives as leaders, support they give, etc.)

2.2.2 Focus group discussions

Five focus group discussions were held. 2 discussions were held only among women and 3 were held in mixed [men and women] groups. As it was difficult to get the women to speak about sexual harassment and violence in the family and workplace with the men, one of the focus groups specifically dealt with these issues. The focus group discussions served to gather specific information to answer questions related to violence and poverty.

In the *first focus group* discussion there were 12 trade union committee and ordinary men members from the Lanka Estate Workers Union [LEWU] in Matale. A SWOT analysis and a seasonal calendar were drawn up. The purpose of the seasonal calendar was to explore the pattern of the annual cycle of the life of women workers focusing on the critical issues pertaining to poverty, violence, work conditions and the level of access to the services of the State and the trade union. The aim of the SWOT analysis was to assess the level of understanding of the trade union committee members both men and women about their role in the trade union and how much they are concerned about strengthening women's leadership in the trade union.

In the *second focus group* there were 12 trade union committee and ordinary women members from the LEWU in Matale. A SWOT analysis and a seasonal calendar were drawn up with the same objectives as stated above.

In the *third focus group* there were about 30 workers from Kenilworth Estate in Kandy. The discussion focused on the seasonal calendar and the coping strategies employed by workers to see them through the low harvest season when their incomes dropped to about one-fourth of the income they received during the peak harvest seasons.

Thirdly as the topic can be viewed as being critical of the functioning of the trade unions which are already facing many challenges, it was difficult to maintain a gender perspective and do justice to the difficulties that trade unions currently face.

It was also difficult for the women to speak openly about the challenges they faced with the union leaders, their supervisors and their husbands in complete honesty. Therefore we acknowledge that many things were left unsaid or said too diplomatically.

Finally, we would like to underline that in ethnographic research; the analysis of the data involves interpretation of the meanings, relies on personal experiences and mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis which plays a subordinate role at most. The limitations stated above are a critical appraisal however, these did not affect the interpretation of their impact as by engaging with the research team and research steering committee in an interactive manner, tapping new insights and perspectives.

CHAPTER 3

OVERVIEW OF THE SRI LANKAN PLANTATIONS SECTOR - CONTEXT AND STATUS OF WORKERS

The Macro Context

Tea production is a heavily labor intensive enterprise in which tea cultivation occupies about 90% of the labour input of a tea plantation. Further in the tea cultivation, tea plucking is the heaviest labour intensive task, which is almost occupied by women workers. For instance, there are 228,874 resident workers employed by twenty Regional Plantation Companies [RPCs] and the state managed agencies of which 55% are women and about 95% of them deployed in the task of tea plucking[23]. There is no second opinion in recognizing the importance of women workers in the plantation industry by the plantation management as well as the industry. Despite this fact that women make an important contribution to the sector and hence to the national economy, generating substantial amount of foreign exchange, plantation workers have remained impoverished for many decades. On the other hand, there was no effort to represent the interests of women workers to bring in effective changes by addressing these issues at any level; institutional as well as political.

The ethno- nationalist state[24] and neo-liberal policies have dominated the political scene subjecting the plantation workers and especially the women workers, constraining their collective agency and voices. The neo-liberal strategies of privatization and deregulation have reproduced conditions of subordination, exploitation and regimented forms of labour which is exemplified by the residential estate labour regime. Not only do the women workers work for longer hours, they have to carry the '*triple burden*' – unpaid household work and community work. On the one hand, the managerial work hierarchy has been dominated by males and patriarchal controls; on the other, the ethno nationalist

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[23] Plantation Human Development Trust, 2006

[24] For Readings on ethno-nationalism & majoritarianism, see, Jayawardene K 1979,1987. Gunasingle N. 1987, De Silva.S.B.D. 1985., ..

state continues to devalue plantation workers and women workers' identities as second class citizens, and is also evident by the '*below-marginal social provisioning*' policies. The decades of ethnic conflict and the unresolved national question, militarization of the state have serious implications for personal security of the plantation workers. Moreover, the various forms of violence and harassment faced by plantation women workers is a manifestation of the overarching culture of violence, (via the patriarchal ideology) that is prevalent in the state, family, society and workplace.

The plantation community forms about 5% of the total population of 21.3 million people. Out of a labour force of 7.6 million people, about 20% are organized, though the unionization rate is declining. The leading Trade Unions in the plantations are Ceylon Workers' Congress [CWC], Lanka Jathika Estates Workers' Union [LJEWU] and the Joint Plantations Trade Unions Committee [JPTUC]. These unions have controlled the unionized membership of 70-75%[25]. The interlocking identity of the union and political party undermines the autonomy of the union as long as it is subsumed by party politics and party agenda via the union leadership and party leadership. The union-party relationship with the state/incumbent governments has its drawbacks, which more often weakens their ability to push for collective actions on behalf of the plantation workers. Meanwhile, the union leadership also maintains its paternalist and patriarchal outlook and practices in dealing with women workers' issues. Moreover, the recognized unions and some of the smaller registered unions' political understanding/position on neo-liberal policies, feminization of labour and its impacts on the plantation sector is still limited.

3.1 The Plantation Sector and Women Workers

According to existing literature (primarily ethnographic), women make up the majority of estate workers, but occupy the lowest tier of plantation work hierarchies. Existing research also cites the female labor force participation rate of estate workers as being much higher than female participation rates in Sri Lanka generally. While male labor force participation rates are comparable throughout all sectors of Sri Lanka, the participation of women in the estate sector is much

[25] See Biyanwila. 2007, quoting Maliyagoda, 2000.

higher than the rest (Table 2). As of 2003-2004, their participation rate is 47 percent, 18 percentage points higher than that of rural women. [26]

Table 2 : Labour Force Participation by Sector and Gender

Sector	Male	Female	All
1996/97 (a)			
Urban	63.3	27.0	44.0
Rural	64.3	32.0	47.6
Estate	61.5	53.6	57.4
All Sectors	64.0	32.5	47.6
2003/04 (b)			
Urban	62.9	26.3	42.9
Rural	65.7	29.0	46.4
Estate	64.6	46.7	55.3
All Sectors	65.3	29.5	46.4

Source: Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2005.

The women working in the plantation sector constitute the largest percentage of women by sector employed in Sri Lanka. More than 62% of the workers are women working in the plantation sector. However, the women are all segregated in the lower rungs of the employment ladder in the plantations. Very few women work at supervisory, administrative or managerial levels in the estates. In the trade unions as well women are congregated at the ordinary member level with hardly any women leaders at the national level in the plantation unions, except for the heads of the women's sections of the trade union.

Ethnically the plantation workers are mainly Tamil migrants from India and they constitute a small minority on the ethnic map of Sri Lanka. As a community they have been marginalized as they lived deep inside the isolated plantations. Till today many plantations are isolated and do not

[26] Apichoke Kotikula and Jennifer Solotaroff, Gender Analysis of Labor in Sri Lanka's Estate Sector, The World Bank, September 22, 2006, p. 7, downloaded in September 2011 from http://paa2007.princeton.edu/download.aspx?submissionId=71572

have easy access to schools and medical facilities. The reason for plantation women's inability to come out of this vicious cycle is primarily the politics of the entire system that keep women under control and use them craftily.

The plantation women were brought from South India not only to toil in the plantations but to serve sexual needs of the male workers as well as to reproduce the workforce[27]. Due to expansion of the informal sector, men workers began to find casual work within plantations and out of the plantations. The burden fell on the women workers to maintain the plantation system. Women work for extended hours while men have a shorter working day. In addition, women have also to put up with daily harassment by the field supervisors. There is the assumption that both women and men get equal wages, in reality it is not so. Women work two and a half hours more than men when men finish their workday at 2 p.m. Furthermore, the woman worker's salary is still collected by the male members of the family.

The social set-up of the plantations is very well described as follows:

> *"Tea plantations are characterized by a rigid hierarchy. Generally speaking the organizational structure is divided into five strata: the owner, management, staff, sub-staff and labourers. The management consists of one manager each for the plantation and the factory plus an assistant manager. Clerical and white-collar workers are regarded as staff, while lower-level supervisors, gang leaders and watchmen all count as sub-staff.*
>
> *The hierarchy is also reflected in a plantation culture characterized by a strong sense of superiority and inferiority. The social distance between management and labour is huge and their relationship is typically a master-servant relationship. The sense of community is often weak. Even the field workers, who are divided by ethnic origin, housing blocks, castes, family, gender, age, etc lack a sense of unity - of being a group with collective interests. This fragmentation is further intensified by current developments such as the casualization of labour, sub-contracting and*

[27] Kandasamy M, 2002.

preferential treatment. Furthermore, field workers are commonly stigmatized as ignorant and lazy. Sub-staff members like to emphasize that they have to guide and educate these backward workers, while the staff in its turn looks down on the 'unskilled sub-staff'. Such notions legitimize the rigid hierarchy and strict pattern of control on tea plantations; they also serve to frustrate upward social mobility thereby perpetuating the lowly position of labourers. One of the most remarkable features of tea plantations is the large number of female workers, who constitute about 50% of the total work force. Women are especially active in plucking, which is very labour intensive. Women are believed to be more efficient pluckers than men, but they are given hardly any opportunity for promotion. However, the main reason tea plantations employ such a high proportion of women in plucking, is to keep the wage bill low". [28]

The politics in the plantation has been largely tied up with the ethnic minority of the plantation Tamils with issues like citizenship being highly controversial for many years. The Ceylon Workers Congress has representatives in the parliament and even has a minister in the cabinet. Again women are little more than voters and they hardly have much serious involvement in party politics besides voting.

Trade unions played a key role and perhaps contributed towards this sector being highly organized.

"The women workers in tea plantations represent the largest unionised sector. Although there are no official statistics on women in unions, even among major unions, women are active within unions. Women are organised particularly in sectors with high densities of women workers such as the plantations, and the public sector, i.e., state administration, banks, education and health sectors. In 2000, around 18% of the employed labor force (6.3 million) was unionized in Sri Lanka. The plantation workers, around 425,000 in number account for nearly 20% of the agrarian labour force (Labor Department, 2001). The unionized plantation workers represent nearly 30% of the unionized labour force in 2000. The same year, there were 1636 unions encompassing around 1.4 million members (Labor Department, 2001). Most unions are dominated

[28] Extract from "To pluck and be plucked" by Rojjer Verschoor – 1996 downloaded in July 2011 from http://www.citinv.it/associazioni/CNMS/archivio/lavoro/teaplantation.html

> *by male leaders, maintaining top down, bureaucratic structures, focused primarily on the workplace and collective bargaining from a narrow masculine perspective of paid work (Biyanwila, 2004). In the plantation unions, these patriarchal practices are amplified. Not surprisingly, most women workers are often unaware of the name of their own union (Kandasamy 2002)."*[29]

3.2 Violence Against Women

The plantation women workers' social positioning/location make them very vulnerable to Violence Against Women – these range from casual, individual, non-formal acts to more planned, organised and systematic ones given their social class and ethnicity. Plantation workers (women and men) are also targets of state violence. Women workers have been frequently exposed to actions of discrimination and violence against women by non- state actors as well as at the local level. There have been many research studies commissioned by researchers /activists[30] to document violence against women (VAW). Gender based violence (GBV) has been defined as, -

> *".....those acts of violence arise due to a woman's gender and sexuality, which results in violence against her person manifesting in rape, assault, genital mutilation, sexual harassment. Second, the social and patriarchal attitude of regarding a woman as the property of a man and control over her subjecting her to physical and psychological acts of violence such as marital rape, rape, assault, abuse, and incest. Third, the situation of women during times of armed conflict and civil unrest, which make women in particular social classes more vulnerable to gender-based violence."*[31]

VAW has its roots in patriarchal norms and the individual woman's positioning, class, ethnic identity and status and infringes her autonomy, capabilities, well-being, rights, freedoms and mobility, etc. Thus VAW directly impinges on

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[29] Paper presented by Janaka Biyanwila from University of Western Australia at the Annual Conference of Feminist Economics in Bangkok, 29 June – 1 July, 2007. Downloaded in September 2011 from: https://editorialexpress.com/cgi-bin/conference/download.cgi.

[30] See further readings in Wanasundera, Leelangi., 2000, [CENWOR], Gomez, Shyamala and Gomez, Mario.,1999, Hussein, Ameena and Loganathan, Bhawani., *1999* [ICES].

[31] Wijayatilake, Kamalini et al., 1997.

women's choices and curtails other rights - right to livelihood, right to health care, right to access various resources, right to education, right to reproductive choices, and the right to participate in public and social life.

This highly patriarchal social set-up has contributed to common prevalence of domestic violence against women in the plantations, though this is not a phenomenon that is not much researched or documented The limited research and studies at workplace violence according to a qualitative study done among women workers in tea plantations in Sri Lanka, concluded that sexual harassment was prevalent on the estates:

> *"The coercive labour control mechanisms together with the traditional culture of disadvantaged-discriminated status and insecure employment conditions contribute to further victimize the workers, of whom the majority is women. Of course the nature, degree and frequency of harassment vary due to situational reasons while the "workplace-homestead interface" aggravates their disadvantaged position. In other words, the indistinct demarcation between the work place and homestead creates a conducive environment for discrimination to take place.*
>
> *According to the information gathered, the frequency of sexual harassment is more pervasive at the lower levels of the estate hierarchy and rare at the higher levels – for example where it concerns the worker and the Superintendent. But here we see that the nature of harassment is more subtle".* [32]

The study also found that very few women protested because of customary social and family attitudes that hold the woman guilty. The estate management regards sexual harassment as a non-issue. This appears to be the case also of some trade unions in the country according to this study. There have also been isolated cases based on strong evidence the abuser had been severely warned or even dismissed. The empirical findings also confirm the strong correlation of woman worker's poverty status, violence and asserting leadership.

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[32] Wijayatilake, Kamalini., & Zackariya, Faizun., 2001.

3.4 Poverty, Deprivation, Human well-being and Freedoms

> *'A poor person is not only one who is hungry but also one, who is oppressed, humiliated and manipulated.'* – UN (1995: 38)

In order to understand poverty, researchers, policy makers and activists often employ terms such as vulnerability, destitution, deprivation, hunger, degradation, exclusion and powerlessness. All these attempt to describe lack of things that are necessities for life. For instance, "*deprivation has dimensions other than income as well. These include matters such as personal insecurity, lack of rights and freedoms, discrimination on grounds of class, caste, gender, race and ethnicity*"[33].

Plantation workers confront social, economic and political deprivations and isolation through generations. While the government finally provided them citizenship in the 1970s and providing them social welfare services, they remain poor and marginalized. Many workers live with their entire family in one room structures that lack running water and sanitation facilities. They often have little or no access to medical services and lack job security of any kind. With the plantation sector [one of main foreign exchange earner], contributing to about five percent of the country's GDP and improving the lot of plantation workers is beneficial not only to the people themselves but to the economy as well.[34]

'Poverty' in the tea plantations has been constantly higher than the national average. In the recently years, Nuwara Eliya is among the poorest districts in the country where poverty has increased from 2002-2006 -2007 by 50%. Wages in the tea sector are grossly inadequate while the average daily wage was 378 rupees for men and 261 for women. *"Thus a female headed household in the estate sector with four members including just one provider , who works a full 30 days, would have a capita income of 1,958 rupees, clearly below the poverty line. To be above the poverty line requires expenditure above 2,924 per person per month as of April 2008,"* says the study.[35]

It would be good to briefly refer to the official national aggregate statistics and what they mean. According to a study on poverty, based on household income and expenditure, in 2006/07 by the Department of Census and Statistics of the

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[33] Shanmugaratnam N, 2001.
[34] UNDP, newsroom, 19 August 2009.
[35] Sri Lankan workers taste a bitter brew, Lanka Business Online, 19 June 2008.

Ministry of Finance and Planning in Sri Lanka, it is revealed that the poverty in terms of Head Count Index in urban sector is the lowest (6.7 percent) and estate sector is the highest (32.0 percent). This means 7 people out of 100 in urban sector are below the Official Poverty Line (OPL) while 32 people out of 100 in estate sector are below the OPL. This reflects poverty incidence in estate sector is more than 4 times that of the urban sector. While comparing with rural sector, poverty incidence in estate sector is more than double that of rural sector and poverty incidence in urban sector is less than half that of rural sector.

Table 3: By Education level of head of the household and by sector - 2006/07

Level of education	Sri Lanka	Urban	Rural	Estate
No schooling	35.7	23.3	35.1	44.8
Up to grade 5	24.6.	13.9	24.9	32.8
Grade 5-10	13.6	7.1	14.3	25.9
Passed G.C.E. (O.L)	3.7	0.9	4.3	13.6
Passed G.C.E (A.L.) & above	1.6	1.5	1.6	-
Total	5.2	6.7	15.7	32.0

Source: Department of Census and Statistics
Ministry of Finance and Planning in Sri Lanka

The table above shows a clear relationship between education of the heads of households and poverty. The incidence of poverty is highest among the population living in households with a head with little or no education and the lowest when the head has a high level educational attainment. For example, the poor persons belonging to the households whose heads had no schooling is 35.7 percent and schooling up to grade 5 is 24.6 percent. On the other hand such persons belong to the households whose heads had completed G.C.E. (A.L.) and above are only 1.6 percent. The table also shows that the estate sector has the highest percentage of poor persons in all the categories of education of heads of households.

Taking social provisioning - using electricity for lighting, usage of safe drinking water and availability of water seal sanitation are some factors associated with

better living conditions in Sri Lanka. The table below shows that 53.8 percent of households in the Estate Sector do not have safe drinking water and this is forty percent higher than the national average.

Table 4: Percentage distribution of households using drinking water (safe or unsafe) by sector, province and district - 2006/07

Sector	Safe (%)	Unsafe (%)
Sri Lanka	84.8	15.2
Sector		
Urban	97.7	2.3
Rural	85.0	15.0
Estate	46.2	53.8

Source: Department of Census and Statistics
Ministry of Finance and Planning in Sri Lanka

62.2 percent of the households in the Estate sector have electricity while the national average is 80 percent. Also 67.7 percent of households in the Estate sector have a toilet for their households while the national average is 89.1 percent. Also the majority of estate households live in Line Rooms. (Study on poverty based on household income and expenditure in 2006/07 by the Department of Census and Statistics of the Ministry of Finance and Planning in Sri Lanka). Again only about 20 percent of Estate households own their own houses while the national average is four times higher and 70 per cent of estate households are indebted.

The most widely used indicator to define poverty based on income is not inclusive as is questionable. Poverty lines are calculated on the basis of household consumption expenditure per person. In the context of neo-liberal globalisation policy, poverty and deprivation is deeper than just being having income below poverty line. Further, these above tables/statistics say nothing about intra- national differences/ differentiations in the issues of distributional problems, intra-household distribution/deprivations and social justice. Due to their social location and individual capacities, people are unable to cope with life stresses and shocks impacting them. On the other hand, quality of health care, education, housing,

drinking water, basic social provisioning, personal security and substantive political freedoms will enhance an individual's freedoms and well-being – ie, quality of life. As writings on political economy and development too points out that, -

> *"The UNDP has been consistently highlighting the growing global inequalities and the need to focus more consciously on narrowing inequalities and reversing social exclusion. Since the launch of the first Human Development Report (HDR) in 1990, the UNDP has viewed poverty as being caused by the denial of opportunities and choices most basic to human development, which has been defined as a process of widening people's choices as well as raising the level of well-being achieved. Human development thus defined is about expansion of human freedom to choose different lifestyles and hence can be seen as a process of expansion of individuals' capabilities".* [36]

UNDP has mainstreaming human development in its approach with the Human Development Index, Human Poverty Index and also Gender Development Index, but all these are national aggregate indicators and have their limitations to uncover the imbalances/disparities within.

Therefore when discussing political economy of poverty, it is relevant to bring concepts of entitlement and capability, freedoms and well being[37] and social exclusion.[38] Hence these should be seen as a process with reference to the structural causes of vulnerability and deprivation from different perspectives and specific contexts.

All these above approaches are useful to map the political economy of poverty in the plantation sector context and women workers. Further, these are shaped by post colonial social institutions and structures and neo liberal policies at the macro, meso and micro levels. As we noted earlier, the plantation workers and the women workers – their marginalization, reinforcement of oppression, regimented power structures, violation of human rights, violence against women

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[36] Shanmugaratnam N,. 2001.

[37] Amartya Sen 1999, for more readings on capability, entitlements and wellbeing and also on substantive freedoms and instrumental freedoms.

[38] Social exclusion, which is interpreted in different ways as a negative state or process but generally around notions of disadvantage, citizenship, social integration, identity, power relations, agency and institutions (Rodgers et al, 1995; Gore and Figueiredo, 1997) in Shanmugaratnam 2002.

– all point to human deprivation and struggle-conflict - ridden situation of this community. In the current global context, the trend is for informalisation and feminization of labour, which allows capital to violate minimum wage regulations, implement coercive controls and 'unfree' labour relations and practice discrimination against women workers. Women workers' enhancement of well being and freedoms [substantive and instrumental] are thus both a means and ends for their individual and collective agency. Women's leadership cannot be addressed unless structural poverty – inadequate access to resources, the violence against women condoned by culture and unequal power relations and denial of human freedoms. The research study and empirical findings is a modest contribution to inform this problematique and women workers' struggles at different levels from the micro, meso and macro.

CHAPTER 4

SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE STUDY SAMPLE

4.1 The Background

The description of the socio economic background of the sample population is based on the data collected through the survey. The demographic features of the population in terms of family types, sex, age, ethnicity, religion, educational achievements, and pattern of livelihood are the main aspects covered in this section. The relevant empirical data for specific chapters have been extracted from the general -overall data analysis.

A total of 210 respondents and families were surveyed of which 60 were from Kandy District, 30 from Badulla District, 90 from Nuwara-Eliya District and 30 from Matara District (Table 5). Among the 210 families, 141 (67%) were nuclear families and 69 (33%) were extended (Table 6). The same Table also mentions the location of the estates where the survey is conducted, the families from the interior estates are 105 and the families from the exterior estates (near the townships) are 105.

Table 5 : Number of Respondents [Families] Surveyed

Districts	Name of the Estates	No of Families covered in the Survey
Kandy	Batagala	15
	Kobonilla	15
	Kenilworth	15
	Queensberry	15
Badulla	Queenstown	15
	Solance	15
Nuwaraeliya	Abbotsleigh	15
	Agrawathe	15
	Banniyan/ Morray	15
	Pedro	15
	Ramboda	15
	Ouvakelle /Vellikelle	15
Matara	Deniyaya	15
	Ensalwatte	15
Total		210

Socio-economic profile of the study sample

Table 6: Respondents by type of Family and type of estates among the Sample

District	Estates	No of Nuclear Families	No of Extended Families	Total Interior/ Exterior
Kandy	Kobonilla	6	9	15 - Int
	Batagala	9	6	15 - Ext
	Kenilworth	15	0	15 -Ext
	Queensberry	12	3	15 -Int
		42	18	60
N.Eliya	Pedro	10	5	15 -Ext
	Ramboda	8	7	15 -Int
	Agarakanda	8	7	15- Ext
	Ouvakelle /Vellikelle	6	9	15 - Int
	Abbotsleigh	9	6	15-Ext
	Banniyan/ Morray	10	5	15 -Int
		51	39	90
Badulla	Queenstown	14	1	15 -Ext
	Solance	15	0	15 -Int
		29	1	30
Matara	Enselwatha	9	6	15 -Int
	Deniyaya	10	5	15 -Ext
		19	11	30
Total		141	69	210

Interior – Int = 50%, Exterior – Ext = equal 50%

The nuclear family was defined as a family composed of husband and wife with their children. The extended families were households where in addition to husband, wife and children other family members such as parents-in-law,

brothers/sisters-in law and other relatives were included. This also meant that household income was used to provide for all in the household. However, as the number of nuclear and extended families were not equal in numbers it was not possible to do quantitative comparisons between both accurately.

Table 6 above also showed the equal number of families interviewed in the interior and exterior estates so that the location as a factor contributing to or deterring women from leadership in unions could be determined. However, the number of estates in each district varied with Nuwara-Eliya district having 90 families interviewed, followed by 60 families interviewed in the Kandy district and 30 families each in Badulla and Matara districts. The orientation of the survey was to explore the differences that may arise between interior and exterior estates rather than differences among the 4 districts chosen for the survey. This was because the survey did not extend to all the tea-growing districts in Sri Lanka owing to the limited resources available for the study.

4.2 Sex Composition

The distribution of the population according to district and by sex is given in the Table 7. The total population covered by the survey is 1091 of whom 558 (51.1%) were women and 533 (48.9%) were men.

The Sex composition varies among the Districts as well as among the estates within a District (Table 7). Surprisingly, it reflected the corresponding gender composition of the country, which is 51% females and 49% males[40]

It is important to note that the survey findings reflected the situation prevailing among the sample population which was drawn from the estates that were selected based on purposive sample and also the families selected were restricted to that of women Trade Union members. It did not hold any proportional representation of the districts surveyed or the national population.

[40] Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka, 2008

Socio-economic profile of the study sample

Table 7: Sample Population by Sex

District	Estate	Sex Categories			
		Male	%	Female	%
Kandy	Kobonilla	46	54.76	38	45.23
	Batagala	45	60.00	30	40.00
	Kenilworth	55	53.92	47	46.07
	Queensberry	41	51.25	39	48.75
Sub Total	**341**	**187**	**54.8**	**154**	**44.2**
N.Eliya	Pedro	40	54.05	34	45.94
	Ramboda	42	48.83	44	51.16
	Agarakanda	32	45.07	39	54.92
	Ouvakelle /Vellikelle	29	34.52	55	65.47
	Abbotsleigh	37	47.43	41	52.56
	Banniyan / Morray	33	48.52	35	51.47
Sub Total	**461**	**213**	**46.2**	**248**	**53.8**
Badulla	Queenstown	34	47.22	38	52.77
	Solance	30	45.45	36	54.54
Sub Total	**138**	**64**	**46.4**	**74**	**53.6**
Matara	Ensalwatha	36	44.44	45	55.55
	Deniyaya	33	47.14	37	45.71
Sub Total	**151**	**69**	**45.7**	**82**	**54.3**
Total	1091	533	48.9%	558	51.1%

According to the family type in table 8, the nuclear families comprised of 679 persons of whom 331 were males and 348 were females. The extended families comprised 440 persons; 221 males and 219 females.

Table 8: Population by Sex Composition and Family Types

Districts	Estate	Nuclear Families			Extended Families			Grand Total		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Kandy	Kobonilla	19	15	34	38	21	59	57	36	93
	Batagala	18	15	33	28	17	45	46	32	78
	Kenilwata	45	47	92	00	00	00	45	47	92
	Queensbery	26	27	53	16	16	32	42	43	85
N.Eliya	Pedro	25	22	47	18	15	33	43	37	80
	Ramboda	23	17	40	21	24	45	44	41	85
	Agarakanda	13	19	32	23	23	46	36	42	78
	Ouvakelle /Vellikelle	11	18	29	18	37	55	29	55	84
	Abbotsleigh	26	19	45	16	21	37	42	40	82
	Banniyan/ Morray	19	21	40	12	14	26	31	35	66
Badulla	Queenstown	30	35	65	05	03	08	35	38	73
	Solance	30	36	66	00	00	00	30	36	66
Matara	Enselwatha	23	27	50	16	21	37	39	48	87
	Deniyaya	23	30	53	10	07	17	33	37	70
Total		331	348	679	221	219	440	552	567	1119[41]

4.3 Family Size

The average family size of the sample population as a whole was 5.2. The nuclear family size was 4.8 and the extended family size was 6.4.

Cultural Background

From the ethnicity point of view, only two ethnic groups were represented in the sample. Out of 210 families, 202 were Tamils and 8 were Sinhalese. In addition 185 families- Hindus; 17 families- Christians and 8 families- Buddhist. Though this is representative of the profile of the plantation sector, it is totally different from the national profile where the majority of the population is Sinhalese and Buddhist. The Tamil and Hindu background of the plantation community has

[41] There is a minor discrepancy of the sample population in Table 7- 1091 and Table 8- 1119 due to data tabulation process. However, this discrepancy did not affect the overall findings.

affected the politics of the plantation community and which has also affected the nature of the trade unions in the sector.

Personal Background of the Respondents

The age composition of the women who responded to the survey is given in the following Table 9. Only one person was under 18 years old. The majority were in the middle age; 32% were in the age group of 36 to 45 and 30% were in the age group of 46 to 55. 23% were in the age group of 26 to 35 and 10% were in the age group of 19 to 25. Those above 56 years of age comprised 10% of the total.

Table 9 : Age Composition of Respondents by family types

Districts	Estates	Nuclear Families						Extended Families						Total
		Less 18	19-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56 & above	Less 18	19-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56 & above	
Kandy	Kobonilla	-	-	-	3	3	-	-	-	2	4	1	2	15
	Batagala	-	-	-	4	3	2	-	-	-	3	3	-	15
	Kenilwata	-	-	4	2	8	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	15
	Queensbery	-	-	2	5	5	-	-	1	-	2	-	-	15
N.Eliya	Pedro	1	-	4	4	1	-	-	-	1	4	-	-	15
	Ramboda	-	-	1	2	5	-	-	-	4	1	2	-	15
	Agarakanda	-	2	0	2	4	-	-	2	1	4	0	-	15
	Ouvakelle /Vellikelle	-	1	1	4	-	-	-	1	4	-	4	-	15
	Abbotsleigh	-	2	2	3	2	-	-	-	4	1	-	1	15
	Banniyan/ Morray	-	1	3	3	3	-	-	2	-	-	3	-	15
Badulla	Queenstown	-	1	1	3	6	3	-	-	-	-	1	-	15
	Solance	-	2	3	6	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	15
Matara	Enselwatha	-	2	4	3	-	-	-	1	1	3	1	-	15
	Deniyaya	-	-	4	2	4	-	-	2	2	-	1	-	15
Total		1	11	29	46	48	6	0	9	19	22	16	3	210

Table10 highlights the marital status of respondents as per family types. It clearly showed that almost 90% were married and higher in the nuclear families. Very few were widowed or separated. None were divorced.

Table 10 : Marital Status of the Respondents

Districts	Estates	Nuclear Families						Extended Families					Total
		Single	Married	Widow	Divorced	Separated	Total	Single	Married	Widow	Divorced	Separated	
Kandy	Kobonilla	0	5	1	0	0		0	8	1	0	0	15
	Batagala	0	7	2		0		0	6	0	0	0	15
	Kenilwata	1	14	0	0	0		0	0	0	0	0	15
	Queensbery	0	12	0	0	0		0	3	0	0	0	15
N.Eliya	Pedro	0	9	1	0	0		0	5	0	0	0	15
	Ramboda	0	7	1	0	0		0	7	0	0	0	15
	Agarakanda	1	6	1	0	1		0	5	0	0	1	15
	Ouvakelle /Vellikelle	1	4	1	0	0		0	9	0	0	0	15
	Abbotsleigh	1	8	0	0	0		1	4	1	0	0	15
	Banniyan	0	8	1	0	1		0	2	3	0	0	15
Badulla	Queenstown	0	13	1	0	0		0	1	0	0	0	15
	Solance	0	15	0	0	0		0	0	0	0	0	15
Matara	Enselwatha	0	9	0	0	0		1	5	0	0	0	15
	Deniyaya	0	8	1	0	1		0	5	0	0	0	15
Total		4	125	10	0	3		2	60	5	0	0	210

4.4 Educational Status of the Respondents

According to the data from the respondents, the highest educational attainment was GCE (O/L), obtained by 10% of the respondent. 26% of the women had not attended school at all, 4% had attended only pre-school, 38% had reached up to primary education, 22% up to secondary level.

The relationship between the educational attainment of the respondents and their family types revealed that those who had never attended school were higher in the extended families than in the nuclear and women headed families and those who attained up to GCE-A/L was found in the nuclear families.

This may indicate that women in the extended families tended to be women with lower educational attainments while women with higher levels of education lived in nuclear families, which is the less traditional option.

Table 11: Educational Status Of Respondents

Districts	Estate	Never	Pre school	Primary (1-5)	Secondary(6-10)	G.C.E. (O/L)	G.C.E.(A/L) /DIP	Total
Kandy	Kobonilla	12	2	1	0	0	0	15
	Batagala	7	3	3	1	1	0	15
	Kenilwattha	3	0	6	5	1	0	15
	Queensbery	1	0	9	2	3	0	15
N.eliya	Pedro	0	0	4	8	3	0	15
	Ramboda	6	1	5	1	2	0	15
	Agarakanda	2	0	8	5	0	0	15
	Ouvakelle /vellikelle	3	0	5	5	2	0	15
	Abbotsleigh	2	1	5	3	4	0	15
	Banniyan/ Morray	5	0	8	1	0	1	15
Badulla	Queenstown	0	0	12	3	0	0	15
	Solance	0	0	7	5	3	0	15
Matara	Enselwatha	8	0	4	2	1	0	15
	Deniyaya	7	1	2	4	1	0	15
Total		56	8	79	45	21	1	210

4.5 Employment Pattern

91% of the respondents were tea pluckers and 8% were tea factory workers. The majority of women in the plantations work as tea-pluckers and thus the survey reflected this reality.

Table 12: Employment status of Respondents

Districts	Estate	Tea plucker	Factory worker	Kanganl	Unemployed	Total
Kandy	Kobonilla	15				15
	Batagala	15				15
	Kenilwattha	13	1		1	15
	Queensbery	15				15
N.eliya	Pedro	15				15
	Ramboda	15				15
	Agarakanda	15				15
	Ouvakelle /vellikelle	15				15
	Abbotsleigh	9	1	1	4	15
	Banniyan /morray	15				15
Badulla	Queenstown	15				15
	Solance	14	1			15
Matara	Enselwatha	12	3			15
	Deniyaya	4	11			15
Total		187	17	1	5	210

Socio-economic profile of the study sample

Table 13: Work Experience of Respondents

Districts	Estate	Less than 5 years	6-9	10-14	15-20	21-26	More than 27 years	Total
Badulla	Queens Town	01	00	00	03	06	05	15
	Sholans	01	03	01	03	04	03	15
Kandy	Kobonilla	00	00	00	02	04	09	15
	Battalgalla	01	06	01	00	04	03	15
	Queens Berry	01	00	01	02	06	05	15
	Kenilwata	00	02	06	04	01	02	15
N.eliya	Perdo Estate	01	01	03	04	04	02	15
	Ramboda	01	02	01	03	04	04	15
	Agarakanda	01	02	01	02	03	06	15
	Ouwakelle /Velligalla	02	04	02	03	03	01	15
	Abbotsleigh	01	04	03	04	01	02	15
	Banniyan	01	04	03	01	05	01	15
Matara	Deniyaya	04	04	01	02	02	02	15
	Enselwatha	01	00	01	04	02	07	15
Total		16	32	24	37	49	52	210

The table shows that 65% of the respondents have been working more than 15 years and more than 25% are working more than 27 years.

CHAPTER 5

WOMEN WORKERS AND THE FAMILY

This chapter attempts to locate the women workers within the family institution. Why is the family important in this study? The intra-household relations within the family, its power structure with the patriarch-head of household and the gender regime [liberal –open or closed], affects the status of the woman - worker. The subjectivity of the woman worker is critical; her self -worth and initiatives, *well-being* and assertiveness - *agency* together with her *capacity* to resist or bargain/ accommodate. These together with the *empowerment / disempowerment* factors at the micro - meso levels will allow her to up -scale/down- scale her *leadership*. Based on the survey, the semi structured interviews of husbands of the respondents, focus group discussions and in-depth case studies; these findings are captured here.

5.1 Social Positioning of 'self' – Woman Worker and the Family

5.1.1 Agency, Empowerment & Disempowerment forces

Why do we talk about agency and empowerment/disempowerment forces?
And why do we have to relate this to women's poverty and human wellbeing?
Here are some pertinent responses from the research findings that show the range of women's perceptions and experiences -

> *"My father was very close to me since I was very good in my studies. He always used to say, " you are also my boy child." Therefore, I got a lot of freedom at home and had enough leisure time to play with my friends. I moved in a large circle of friends and my family freely allowed me to do so. My father wanted me to be a nurse, due to poverty, I had to discontinue my studies at grade 10. I enrolled in the estate without my father's knowledge. He was enraged by my decision and hit me, this was the first time in my life he did that. But I was adamant and went to work."*
> *(woman respondent)*

"My husband's salary is Rs 5900 in one month. He pays Rs 3500 for the liquor debt and then he pays another Rs 800 to buy a full bottle of liquor and comes back with little that was left. When his loan for the liquor is more than his salary, he tries to beat me and get money from me. He even tries to sell our household things to get money. I have to be careful with my money so that I can feed everyone in the family, pay for the children's medical needs and their education needs." (Focus group discussion)

"I feel that I have the talent. My parents have worked in the estate and later my elder brother and husband have followed them. All in our family are engaged in the estate work. I used that experience to solve my issues. When I was a child I remained very active. Even now nobody can tell me that I am a mother of three children. I freely move with everybody and have understood them properly. Therefore, when there is an issue, my co-workers - tend to extend their support to me. Therefore it is essential for us workers to act in a united manner so as to win our rights. Today, workers need a strategy which would help them to gain our privileges, while ensuring job security." (case study interviewee, tea factor worker, 26 yrs)

The varied life situations of these three women illustrate how complex is the woman worker's everyday struggles and stories of resistance.

Household Management and Decision making

The picture that emerges from the survey about women and the family is intertwined, with empowering and disempowering agents at work at the same time. The empowering elements that we found in the survey were expressed in the decision-making power that the respondents exercised in the household. The analysis for this chapter is limited by the questions in the survey which covered the decision-making areas for women in plantation households – food preparation, marketing, helping children with their schoolwork, child-care, etc. The survey did not include questions about choice of schools and educational options for children, mainly because plantation communities do have much access both physically and financially to schools outside of the plantations or the vicinity of the plantations. Thus plantation communities are limited in the choices that they can make because of their poverty and isolation of the plantation housing for workers.

In total 34% of the respondents were main decision-makers regarding family matters. While this may not be a large percentage, it is clear that while women played the main role as house-keepers and primary care-givers in the family, one-third of them also made decisions regarding family matters. Many women in the focus groups and case studies had husbands who worked overseas or in other towns. This meant that these women made all the day-to-day decisions regarding the family. While this may not be empowering in itself, it proves that women are capable of managing their families/households. Women also were the financial managers for their families when their husbands were absent from home or were financially irresponsible.

The women were the main decision-makers with regard to the daily needs of the household in both nuclear and extended families. In fact in extended families, the role appears to be bigger than in the nuclear families. In some activities, the picture was mixed as in the case of marketing. A fairly large percentage (47%) of the husbands did the marketing while 41% of the respondents also did the marketing. When the husbands played a role in this household responsibility, it took away one more chore from the women. At the same time, it can be argued that when the women did the marketing it brought with it the responsibility of spending the family income for daily household needs. This may give them a little more access to financial decision-making. This survey was not able to determine whether doing the marketing actually gave the women power to make financial decisions.

The women are also the family financial managers when their husbands act irresponsibly. In the focus groups discussions this was repeated by many of the respondents. When their husbands abused alcohol and did not provide money for the family, it is the women who managed the finances and ensured that there was food on the table for the family.

In the area of helping the children with their studies, the responsibility is mainly shouldered by other siblings in the household. However, 20% of the women as opposed to the 10% of the husbands also played this role. This can be seen as an empowering task because being involved in studies meant exercising educational abilities which implies greater power as well. Among the ten case studies, in only one case, was there mention of a father who specifically wanted his daughter to study and find work outside the plantation. Even this dream was unfulfilled

despite the fact that this child finished her O-levels. This girl went to work in the plantation so that the family could continue to live on the plantation as demanded by the employers and in direct opposition to her father's orders.

Access to Information and Initiatives

In the midst of these demands upon the women do they develop their own thinking and spend time on themselves? According to the survey 34% of the respondents read the newspapers. 70% read "Veerakesary" and the most widely read section was the political section followed by stories and the cinema section. Being in the midst of a conflict situation affecting Tamils until the recent past may have caused the interest in politics among the largely Tamil plantation workers. Whatever the reason, it is a fact according to this survey that the women showed interest in the political developments of the country. This is an empowering factor because politics is usually associated with male power.

16% of the respondents read books. This is a good sign that some women attempt longer reading material though most (64% of those who read) read story books. This fact is more significant in the light of the age and educational background of the respondents. Most of the respondents were middle-aged and with children. Usually working class women in this age group do not read much. In addition only 38% have had primary education and 22% a secondary school education.

83% of the respondents watch television. This meant that they take some time in the day for themselves. The most popular television programmes for the respondents were drama (55%) and films (32%). The personal time is mainly devoted to entertainment and this is understandable for women who do so much manual work.

60% of the respondents listen to the radio and the favourite programmes are songs (60%) and news (38%). One-third of the listeners are interested in the news. The main reason for not listening to the radio was that they did have one.

The case studies also show that those who have a higher education take up more leadership and they have more confidence and appear to be more courageous. The case studies also seem to point to the fact that there are certain personality traits such as friendliness, ability to express themselves, concern for others,

kindness, helpfulness, courage, team-spirit, empathy for women and self-confidence that all the women had. These qualities seem to surface despite a hostile background of poverty, child labour (both paid and domestic) and a lack of formal education. The case studies in addition indicate that all the women leaders had an ability to analyse the social situation, speak and solve problems and the knowledge to address work and personal problems. These women appear to have been sticking out of the crowd and hence given leadership.

Workload, Freedom and Supporting Environment

The ten case studies showed that a lack of education, the lack of social interaction in activities like sports and the lack of time for self because of the demands of the household tasks were disempowering for the woman. Her time was greatly demanded by the household in attending to all of their daily needs. At the same time she brings in an income and even borrows money to keep the household going. In return she makes the day-to-day decisions and some social and political decisions as well. It does not seem as if there was much personal space for the woman to blossom and develop her own potential and dreams. Again the personal space for a woman to grow, identify her talents and develop was extremely limited. The women have social demands put on them from their childhood when they are given nurturing and caring tasks.

While women appeared to have some empowering agencies at work in their family-life it must be noted that they are overwhelmingly tasked with household work. The sexual division of household work in the plantations is largely traditional and patriarchal. Cooking for the household was almost always the respondents, with a mere 9% involving others in the household. While the survey did not reveal gender segregation of the children and relatives who make up this 9 %, we may not be wrong in assuming that these were the female children and relatives. 86% of the women take care of the children in the household. Husbands only account for less than 2 % of the child-minders in the households. Thus when a woman is married she makes decisions regarding the day-to-day business of the family – buying food to cook, cooking, cleaning, washing and care of the persons in the family. These duties were done in addition to going to work.

Again among the ten women worker leaders' case studies, there were six women who went to work as children, one as early as 9 years of age in order to cope with

the poverty of the family. Many of them dropped out of school to work or to care for their siblings who were sent to school. Thus even as children, the girls had to give-up school and start work both at home and in the plantation as a coping mechanism for the poverty that the family experienced. This was a choice made for them by the family in almost all the cases.

The questionnaire used for the survey did not examine the forces in the childhoods of the women that empowered or disempowered them. The case studies however gave us good glimpses of this in the lives of the ten women who were interviewed. Four of the ten interviewees specifically spoke about the freedom they received mainly because of their fathers. Six others were child workers and one of them travelled to a nearby town everyday to sell milk. These women had a measure of freedom allowing them to go to work, but more due to compulsion. One of the interviewees was raised by her father as a child. Thus all the ten women leaders who were interviewed had the benefit of an encouraging father or went to work during the childhood meant they crossed over to the life of an adult in their childhood.

From the case studies it is evident that a supportive family environment from childhood was significant in the women who "naturally" took on leadership roles. These were women whose leadership qualities were evident to co-workers who went to them with their problems. A supportive father was especially mentioned by the women during their childhood. They were given freedom to interact with others freely and they developed confidence.

After marriage, supportive husbands and family members were mentioned in the case studies as being instrumental in the women taking up leadership. They mentioned often that their husbands and families supported them particularly during challenging times in their roles as leaders. In the focus group discussion this point was made again - a woman leader has to be single or she needed the support of the husband.

69% of the respondents shouldered the responsibility for maintenance of the house with the husbands' contribution accounting only for 17.6 % for this task and relatives and children accounting for the remaining 12.4 %. It must be borne in mind that these are all time-consuming tasks from which there is very little respite. These are tasks that are done 365 days of the year and during most of the

waking hours in the day with often some hours of the night as well if there is an infant or a sick person in the household. The women also appear to spend at least 9 to 10 hours at work. This is fairly long as the women have to go back to housework which would take up most of the remaining waking hours in the day.

In terms of financial tasks, the survey revealed that 48.8% of the respondents had taken loans together with 56% of the husbands. While it was not clear who made decisions regarding financial matters in the household, it was clear that the women shoulder a large part of the financial burden when they take out loans. The burden becomes even more apparent when the survey revealed that women mostly took loans from informal lending institutions like buying on credit in shops (15.2%) with smaller numbers going to the formal institutions like the banks (6.6%) and money-lenders (8.6%). Another point to be noted is that in 25% of the cases, the women took out loans for purchasing household consumption items and to repair the house. Thus as a result of having the decision-making power in daily needs of the household, the women also have the responsibility of raising the money for running the household.

In the case studies, the women found that the lack of trust in them as leaders because they were women was a hindering factor. However, the coping strategy seemed to be how well a woman was able to manage her time in such a way that she is able to do her housework and also deal with work-related problems. Thus taking on leadership meant that the women had to keep their jobs, do the domestic work in the family and only then take up their union work. Women rarely can make a choice between domestic work and leadership work. It was a package deal for them. They had to take on both these tasks. All the case studies and the focus group discussions confirm this. Therefore the culture of families in the plantations tends to be a powerful disempowering agent in the lives of the women workers. However within this context, supportive family members helped greatly in women breaking out of the confines of the family and take on leadership albeit with a cost in most cases.

There was a case study where a woman was able to be involved in social activities and take up problems at work with the support of a collective of friends in the tea plantation. She experienced more freedom before she got married. After marriage, this freedom dissipated even as the group of friends dispersed as she and her friends got caught up with marriage and household work.

Community work/Social Interactions

Besides making decisions regarding day-to-day functioning of the household, women also played other decision-making roles. In community matters as well, women played a significant role accounting for 39% of the decision-makers. The question in the survey asked a general question about who makes decisions on community-related matters. There was little information about the nature of such community-related matters that could throw more light on the type of community-related matters that the women made decisions on. However, we could see that more than one-third of the respondents said that they made decisions related to community matters. This widens the picture of the woman's decision-making reach, taking it beyond the household.

Even in political matters where the husbands played a dominant role as decision-maker, the women's share is not insignificant. 39% of the respondents were the decision-makers in political matters as well. In trade-union related matters the respondents accounted for 46% as decision-makers. This may indicate the greater involvement of women in trade union leadership. More importantly, it showed that the women actually had the ability to lead the other workers. In the case studies there were good examples of how the women organized and led their co-workers to resolve workplace issues. In fact all the women in the case studies spoke about their organizing initiatives. In most of these cases they initiated actions based on the observation that injustice was being perpetrated and in the rest they responded to the Union's call for actions in organizing pickets and strikes.

5.1.2 Poverty, Capability[40] and Well-being

In Chapter 3, it was established that the plantation sector is a poor community in Sri Lanka. In the survey and the case studies, poverty was cited often as a prevailing problem in the estates. Salaries were not enough to meet the needs of the household especially during the low-harvest season. Children's education was

[40] A person's capability refers to the freedom to achieve various lifestyles [see Sen 1993] quoted by Shanmugaratnam N 2001.

sacrificed because of poverty. People had to eat less food, forgo medical attention and take loans. To cope with this people looked for work outside the plantation if such work was available. Families also sent their children to garment factories to supplement the family income. Women however were usually confined to the plantation to care for the young and the elderly. People keep their jobs so that they can continue to stay in the houses provided by the plantation.

The survey, case studies and the focus group discussions all reiterate that there was widespread poverty in the plantations, as illustrated below:

Snapshots of Poverty and Deprivation

"For eight months in the year, we have between 5-10 days' of work only because of heavy winds and low harvests or because we cannot get targets and are only paid half-day wages. Monthly salary during these months averages about SLR 4050. For example, last December there were very heavy rains and the leaves fell off the plants. We only were able to work on 2 days that month."

"Children need to buy season ticket to go to school, which is 14 kilometres away. If the bus does not come, the kids miss school. Some days the children go to school in the morning but the bus does not run in the afternoon. Then the children have to wait in school until 8 p.m. when a factory bus leaves for the plantation. Many children have to wait without food until they reach home at night."

"Many children drop out of school when they are 12 years old because it is too expensive to send children to school outside the plantation."

"In the estate only a few families eat three proper meals a day. These are families which have people working in Colombo garment factories. Those who depend solely on the plantation eat one or two meals a day."

"When there is no work on the plantation, I go to a nearby vegetable farm to work. There I get SLR 500 a day together with two meals. If I work 4 days I earn SLR 2000 and this helps us to meet our meagre expenses."

" In our estate there is a cold and windy season when there is very little work on the plantation. So our children do not go to school during this season. The men go out looking for manual work. Poverty causes a lot of quarrels and violence in the home. If a worker gets sick, gets bitten by snakes or scorpion, there is no compensation provided by the estate. In fact we also lose our pay for that day."

The ten case studies restate that poverty caused the girl child to drop out of school and to start working even as a child. Some of these cases are quoted:

"My mother often becomes sick and hardly goes for work. Therefore, I stayed with my grandmother at her house. Although there were four members in our family the income were not adequate for its day to day expenses. Due to this situation, I used to work in private estates during Saturdays and Sundays as a tea plucker from the age of ten."

"Our family consists of seven members including my mother and father. Therefore, like all other worker families we also suffered from poverty. I discontinued my studies at Grade 2 and went for weeding work in the estate on as a casual worker at the age of 9. At that time I was paid 75 cents per day."

"I was born on 25th December 1956 as the 5th child of a family of 14. We were living at the Galaboda Estate, Rangala and my parents were working in the estate. My 4 brothers were schooling and I did not attend school as I had to look after the younger siblings and fulfill the needs of the elder brothers who were at home. At the age of 5-6, I started cooking meals at home and looking after the younger children. Due to the poverty prevailing in the family, at the age of 10, I enrolled myself as a worker in the estate. Because I was a child and a minor they paid me only 50 cents per day as wages."

The additional notes that the data collectors made during the interviews confirmed prevalence of absolute poverty in the following estates: Kobonilla, Agarakanda, Ouvakelle, Queensberry, and Abbotsleigh. These estates were characterized by minimal basic facilities, lack of medical facilities, unsanitary environment, water and toilet shortages, and poor roads and transport facilities. Many workers had to look for employment outside the estate especially during the low crop seasons.

The poverty caused the women to begin working even as children. Seven women out of the ten cases studies stated clearly that they went to work as children or dropped out of school to do domestic work for the family. This meant that they were unable to finish school and some even are semi-literate. All of these were hindrances in taking up leadership. We will see in the next chapter how most women leaders are found in the lowest level of leadership in the trade union, which is the estate committee. To be a national-level leader one needs to be able to read and write well so that dialogue and negotiation with estate management and bargaining with companies and other interest groups. Poverty and its

subsequent effects take its toll on opportunities for leadership for women.

Taking on from what they respondents said about their housework, we can surmise that poverty compounds that situation. As the workers are poor they tread carefully about workplace issues because they wanted to keep their jobs; as the workers were poor they are tied up with family responsibilities that take up their time as they cannot pay for time-saving gadgets. Like most poor women workers all over the world, they hurry back home as soon as work is over to attend to their family chores. They need the permission of their husbands or male relatives if they want to attend meetings. Therefore, poverty increases the difficulties for them in taking up leadership.

However, the data collectors noted that even in these conditions they met many vocal and articulate women. These women appeared to have leadership qualities and a desire to improve conditions in the estates. Some of them have raised issues on behalf of their co-workers. The ten case studies are good examples of how women took up leadership despite the poverty and its subsequent negative consequences on their lives. In an effort to better their conditions the women spoke up and organized for change. Yet despite their eagerness to bring changes they needed the support of a dynamic trade union that would educate and train them. There was an instance of a woman in Agarakandha Estate who constructed a toilet using her own money and today this toilet is being used by twelve families.

Sexual Abuse and Violence against Women

The components of poverty and patriarchy breeds cycles of violence, which in fact is self-perpetuating. It is clearly evident that women workers are subject to increased levels of violence and abuse in different forms. The 'dominant patriarchal culture' in the plantations condones acts of discrimination and violence against women and denies women workers' rights. Here is one incident of sexual abuse:

> *"When I went to that Kanakapillai's house to meet him for some other business, my teacher friend was sitting there in a very scared mood. When she saw me she cried and told me: "He asked me to help him to take his wife to hospital because she was sick. But when I came here he tried to*

misbehave with me and uttered some filthy words". At that time, Kanakapillai who emerged from the inside of that house got scared when he saw me. Then I shouted at him by saying: "Once again if you try to misbehave with any women, I will expose you to your wife. I will also summon all workers and chase you away from your work. Do you consider women as play things"?

This woman is an Estate Committee Leader and her intervention stopped the harassment by this one staff individual. However, no other action was taken against this perpetrator even though she and other women knew that this man was a sexual harasser. Even though this study did not collect much data on sexual harassment, the available data shows the existence of this kind of harassment. In addition, it also showed that women leaders were the ones who saw this and took action to address it.

The case studies, survey and focus group discussions revealed many examples of domestic violence that the women workers face. These also showed that poverty and violence were closely related in that violence increased during times of poverty. What some women had to say in the all-women focus group discussion and during the survey:

"In the estate there is less work in some seasons. When this happens, our income is also less. Then we have to pawn the little jewellery. This is when we take more loans, even from the shop. This is also the period when our husbands will drink more and there are more problems in the house. Nowadays the prices have increased but our salaries are insufficient and we have to find work outside to feed our families. This is not a problem related only to our husbands' drinking habits. It is also our poverty. If we are paid more we can manage our families on our own without our husbands' money. Even if we work hard and there is no crop in the estate what can we do? On the one hand the management pays badly, and then our husbands drink, we are not happy, and finally we get more angry and frustrated." [case study]

"I have a husband who is violent, a drunkard and picks fights over small things. Can I participate in trade union activities with such a husband?" (Respondent -survey)

> *"Some days, because of my husband's forceful sex with me, I get tired and find it difficult to do my housework and then go to work the next morning. When I am given a field that is far away it is really difficult. If I do not pluck the targeted amount of tea leaves I will only be paid a half day's wages. I can't go to the doctor and tell him the truth because I am shy. When I am in pain, I often take it out on the children. Sometimes I want to leave and go off on my own but thinking of my children I continue". (All-women Focus Group Discussion)*

Together with poverty and deprivation, there is widespread violence and sexual harassment on the plantations. These three factors when combined become a major impediment for women workers to become leaders. Women's leadership needs to be nurtured among women who stand out for their outspokenness, their ability to organize and communicate their strong sense of justice, their self-confidence. All these qualities are the raw material for the making of great leaders. The case studies also showed that these women have developed themselves to become active estate committee leaders.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

The study showed clearly that poverty is pervasive in the plantations and workers naturally will leave the plantations if they can because they can earn more doing other jobs. This mobility is difficult for women, especially those with young children. Thus who remain need to struggle for changes in the plantation so that the issue of poverty in the plantations can be addressed. Moreover, women's capacity to access public goods [drinking water, sanitation, housing, transport, health, education services etc] is hampered by lack of freedom, choice [lack of] to negotiate freer wage contracts and hence affects their collective agency.

The sexual division of domestic labour and responsibility for domestic affairs does play a disempowering role in the lives of the respondents. The disempowerment comes because women have domestic tasks thrust upon them, giving them little or no room for choice. The poverty in their situation does not allow them to cast these tasks upon other women whose services they can hire. Secondly the disempowerment comes because these are tasks that are done every day. There is

no annual leave for domestic work. In addition the tasks were time-consuming and energy-draining. Thus they have little time or energy for anything else – even leisure and entertainment. In fact women bear 'triple burdens' with domestic, workplace and union/community work.

The times when the family especially the father or husband supported the development of the respondents have been very few. Yet when the women got the support of the father or husband they took up leadership because they had greater confidence and were more articulate. In these instances the family became an empowering agent. Thus families can make a choice to be empowering of women. At the same time the family can be disempowering for women as study demonstrated that other factors compel the woman for example, to discontinue formal education and take up estate work.

It is also evident that there are women who have qualities that make them leaders. Many of these were nurtured in supportive family environments but many developed coping strategies that helped their leadership abilities to be expressed and used. Their capability has been nurtured by skills and knowledge through praxis. Here, the women have moved beyond their socially prescribed role of nurturer and 'caregiver' in the family.

Finally, we see that the hostile environment to women playing leadership roles is challenged by the women's sense of justice. All the ten women in the case studies displayed a fierce sense of justice – fierce because many paid a high cost for this. They faced social isolation by some fellow-workers, discrimination by their supervisors who tried to break their spirit and thus attempt to force them to give up the role of champion of other workers. Many women also faced domestic violence and abuse by their husbands.

CHAPTER 6

WOMEN WORKERS AND THE WORKPLACE

In this section, issues faced by women workers, their work environment, problems in vulnerable employment and equal opportunities for skill development, equal pay and claiming rights are highlighted. It also links these issues to violation of women's bodies and the neo-liberal policies that lead to exploitation of women's labour. Twin dimensions of the dominant '*patriarchal work- culture'* and the '*neo – liberal –culture'* was very clearly reflected at the meso and macro -national levels. In addition, the survey revealed several aspects of work – that are empowering and disempowering for the respondents. It also looked at attitudes of management, how the women's work was appreciated; how the staff behaved towards the workers and other factors.

6.1 The Work Environment

In the preceding chapters, we highlighted the plight of women workers who are trapped in a repressive form of labour relations and regimented system of work in 'deregulated labour markets', which directly relates to the neo liberal market driven policies.

At the local level how do these manifest in women workers' experiences and their resistance?

How are the women regarded and treated in the workplace?

Here are some issues that were raised from the questions posed in the survey. One issue was whether the women were given encouragement or appreciation by their supervisory staff. About 40% said they were given encouragement while working. However, 68% of the encouragement was verbal and did not affect benefits or remuneration. However, the women workers were not appreciated enough to get benefits in other ways both monetary and non-monetary. It could also mean that the women or the trade union did not raise the issue of promotion as an accepted process that workers who qualified could access.

While the majority of respondents were not consulted by middle-level supervisory and management staff 32.9% of the opinions of the respondents were accepted. 82.6% of these opinions pertained to work matters. This may mean that there was some recognition of workers' knowledge about their work by middle-level management. Within a context of a hierarchical and patriarchal culture in the plantations, it is positive that about one-third of the respondents' opinions were respected by management. With greater consciousness among the workers that only they know best about their work, the workforce could be more assertive and confident and thus challenge any abuse by management.

In response to the questions about making complaints, 56.2% of the respondents chose to make complaints through the trade union estate committee head rather than directly to the management staff involved. The survey did not address the issue of a complaints mechanism in the workplace besides the Labour Day. From the responses it can be assumed that workers saw the union estate committee was the right place to lodge workplace complaints.

Authority and Power

The issue of the weight of the tea leaves harvested each day by the workers appeared to be contentious and important. It was raised not only in the survey but also in the focus group discussions and the case studies. This was because the salary of the workers is directly affected by the amount of harvest they brought in. If they brought in low harvests their salaries would be low. At the same time if they did not know how much they brought in as harvests in a month, they could be underpaid. 78.4 % of the respondents took notice of the weights of the tea leaves that they brought in everyday. In addition, about 40% of these felt that the lowering of the weight of the tea leaves during recording (notwithstanding the standard amount deducted for moisture in the leaves) was done on purpose by the management personnel.

During a focus group discussion some people said that the management staff (Kangani[41] and the Accounts clerk) used the extra amounts that resulted from the under recording of the weight of the tea leaves to add to the weights of persons connected with them – either workers they favoured or relatives etc. About a

[41] Kangani is the estate lowest level field supervisor.

little more than half the respondents said that they reacted to the work-place problems. This was a good sign that a large number were not being complacent about their work place problems. 69% (55 persons) of these expressed their opinion directly to the person involved. The workers also said that most problems were created mainly by the Kangani and accounts clerk and very few blamed other workers. The respondents' answers showed that as workers they were aware of what was going-on in the workplace and that they made an effort not to be cheated by the staff above them.

From the case studies we noted that some of the women leaders had a group of friends, who helped them in taking leadership roles in the estate. Others said that they moved freely with people on the estate from their younger days, or that they were able to gather support for actions that they initiated such as refusal to pluck more tea leaves or picket for higher wages. This kind of support empowered them. The support of women workers for their female leaders was a motivating factor for many of the women in the case studies.

Support from male colleagues was also an empowering factor for the women leaders in the case study. Six out of the ten women case studies, specifically cited that they received encouragement from their families or male associates. This could be male colleagues or male estate committee leaders. The men seem to play a positive role in affirming the leadership abilities of the women workers.

Only one respondent in the survey admitted that there was sexual harassment in the work place. However, in two case studies and in the focus group discussion women admitted that there was sexual harassment.

6.2 Workplace Problems and Claiming Rights

While the women appeared to be knowledgeable about their work and they tried to stand up for themselves in the workplace, the survey also showed that many practices of the management are stacked against them. What are the problems highlighted by the respondents in the workplace?

The following table gives a summary of the main issues raised in the survey and the case studies.

Issues/problems	Findings	How resolved
Not appreciated for work done	*59.5 %*	*Issue was not resolved*
Not consulted by supervisory staff	*67% and this also not raised and opinions volunteered were rejected*	*However, a small percentage of women's opinions relating to work matters were received by supervisory staff.*
Complaints mechanism	*Almost all complaints (56%) were made to the trade union*	*Complaints directly to management appear to be rare.*
Discrimination at work	*More than half [>50%] experienced discrimination especially in issue of choice of fields for plucking/harvest.*	*- In the case studies, women estate leaders addressed this issue in some fields.*
Excessive workload	*Half the respondents [50%] complained about excessive workloads*	–
Under-recording of weight of harvest or not taking note of the daily harvest.	*About 60% of the respondents complained*	*Through individual women who were outspoken and spoke to the manager or through a trade union campaign where women were asked to keep records of the harvests.*
Pregnant women not given fields near-by	*78.3 %- rarely given any consideration about being allocated fields that were near.*	*Not seem to have been raised except by some women in the case studies who negotiated on behalf of some pregnant women successfully.*
Breast-feeding of infants	*84% - general consensus was that the time given for breast-feeding was insufficient because the fields were remote and walking to the crèches took too much time.*	*Only when trade union leaders raised this on Labour Day, was it resolved when breast-feeding mothers were given fields that were closer to the crèches.*
Not attending Labour Day meetings	*About 75% did not attend Labour days mainly because they did not know about such a practice or that they believed women could*	*The 25% who participated did so because they wanted to resolve some workplace problems. In the case studies, there was a trade union effort to promote Labour day*

	not attend Labour day.	*participation through a campaign and training of the estate committee leaders.*
Sexual harassment	*Though women did not admit that they were harassed in the survey, they spoke about it during an all-women focus group discussion.*	*The cases that were resolved were when estate committee leaders or outspoken women leaders raised this with estate superintendents or when husbands openly supported their wives on this issue.*
Not helping co-workers in trouble	*Only a small number said that they did not help co-workers and one woman leader in the case studies said that she was shunned by her co-workers at the request of the supervisory staff.*	*This issue was solved when the woman spoke to her colleagues and they changed their attitude and the woman's problem was resolved when she spoke to the Superintendent.*
Not collecting their own wages[42]	*Only about 20% of the respondents allowed their husbands or other male relatives to collect their wages. Some of these were forced by their husbands and others because they were unable to travel to the division where the salaries were being paid*	*In the case studies and focus group discussions there were many instances where the trade union raised this issue with the management and resolved it or where there was a union campaign to educate the women about their right to collect their own salaries.*

59.5 % of them were not given encouragement while working. 67.1% of the opinions of the respondents were not accepted by the Kangani, accounts clerks and supervisors. 54.1% of the respondents said that they experienced workplace discrimination in matters like choice of field especially in the interior estates. On the issue of forced extra work, the opinion was almost equally divided with 51% claiming that this existed and another half saying that it did not.

About 60% of the respondents said that they have problems with the weight of the tea that they plucked claiming that management records decreased weights. In addition many estates use old-fashioned scales to weigh the tea and these are

[42] It is a common practice for male relatives of women workers to collect the salaries of the women workers. The management mostly allows this practice though it is not legal.

difficult to read. This was raised repeatedly in the focus group discussions as well. In the interviews with women leaders of trade unions, one union went to some lengths to address this issue. Without some kind of support to stop this abuse, workers can be easily deprived of their rightful benefits.

78.3% of the respondents said that no special consideration with regard to working place (field/rows) was given to pregnant women. A huge 84% said that they were not given time to feed their babies.



"I am a breast-feeding mother with 2 children. When I ask for breast-feeding time I have to face a scolding every day. We cannot leave our field until the Kangani allows us. Sometimes I feel it is better to give up our right to breast-feeding time rather than to face a scolding in exercising that right." (Respondent in survey)

The respondents (21.8% or 44 persons) who did not take note of the weight of the tea leaves that they brought in gave several reasons for this. The largest number (47.1%) cited the reason that there may be problems for them if they noted the weight of the tea leaves that they brought in. This showed that the fear of supervisors is still strong and that hierarchical and patriarchal culture is still operative in the plantations.

52.9% of respondents said that workers were scolded by the management personnel. Almost 80% of the respondents also said that workers were humiliated by the management personnel. Again it appeared that the old feudal attitude of management towards workers was still very much the norm. The focus group discussions confirmed this. They talked about how workers were treated in a dehumanizing manner by some supervisory staff.



"One day I went to work 30 minutes late. While I tried to explain myself, the Kangani verbally abused me. He said, "if you are enjoying yourself the whole night long you certainly will suffer from headaches and dizziness in the morning. We can't accept that kind of excuse in this workplace." (Respondent in survey)

For 30.6% of the respondents, the work place problem was coming to work on time. There were small numbers (about 10%) for the other problems mentioned in the survey. The survey did not ask the reason for the problem. Perhaps the

women had domestic chores to do before leaving for work or their houses were a considerable distance from the place where they report for work. Considering that they all lived on the plantation and that their houses are so close to each other it is unlikely that the women were late risers because it is noisy in the mornings on the plantation line houses and so difficult to awake late. Therefore this problem is most probably related to gender division of work in the plantation families.

Among those who did not react to the work place problem did so because they felt that it would create bigger problems in the future. Though about 63.3% of the respondents felt that they did not face problems in the work place, it is evident that there were fundamental problems in the workplace especially for pregnant women and feeding mothers. We can conclude that the workplace gave the women little more than a meagre salary and poor housing. The picture can also be painted of a work environment that is harsh and non-affirmative bordering on being abusive to the women. The opinions expressed in the survey also point to the fact that estate staff and management still try to run the plantations like feudal fiefdoms and women have to fight these in expressing their opinions to their offenders. The women obviously hold back their grievances because as the survey showed that fear of the employers' power to take away their livelihood is still very strong.

6.3 Workers' Self- esteem and Right to Negotiate

64% of the workers collected their own salaries. 86.2% of the respondents looked at the salary list before collecting their salary. This meant that the women are breaking with feudal practices like allowing their husbands to collect their salaries. The women were also checking to see if they are paid correctly. These were all indications of women who were aware of their rights in the workplace.

However, there were many challenges in the disempowering forces that deny women workers their rights. Right at the top are the 21% of the respondents who allowed their husbands to collect their salaries on their behalf.

> *"My husband collects my salary and spends it. He starts a fight if I try to collect my salary. After collecting my salary he comes home drunk and if I try to find out how much my salary was he becomes violent." (Respondent in survey)*

This appeared to be higher among nuclear families. This was a high figure especially for women who are members of a trade union. A more disturbing situation was that about one-third of these women said that their husbands were in the habit of doing this and they did not want to contest that. A smaller number (19 persons or 24.7% of 77 workers) said that travelling to the office was a problem and that was why the husbands or others went to collect their salaries. As long as husbands collect the salaries of their wives and managements collude by allowing this, patriarchy is alive and well in the Sri Lankan plantations. Patriarchal practices emanate from the family that extend to the workplace are major disempowering factors for the women workers.

Those who did not check the salary list, i.e. 29 workers, did not think that it was important (30% out of the total of 29) and another 26.7% said that the list would not be given. As they were all trade union members this is serious overlooking of their rights.

About 25% of the respondents participated in the Labour Day[43]. This can be seen as a starting point in using the space to negotiate with the management that has been created for the workers. This 25% clearly saw the Labour days as means to solve both work and other problems, as emphasised by this woman grassroots leader,

> *" ....our union has motivated and given us the knowledge & skills to negotiate. I was determined in my capacity as Secretary of the estate committee to find solutions to the problems of estate workers. I feel proud for being the first woman worker who was given half day leave with pay in order to discuss the issues of the workers at a meeting. Earlier the Labour day was held at the estate in a nominal manner". (woman grassroots leader- case interview)*

[43]. Labour Day is a provision in the Estate Workers Ordinance, that provides for the manager of an estate to designate at least one day in a month from 2-5 p.m. when the workers or the trade union estate committee leaders can bring up and discuss labour issues in the Manager's Office on the estate.

74.8% of the respondents did not participate in the Labour Day meetings. The biggest number of respondents said that non-participation was because they were not aware that there was a Labour Day. The next reason was the misconception that women were not allowed to participate in the meetings. This is surely something that trade unions should deal with, otherwise this will become another instance where women workers are kept in a situation of ignorance and management will use it to continue to oppress them.

> *"Even though I am in the Trade Union Committee, I cannot participate in the Labour Day because of the estate union leader. He is both a Kangani and union leader and has a good relationship with the manager. This affects all of us, the workers." (Respondent in survey)*

Ignorance or lack of a plan to address the common issues at the workplace can be cited as the main disempowering forces for the women in the workplace. Surely trade unions can see to it that pregnant women and feeding mothers are given suitable fields as a matter of policy. This need not be an instance where the affected women have to individually fight with their Kangani. In addition trade unions can surely see to it that their estate committees use the Labour Day provision.

6.4 Rights Violations and Women's Capacity to mobilize

The plantation is a difficult workplace for women workers. The difficulties arise from the very way in which the plantations function. For example, the women workers do not have a say in the choice of fields and neither is there a system that rotates the fields for the workers in a more objective way. Secondly, the main determinant of the wages that the workers receive allowance for the amount of tea leaves they bring in, is not systematically carried out. The records are kept by the supervisory staff and these records are not verified by the workers every day. In addition, the scales used are not easy for the workers to read especially as everyone is in a hurry to get the weighing done at the end of the day. These are matters of workplace systems that the trade union and management can negotiate and make more simple, efficient and just for the workers. One quote among many that showed initiatives, capability and agency of women workers,

> *"The issue of leave bonus was calculated erroneously by the management. Almost all the workers did not question the management about this discrepancy. I discussed with my co-workers and said that we have to make a collective request. So we approached the management and said, 'leave bonus is not calculated according to the new salary scale. This must be calculated accurately.' The Accountant said,' it has been calculated correctly, there are no discrepancies.' Having realized that it was futile talking with him, we met the superintendent and explained the situation. Then we realized that the estate leader [male] was the cause for this anomaly! In our discussion, we were adamant that we will take appropriate action if our bonus was not paid. Subsequently the payment was calculated properly and paid." (case study)*

These points were highlighted in the focus discussion with men and women workers on workdays assignment and seasonality – rainy/dry. According to the seasonal calendar, men were given more work days during the intermediary season. However the workers said that the factor that determines the number of days offered by the management for men and women was not strictly by the seasonal variation. In fact the company at central level makes the estimate of number of days that should be offered in a year and those predetermined days are being allocated according to local conditions. If the tea growth was higher during the particular season, the management may intensify the work load by setting the day's target [norms] rather than increasing the number of days beyond the present target.

In the management work plan schedule, maintenance of fields was not important but harvesting was given high priority. In general men were assigned maintenance related work at the field and women were assigned plucking. Sometimes when management gives high priority for plucking, men were forced to engage in plucking, though they were reluctant for various reasons. However, when it happens the fields get neglected and become full of weeds and the task of plucking was difficult. The lack of application of pesticides and fertilizer also affect the task of plucking – intensive, demanding labour time to achieve the set norms for the day's wage. This leads to exploitation of workers' labour that affects women more than men.[44]

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[44] The basic wage of worker [at the time of the survey] was Rs 285 per day [from which EPF is calculated], plus 75% depending on workdays – Rs 95 , plus Rs 30 for price share calculation. But women worked for longer hours compared to men as already stated earlier.

The location of housing on the plantation compounds difficulties even more for the women whose reputations can easily be tarnished by vengeful staff and unsupportive husbands and relatives. At the same time the plantations are isolated and often inaccessible especially for the women. All the information received in our investigation points to the fact that even fundamental rights such as recording the exact amount of leaves harvested by the women each day was in dispute. Some unionists had to teach women how to do this and only after a campaign did the women keep accurate records of the harvests they brought in. It was the same for the women workers to collect their salary. It is only after education and a campaign did the number of women who exercised this right increase.

There is obviously sexual harassment in the plantations but the women generally feel that they have to deal with it themselves or with the help of trusted co-workers. This was confirmed by the case brought up by an estate leader who was interviewed. The women in this study also mentioned several instances of sexual harassment. One of this is cited here

> *"The supervisor gives us problems. He is 40 years old. Our field is a bit remote. When we go there we do not take a lunch break. We try to reach our target and then come back home early. I always get the furthest field. The supervisor speaks in very obscene language, teases me and other women who work there. In the last 8 months he has been sexually abusing me. He asked me for some betel leaves. I told him to wait as I had betel leaves in my hands. However, he put his hands on my waist where I keep the betel leaves in a knot in my clothes and took the betel leaves himself. In the process he touched me as well. I was shocked and scared. He has continued to do this since. One day I told him that I would report this to my husband. Then he said that my husband will only say that if I behaved properly no one will make sexual advances to me. He challenged me to tell my husband. He also added that if my husband questioned him he would report me to the manager for not doing my work and get me dismissed. I don't know what to do. I asked the management to change my field. I am scared to tell my husband." (Focus Group Discussion)*

As this case demonstrates, recourse to possible action against sexual harassment is neither clear nor within reach for them. Even the talking about this was difficult for them when in the presence of family members or men.

6.5 Social Interaction and Support Networks

In this section, we will examine how the women workers interact socially through organizations and social functions. When there is interaction between the workers on the isolated plantations with others from other areas and sectors, the traditional isolation could be broken. Often this leads to social change and greater participation of women in society.

A small percentage of the respondents (23.4%) had some experience with Community-based Organisations (CBOs). It was not very clear what CBOs the respondents joined as the figures were small for the CBOs mentioned in the survey with the "others" category being the highest (49%).

86% of the respondents had participated in social functions and a large number (87%) of these participated in public social functions. Participation in temple functions was also high (75.7%). Participation levels drop for school functions to 60% and even further for health-related functions to 40%.

About 22.4% (47 persons) of the respondents actually organized social functions. 80% of these organized public social functions and 23% organized temple-related functions. Of these about half took overall responsibility for coordinating the functions while another half helped to organize the functions.

The survey also showed that 76.6% of the respondents did not have experience with CBOs with interior estates having a lower percentage than exterior estates. The reasons given for this was that there were no CBOs in the area. This could be a reason for the lower figures in the interior estates. Out of the small number (29 respondents) who did not participate in social functions, 40% said that they did not have time for this.

While participation is high in social functions, the rate for organizing the function was low with 77.6% not having played this leadership role. The reasons for this

situation were not clearly articulated though a small number (20%) said that they did not have time. 90% of the respondents said that they did not participate in social functions to make decisions.

In social functions where the respondents made decisions, the majority of the occasions were welfare-related (31.8%) and festival-related (22.7%). In making decisions the respondents said that they made the main decisions for the social function (53.4%) and others said they expressed their opinions (28.6%).

The husbands' role (34.4%) in supporting their wives' participation in social functions was mainly to permit them to attend the social function programmes and meetings. The support was not actively expressed in positive actions like helping with the housework while the women went for the functions.

Generally we could say that the women did not have much experience in CBOs. Leadership in the CBOs was also low. In this area the women's leadership experience was very limited. Yet despite the odds against, them women on the plantation participated in social functions and about 25% of the respondents even participated in CBOs. This means that the social isolation is breaking down and opportunities for women to widen their experience with matters outside the plantation and their families are growing.

6.6 Summary of Key Findings

The administrative system is hierarchical with the women workers found in the lowest and least powerful position in the system. Every day the women workers were at the mercy of management staff who decides on the fields where they work. Breast-feeding mothers face difficulty in getting fields nearer their homes or crèches so that they can go back to feed the child and return to work.

The management style is very feudal with bosses who can speak with the workers as rudely as they please. Workers have little recourse to complaints as complaint mechanisms do not appear to exist in the workplace except for Labour Day which is being practiced in many places. Complainants have to face reprisals against angered supervisors and so many women just put up with the abuse.

Many challenges women workers face, such as sexual harassment and violence in the home and workplace, reflected their powerlessness in the plantation community. This too needs to be addressed as women constitute the majority labour force in the plantations. There is clearly a cycle of poverty-violence-sexual harassment –powerlessness among women workers in the plantations.

Issues that women workers confront in their everyday lives in their family and at workplace [at micro and meso levels] and their capacity to negotiate with power relations are made complex by the blurring of the boundaries of the workplace and homestead. However, the diverse experiences, struggles of women workers and strong grassroots women leaders proved their capacity to negotiate and resist the patriarchal culture and exploitative work culture to change the power relations at the local-micro and meso levels.

There are some windows of opportunities for women workers to interact in the public sphere to widen their public activism, break isolation, increase mobility, knowledge on societal issues and access other resources – informational base. Ensuring social security and public entitlements of women workers will also add value but needs direct state intervention. In the current political economic policy approach that is unlikely, especially in the plantation context.

In the following chapter, we will examine how women have played a leadership role in the trade unions despite the shortcomings in the oppressive context.

CHAPTER 7

WOMEN WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONS

In this chapter, the crux of the research questions becomes critical. The preceding chapters were organized as a continuum, moving from the individual – self woman worker, family and workplace, but there are many overlaps and interfaces with this chapter. Given the continuum is not a linear process; the sites of struggles interact with empowerment/disempowerment forces and power relations at multiple levels. Whether the trade union is open or closed in terms of practising internal democracy, its inherent values to engage with women workers and their agency is central. At the same time, the instrumental role of the trade union as a workers' organization to negotiate and bargain on behalf of the workers' rights is also influenced by the external economic - social –political contexts at micro, meso and macro levels.

7.1 The Setting

> *"Within Trade Unions [TUs], possibilities are low for women leaders. If you look in the whole country, women's leadership is weak. In the plantation sector it is weaker. Most people think that this is something which belongs to the men. The TU leadership is to blame. There is no consciousness-raising about what is a TU, what are rights. Until there is that kind of leadership within TUs itself, it will not be possible for women in TUs to emerge."*
> *(Top leader of TU)*

What are the forces that encourage or restrict women from participation and involvement in the trade unions both as members and leaders?

What does participation & representation means and at what levels of the TU structure?

How does the Trade union (as an Institution) practice gender equality and democracy?

Trade unions in the tea plantations are located in the most organised sector of the economy among the most poverty stricken and marginalised workers. In the post 1977 period [neo-liberal policies], conditions of poverty and deprivations in the plantations worsened. The dominant union strategies in the plantations illustrate forms of political unionism and are often extended beyond the workplace to union community alliances.[45] Moreover, the hierarchical arrangements that exist in the plantation sector, the management companies are reproduced in the estate and in the union.

The plantations consist of a fragmented constellation of around 61 registered unions in 1999 (Labour Dept., 1999). The unionised workers accounted for nearly 64% of the total workforce in the plantations (450,000 unionised workers out of a workforce of around 700,000 workers) in 1999. Nearly 80% of the unions are small unions with less than 1,000 members, with around six large unions representing the core unions (Labour Dept., 1999). Women work force is the backbone of the plantation industry. Nevertheless, women workers' participation, consultation, representation and influence within the trade unions have been minimal or absent.

The table below shows the absence of women leaders in the central committee in all these leading unions. Some of the leaders have been in these positions for more than 20-30 years.

[45] Biyanwila, Janaka, Union strategies in the Sri Lankan tea plantations: rediscovering the movement dimension, published in Economic and Labour Relations Review, June, 2003 Source Volume: 14 Source Issue: 1, downloaded on 12th March, 2011 from http://www.freepatentsonline.com/articles/Economic-Labour-Relations-Review/240488256.html

Top Level Leadership of Major Plantation Trade Unions

Name of Trade Union	*President Secretary Treasurer*	*President Secretary Treasurer*	*President Secretary Treasurer*
	2007	2008	2009
1. Ceylon Workers Congress	all M	all M	all M
2. Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union	all M	all M	all M
3. National Union of Workers	all M	all M	all M
4. Up -Country Workers Front	all M	all M	all M
5. Ceylon Plantation Workers [Red Flag]Union	2 M, 1 F	2 M, 1 F	2 M, 1 F
6. Lanka Estate Workers Union	all M	all M	all M

Source : RFWM 2011, M- male , F - female

The trade union as an entity operates at three levels – estate, district and central with respective committees. Women workers' have self perceptions about the trade union at different positions and levels and own experiences. Identifying the factors that influence women's involvement in trade union activities in the context of the family and the workplace is imperative to any study. More importantly the enabling spaces that the trade unions provides for women's involvement and active participation in trade union activities and leadership as intersection with internal democratic practices is crucial. Furthermore, how the Trade union is able to grapple and contend with nascent grassroots women's leadership, who attempt to transform the traditional praxis and existing power relations.

7.2 Involvement and Participation

40% of the respondents joined the union when they were between 18 to 24 years old. This may imply that they joined the union when they began working on the plantations. Quite a number of them (50.2%) became members prior to marriage and the other 48.8% after marriage. However, 44.8% of the respondents did not

understand clearly the purpose of the trade union though 36.1% said that it would help them solve their labour problems.

Trade union membership was supported by the father in 35.3% of the cases while the estate leader was responsible for 22% of the respondents. The husbands' support (25.7%) appeared significant only in the interior estates.

43.3% of the respondents participated in public meetings and pickets organized by the trade unions. Of these 46.4% attended May Day meetings and another 16.5% attended Women's Day Meetings.

About 51% of them knew the name of their trade union leader. A higher percentage – 67.5% - knew the name of the estate committee leader. Only 40% of the respondents knew the purpose of Labour Day. 77% of the respondents knew the entitlement for maternity leave. 64.8% of the respondents knew what they should do in case of unjust dismissal. About half of the respondents did not know the name of their trade union leader. About 32.5% did not even know the name of the estate committee leader. The knowledge gets fainter for other details of the trade union like the number of members in the estate committee with only 25.6% getting this correct. 60% of the respondents did not know the purpose of the Labour Day. This was high as all of them were trade union members.

In trade-union related matters the respondents accounted for 46.6 % as decision-makers while the husbands accounted for 43.3%. This may be reflective of the increasing role that women in this survey were playing as leaders in trade-unions as well as the fact that all the respondents were trade union members.

It is unacceptable that 23% of the respondents, all women and trade union members, did not know how many days of maternity leave a woman was entitled to. It was even more shocking that 61% of the respondents did not know the working hours for women. An even higher figure (84.3%) of the respondents did not know the feeding times that mothers were entitled to during work.

The trade union leaders in their interviews did not see the issue of empowering of women leaders as important. They seem content to recruit women to join the trade union but are not thinking of ways to involve the women in trade union activity, such as the Labour Day.

> *"We have a women's wing with more than 3000 women and there are women leaders. In our central committee – we have one woman who is vice chairman and another woman who is vice secretary. We consult them in relation to decision making. But there is no opportunity to go forward – no opportunity to become General Secretary. They don't have the education."* (Top leader)

The trade union leaders did not seem to see that having effective women leaders would inspire other women leaders to emerge or cause greater activism among the women members. Instead they talk of the "old days" when women were active in the union or find fault with the women because they are too busy working the longer hours and extra hours. They do not see that the trade union movement in the plantations failed to take the workers out of poverty levels. Hence, women workers will try to earn as much as they can and even give up their activism because the "bread and butter" issues have not been adequately addressed.

90% of the respondents said that they helped co-workers at the work place. This is particularly important as all of them were union members and there appeared to be a collective awareness. For example, the help was in situation of health problems (31.2%) and 23.7% argued with staff on behalf of their colleagues. Obviously they had an ability to support one another in times of trouble. Out of the small number who did not help their fellow workers, an even smaller number were able to give reasons for this behavior. The support also of male colleagues was seen as an important empowering factor. This helped women to overcome their fear of taking leadership and it is an affirmation that women are seeking.

7.3 Representation and Interest

7.3.1 *Estate and District levels*

Among the 54 respondents, 20.9% held positions as presidents and 4.8% as secretaries. From the ten case studies of trade union leaders, a supportive family environment since childhood emerges as an empowering factor. A supportive father who gave freedom to the daughter clearly led to the development of self-confidence.

Supportive trade union leaders, especially male leaders encouraged women to take up leadership. In addition, there were structures in the trade unions that supported women's leadership. The women's section, the estate committee were the areas where women were leaders. The only exception was the Red Flag Union which had a woman President at the Central Committee level. The President according to the case studies embodied the role model that encouraged women to take up leadership, the structural support for the women leaders who were trained and encouraged to take up leadership of the Estate Committee in addition to the leadership of the Women's section. This is a potent factor that had nurtured many women leaders.

The case studies also showed that all the women had supportive husbands and family members (parents or children). This support to women leaders contributed to their ability to face many challenges. In the survey, 63% of the 38 husbands who responded liked the fact their wives have positions in the trade union. 65% of them said that they helped their wives. 86% of them said that they would help in the household activities. Out of the 10 who responded to why they would not help said that they did not have time or were not in the house to help. Out of the 34 who responded to the question of how they would react if their wives were unable to finish their housework properly 32.3% said that they did not care and 29% said that they would do the unfinished work themselves.

51% of the respondents' husbands were not members of trade unions. Furthermore, only 6% of the respondents' husbands had positions in the trade union. Responses about the advantages and disadvantages of having husbands in trade union positions were too few (12) to be significant.

Though the respondents were all members of trade unions, 56.7% of them did not participate in any trade union meetings or pickets. The reason cited most was no time and lack of interest. 76.7% of the respondents had not gone to an estate committee meeting. 16.2% of these said that they were not informed about the meetings or that the estate committee was not functioning. However they did not take any action to reactivate the estate committee themselves. More than 80% of the respondents did not complain to anyone about estate committee problems. The few who did made the complaint orally to the estate committee head.

At the District Committee level there was hardly any participation. Non-

participation was at 90.5% among the respondents. When asked the reasons for not participating at the District Committee there were very few responses – only 10% of the respondents and all of them wanted solutions to their problems both labour and other problems. The reasons given for non-participation at district committee meetings were lack of time, they did not like those meetings or they were not invited. There appeared to be little interest among the respondents to get feedback from district committee meetings as well. The district committee [majority male] is inactive and seems to function by default, but it wields immense power over the estate workers.

7.3.2 TU Committee level

34% of the respondents expressed an interest in holding a position in the trade unions. Of this number, 39% expressed an interest in the women's section and 36% expressed interest in the estate committee. The interest in getting a position was to solve workers' problems as expressed by 77%. Of the small number (a total of 15) 9 received leadership training and the other 6, some other type of training which was not specified in the survey. When asked if they would like to hold a position in trade unions after they received training, 24% said yes. Obviously the women feel the need for training before taking on leadership. This is a sensible attitude – they want to be good leaders or leaders who can do their job.

68% of the respondents would like women to be in the Estate Committee. This is a clear indication that they see a need for women to be in leadership and that they feel women can be leaders. 80% of the respondents liked to have women leaders in the trade union. 25% of the respondents to this question said that they would help the women leaders as much as they could. Another 49% said that they would help in various ways. This is a positive show of support for the women leaders.

However the disempowerment factors included lack of vision by the women of themselves as leaders and the lack of training. 78% of the respondents did not like to get a position in the trade union structure. In addition the women did not seem to be interested in positions higher up in the structure like the District Committee or the Central Committee.

Only 7% of the respondents received training. The biggest number of respondents (54.6%) said there were no facilities for training as the reason for not getting training. 17% expressed a lack of interest in training. This also included overseas exposure for the women worker leaders which were very few. However, when they were provided as stated by some of the women in the case studies, it had a positive effect on the women leaders.

Of the 20% who did not like to see women in leadership in the trade unions did so because they felt that women could not be good leaders (54.5%); it was risky (22.7%) and other reasons. Thus gender sensitivity was lacking among this small group of women.

The responses seem to point to the fact that trade union positions are not obtained by elections but by appointment. This can be again a feudal and patriarchal (where the husbands who helped the wives get the positions) practice that does not contribute ultimately to empowering women to be leaders.

7.4 Women's Agency and Leadership

7.4.1 Women's Capability and Resistance

38.9% of the 54 leaders among the respondents held a position of President at Estate Committee level. 11.1% were vice-presidents, 12.9% were secretaries, and 35.2 were heads of the women's committees. 31% of these leaders were in their positions for more than 9 years; 25.9% for between 3-5 years. So the respondents who were leaders had been in position for many years already. The women leaders said that their friends (31%), the estate committee leader (24%) and their husbands (22%) helped them to get their trade union positions.

The women leaders (51.8%) in the survey had been engaged mainly in the activity of solving workers' problems. It appeared that the women leaders were not dormant leaders but that they had been active in solving workers' problems. Another 27.7% brought the workers' problems to the trade union leaders presumably at higher levels of leadership. It is heartening to see that 35% of the women leaders coped with their heavy responsibilities and demonstrated assertiveness as this showed:

"I was able to obtain solutions for several issues through discussions. Workers in 3 divisions have to carry their tea leaves baskets for a long distance to load them to the lorry. It is an arduous journey during the rainy season and several women workers have injured themselves falling on the slippery earth. For elderly women it is very difficult. I made a request to the Superintendent to send the lorry to the road that is close to the division. At the Labour Day, I explained the difficulties faced by the women workers and that they get late to reach homes. This request was accepted and the next day arrangements were made to send the lorry to the closer point." (Secretary- estate committee)

"During the time, arrangements were underway to sell our estate to the private sector and all workers remained worried about it. The leaders joined and organized a demonstration demanding that all dues to the workers be paid before in case the estates to be handed over to the private sector. We did not report for work, blocked the road in order to deny access to the person who came to take over the estate. During this demonstration, we took the leading role and mobilized women workers from all divisions." (case study)

A key source of support for the women leaders was their husbands in 76% of the cases. The support was active because the husbands like the wives to hold positions or "passive" when the respondents manage to cope with their household tasks despite their union responsibilities. In fact, 62% of the leaders said that their husbands actually helped them. This help came from husbands who helped in the cooking (55%) and child-care (22%). 34% of the women leaders said that their husbands would complete their unfinished household tasks or ignore the uncompleted tasks (30%). 31% of the women leaders said that they had received training for their current positions. 89% of the training was giving by the trade unions. 76% received leadership training. 30.7% of the women leaders would like to have a higher position than their current position. This appears like healthy ambitions. 70% of these also had a plan to upgrade their skills. This meant they know how to get a higher position. The upward mobility of the women leaders from worker to secretary; working committee to secretary of executive committee of the union women's section was remarkable.

The importance of training and building skills was reiterated by the women leaders:

> *"...very few people take up the needs of women workers and win our rights. The union has given me the strength by providing training on legal aspects of labour issues and ways and means to find solutions. The training has wideedn my horizon and given me the courage to make interventions on labour problems."*
>
> *"...we were taught to write our names instead of placing our thumb impression. After 2 months all workers in this estate were able to place their signatures in the check roll. Our awareness of trade union, importance of using Minutes book and participation in Labour day proceedings was developed. I also educated the other estate women about this."*
>
> *"After awareness raising by the union, all the women workers in the division personally collected their wages. Even I did not collect my wages before. I feel personally proud that I could contribute to redeem women workers from this kind of exploitation. Now the workers personally check, and count their wages . We also put in the minutes book that women workers need half a day leave on pay days."*

In the focus group discussions, the men workers said many affirmative things about the women trade union leaders. They said that women workers find it more comfortable to deal with women representatives and hence they gave more support to the union. The women leaders have the tendency of approaching the Management directly and they have a straightforward approach unlike men leaders. The Management hardly used bad tactics on the women leaders as they do with the men leaders. When women handle the labour issues, the Management takes steps to solve the problem immediately since they do not want to prolong their discussion with women. Women do not let Management buy them as men do. Women represent the specific needs/ issues of women at the committee and men leaders do not bother about women's special needs and requirements. These findings are very positive accolade in favour of women leaders by men workers. This in itself should spur trade unions to take the promotion of women into leadership of the trade unions more seriously.

In this same discussion, the men workers pointed out some disempowering factors. They said that women leaders who were successful in solving the cases with the management were sometimes humiliated even by the co workers saying that a woman leader won because of her sex appeal or favours granted to the management staff. In such cases, other women do not come forward to support the particular leader. In general, women lack self confidence and external exposure to handle their positions more confidently. They also pointed out that the women had difficulty in speaking Sinhalese and this hampered negotiation with the management.

There are many instances when women leaders had to struggle with their agency role, which could be disempowering and empowering at the same time,

> *" When a woman worker complained to me that a Kangani [KG] verbally abused a co-worker, and when I approached him , he abused me also and threatened that he will stop my work. I then went to the estate office and complained to the Superintendent [SP] – and said that 'we are working in this estate, but even you do not have the right to insult us women. It is a disgrace. Therefore if you treat women in this degrading manner, we would not work from tomorrow.' The SP immediately summoned the KG and inquired about the incident. As a result the KG was suspended for 2 days. On the 3rd day the KG addressed the workers in a threatening tone - that my name will be taken off the check roll. For 2 weeks, no worker talked to me but they would talk to me at home but not in the estate. One day I told the workers, I think I don't want to continue as president as nobody raised their voice against that incident. The women workers admitted that it was wrong and asked forgiveness from me. Though I was very much affected by the incident, I did not have a grudge against the KG. – this is the quality, a leader should have." (President - estate committee)*

48% of the women leaders faced difficulties in their positions as leaders. The causes of this were their housework, interference of their husbands, male domination, and low respect for women leaders. 26% of the women leaders admitted that their husbands would be angry and even violent if they failed to complete their household tasks. These indicated a high level of gender insensitivity and patriarchal family practices. In getting help with their difficulties the women turn again to their female working colleagues.

69% of the women leaders did not receive training for their current positions. The main reason given for not receiving training for the current position was there was no opportunity to get such training. 69% of the women leaders did not want to have a higher position than their current position. The survey does not elaborate on the reasons for this.

7.4.2 Women's Section (wing)

Giving Voices and Enabling Strategies

> *"We don't have a special programme to build women's leadership. We don't want to divide men and women. We will try to ensure that women have the same opportunities as men." (Top leader)*
>
> *"Women's wings were always there and promoted women's leadership, now that tradition is being continued but the women's wings are not so strong" (Top leader).*

Organizing women separately is aimed at achieving a sense of democratization, even though this is a debatable issue. The only woman leader [President, TU central committee] had this to say,

> *"In 2001, I began to do research on women's leadership in trade unions. I saw that even though there were women's sections in trade unions, something was missing. I saw many gaps and began thinking how these can be addressed. In the course of our work, we realized that we were working separately. I saw a need to connect the work of the Women's Movement with the Union. We were already organizing domestic workers and garment workers. The position in the central committee brought a connection between the Women's Movement and the Union."*
>
> *"We began to change concept of leadership from being based on an individual to being more collective."*

Women workers and trade unions

Other women leaders of the women's sections interviewed recounted other experiences including constraints they faced,

> *"This section was started by the Top leaders. It is a parallel organization of women. The woman leader has to mediate between families and between KG and women workers and now they also directly dialogue with the management and TU. The biggest role is organizing ceremonies. Still the top leaders take all important decisions, they do not allow us to interact with outsiders. This section has no relations with the TU. Even organizing May Day or International Women's Day, the guidelines are already made by the Top leaders."*

> *"Women have limited power as men in the TU committee are the main decision makers. The women leaders those who were shy in speaking to the male leader have now changed and have developed. There is now mutual respect and joint involvement of men and women leaders and now management is more concerned about women's issues. But lack of resources and wider communication gap between Top leaders and women leaders are constraints."*

Another issue to note is the lack of political will within trade unions to support women's sections of the trade unions. Merely having a women's section does lead to increased participation of women in the trade unions and its leadership. The women's sections appeared to be still in the shadow of the male leadership who often choose and appoint the women leaders. The lack of training [skills and knowledge] of women leaders and the lack of active participation of women leaders in taking up cases outside the individual estate severely constrain women's leadership. The existence of women's sections can create leadership positions and opportunities to remove the barriers that women face, but the women's section should not be a powerless ghetto.

7.5 Top Leadership

Attitudes and Perceptions

Here are some perceptions and attitudes gleaned from the interviews of national leaders,

> *"...But women are also physically weak, most women are in bad health."*
>
> *"Men are not allowing women to come forward. Men dominate and women think that it is right. We cannot change that. It should be done by women's organizations.*
>
> *All men should respect their female relatives. They have to be brought forward, but cannot forget motherhood."*
>
> *"According to our constitution, prominent place is given to women workers. But because of our culture, they are not participating. If a woman is interested to become a leader, they are always welcome".*
>
> *"Those days' women had more time. There were no incentive schemes. They did not work on Sundays. Now there is a time factor. Women don't have time for social work or union work."*
>
> *[illegible] is male dominated. Over 90% of TUs are male dominated. [illegible] themselves feel that they cannot lead. The industry, the state [illegible] the police, the estate management, labour department and [illegible] is male dominated. This is not an exclusive problem of [illegible]*

Counter posing this with day to day experiences and narratives of women leaders in this study is enlightening,

> *"After I was appointed as secretary of the estate committee, the management recognized me and acknowledged my leadership and ability to represent workers problems. The first time I went to the discussion on Labour day with the President and the union representative, the Superintendent offered us seats, it was a big surprise for me. Earlier, permission was refused for us to enter the estate office, but now after*

assuming the position in the estate committee, I feel honored and it is a source of strength for us."

"When I start to speak, I was accepted as leader. Our Secretary was accepted. Our grass roots leader was accepted. We are all accepted. The problem is only for trade union leaders who do not accept women leaders. We showed to workers that women can be powerful leaders. At the same time, we also want to put in the idea of collective leadership".

" I got motivated working with young workers. During our youth we had to face a lot of constraints. Now some of these have been removed over the years, but our women face many constraints. We wish to remove these barriers on their path to empowerment. Our union has proved through me that nobody could stop women if they decide to come forward and fight for justice."

"Women are capable to resist problems but various socio-economic factors hinder their courage. When there are people to support us, we can achieve our goals. A need has arisen for women workers to join together to wage the struggle against the injustices meted out to them."

"When I was appointed to the estate committee, some persons had reservations about my appointment, saying, do you think women can solve problems? They also said that the post of secretary carry heavy responsibilities. Afterwards they changed their opinions when I gradually sorted out their issues. Workers, irrespective of their trade union affiliations have recognized me and bring their issues to me."

The case studies and the interviews with the trade union leaders revealed that there was a lack of democratic practice in many trade unions. This coupled with the fact that almost all of the national trade union level leaders are men do not actually leave much space for women to become leaders of the trade unions. We can assume that women do not have the resources or skills to challenge the men for the key positions in the trade union especially at the national levels.

7.5.1 Claimed or Invited Spaces

Collective Bargaining Agreements [CBA]

CBA is the place where the negotiations with the TU leaders, the Employers and the State where key decisions are made. In this forum, there is no women representation; even though this is the space the TUs could use influence/power, on behalf of the rights of workers. Unfortunately, all the trade union leaders who attend this forum are non workers.

> *" ..Because of Collective Bargaining Agreements- people want to work every day. If you don't go to work, you lose out. Therefore, women are not interested in trade union work. I think women can work for their community. But in the plantation sector, a women's leadership has not emerged. Prior to the collective agreements they had freedom. Now they don't." (Top leader)*
>
> *" At every time of the signing of Collective agreement, I have been mobilizing women workers. We demand our wages be increased to Rs 400 per day under my leadership 5 women participated in satyagraha for 3 days in the estate." (Grassroots woman leader)*
>
> *"We have brought women's issues as workers' issues eg, provision for feeding mothers, pregnant women, sexual harassment etc. We submitted 3 issues – providing space for eating, proper weighing scale & time to read and women to collect their own wages, to include in CBA negotiations, then these could be legally implemented". (Top leader)*

The above voices were self explaining. The CBA is very much a controlled space with competing and compromising interests. Claiming legitimate rights through raising issues should be the standard practice, but the process to lead up the negotiating table at the CBA has not been adopted from the bottom up. It is clear; the women workers have to wage many continuous struggles to get into the vanguard status.

7.6 Moving Forward

Many issues that were highlighted relate to participation, representation and consultation all points to how to translate and practice union democratic ideals at all levels. Some of these sentiments that were collated (during the study) are worth to reflect upon,

> *"Our TU has a more progressive outlook. Leadership is progressive –there are women right at the bottom, but also at the middle level and at a higher level. We are not involved in party politics unlike other unions. Involvement in politics also divides the workers. This is also a disadvantage for the development of the TU movement as well as women's leadership." (Top leader)*
>
> *"Plantation workers are isolated as workers and marginalized from other struggles. It is necessary to change this. We are also raising awareness about other workers and their struggles." (Top leader)*
>
> *"Workers problems over the years have got compounded and grave. Trade unions have contributed to this." (Top leader)*
>
> *"We cannot sustain women's leadership individually, we need structural change." (Top leader)*

On the practical level, grassroots women leaders have shown competence with concrete vision:

> *" I feel that my achievement could be cited as the best example. It is incumbent upon a trade union to provide encouragement and support to women workers. In fact we are doing this now – promoting leadership among women workers." (grassroots leader)*
>
> *"When we provide leadership to the workers, we are called to face several challenges and constraints. Sometimes they would betray us; verbally abuse us. However, I have realized that if we do not intervene to mobilize them, they will remain scattered. Therefore whatever challenges I face in my work, I always wish to remain as a worker, stronger among workers." (grassroots leader)*

"Continuous training needs to be conducted so as to encourage the present generation of women workers as well as to engage in this activism. During the early period, trade unions conducted political classes for the benefit for the workers. But today most trade unions do not implement these. In order to win the rights of workers, the trade unions should make proper contributions and the workers need to comply with the request of the trade unions." (grassroots leader)

"In case we remain silent without engaging in any struggles, the estate owners will make more efforts to keep us their slaves. Today workers need a strategy which would help them to gain their privilege while ensuring their job security."

These insights could be a beginning for opening spaces for political dialogue and more equitable power relations in the context of women workers' emerging active leadership.

7.7 International Legal Provision for Women in Trade Unions

7.7.1 International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions

There are numerous ILO Conventions that provide for decent work, freedom of association, gender equality, and maternity leave. Here a few of the significant ones are mentioned.

On minimum wage (Convention 131,1970) the provision is for a minimum wage that will cover the living expenses of the employee and his/her family members. The plantation wage falls far below this standard and this has caused thousands of women plantation workers to live in poverty and hence hinder them from active participation in trade unions and its leadership.

ILO Convention 183, (2000) on maternity and work not only provides for paid maternity leave for 90 days but it also provides for free medical care during pregnancy and maternity leave, safe work during pregnancy (safe for the baby and the mother during pregnancy).

ILO Conventions on Fair treatment at work in Conventions 111(1958), and 100

(1952) provide for equal pay, sexual intimidation as gender discrimination and freedom to complain.

ILO Conventions 87 (1948) and 98 (1949) provide for trade unions to function at the work place allowing negotiations on terms of employment between the trade union and employers. There is also provision for workers to join a trade union and be active in the trade union outside working hours.

7.7.2. Committee for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW]

Article 11 calls for appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of employment in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women. It calls specifically that women be given equal employment opportunities as men, choice of employment, equal rights for promotion and training. CEDAW also calls for rights to equal renumeration or work of equal value. It also calls for social security, retirement, sickness and invalidity provisions to be equal for women. It specifies particular attention be given to maternity, child-care and women's health. It mentions also non-discrimination of women when they are pregnant.(UN, CEDAW, 1979)

CEDAW provides very specifically for women in the work place as well as for women in the family, culture, economics and politics to have equal rights and to eliminate all forms of discrimination against them. The United Nations has also recently launched a new organisation for Women called UN Women. The challenge then is for trade unions in the plantations to use these norms and conventions for legal reform and changing conditions of work for women as well as transform their unions to ensure that no discrimination exists for women to function as leaders.

7.8 Summary of Key Findings

The general picture here is that women's membership in the trade union is welcomed by the women members and leaders as well as by the men. There is also consensus that women leaders are reliable and honest. The case studies also showed that the women leaders have commitment and imagination alongside

their ability to organize and lead. They have shown that they were able to concretely address many workplace issues. Thus it is clear that women have the ability, commitment and skills to lead in the trade unions. The immense capability of the grassroots leaders and their resistance in the face of disempowerment also showed that they can push the union boundaries/spaces to exercise rights and agency.

Despite this, the trade unions have not been succeeded in reaching out to the women members and educating them about the basics of the trade union and the labour law, especially sections pertaining to women such as maternity leave and feeding time. The women have also not been educated on the use of the Labour Day to raise their issues. This appeared to be a very accessible way of raising issues by the estate committees, even more accessible then going to the trade union office for most women members. It is a pity that this avenue was not better used.

In addition, trade unionists in this survey said that they welcome women leaders and yet the unions have done little more than set up a women's wing. This wing does not have much resources and influence over trade union decision making and policies. Most of them act like little islands outside the trade union structure.

It was also clear that male leaders do not have a vision or a strategy for involving women in the leadership. The women's section could contribute both towards increasing the membership of the trade unions as well as discovering and training effective women leaders. For example, their strategy of getting and training women leaders to use the Labour Day on the estate is something that can be easily used by all trade unions to increase participation of women leaders in union issues. The campaigns that they used such as collecting your own wages, keeping record of the daily harvest brought in by the workers themselves were concrete ways in which women can be made aware of and defend their rights. These are not difficult for any union to emulate. In fact the women's sections can be used strategically to transform gender power relations for women workers to claim rights and benefits.

Therefore, while the external forces of poverty, domestic responsibilities and violence continue to discourage women from public life it must be acknowledged that women workers have tremendous leadership potential that can and must be

tapped in the interests of the plantation workers in Sri Lanka. Investment in women workers will greatly benefit the workers themselves as well as the plantation unions.

Finally, it is important to remember that the Trade union as an institution is affected by the macro external political economic context – the inherent contradictions and it also carries the unequal structures and power relations within the union. The struggles and critiques of neo-liberalism and globalism, political economy and interrelated poverty, deprivation that Trade unions wage on behalf of plantation workers also equally applies to the unions as a political entity, ie, to critique its own internal contradictions on democratic praxis, changing unequal structures and power relations within. Then, the unions will be the effective legitimate voices of the marginalised plantation workers and more so of the impoverished and violated women workers.

" I have acted in such a manner to help all workers irrespective of their trade union affiliation. We can only secure our rights when we work with others in full co-operation, including women workers. One of the reasons for the present plight of our workers is our disunity created by the conspiracies of capitalism. In order to change this situation, we all need to work together..."
[grassroots leader]

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Overall Conclusions

Feminisation of the plantation labour force has opened spaces for women workers to organize, mobilize and assert through their own agency and their empowerment. However, in the current economic-political context [at micro, meso and macro], there are many disempowerment forces that obstruct the gains that women workers had struggled over years to claim leadership. More specifically, the persistence of poverty and forms of deprivation and reduction of household incomes has had adverse consequences on the socio-economic power, linked with increased levels of violence against women [intra household and extra household-workplace]. Further, increasingly unregulated- oppressive labour relations have added pressures to women's emerging leadership.

Given this challenging environment, the Trade Union seems to be the legitimate agency that has the right to secure equity for women workers and address gender based discrimination at the workplace and society. While there have been some success in getting women workers' issues and leadership on top of the agenda of trade unions, the wide opportunities for trade unions to expand the democratic spaces within have not been understood or considered, as the study pointed out.

The research elaborated that there was ample evidence that women workers struggle with poverty, family – society– workplace violence, job security and personal security. The patriarchal structures embedded in the plantation/estate management, the work place, the trade union and in the market – neo liberal policies clearly reproduce unequal power relations in different forms and at different levels. In tandem, there is also evidence of women workers' agency, their empowerment and leadership, and the experiences of resistance and of diverse strategies that women adopt in a given time and space.

The action research did not attempt to map a blue print for empowerment or for developing women's leadership in the context of plantation sector unions, but it intends to stimulate alternative thinking and ways to address the questions the study raise. On the other hand, the questions and findings are compelling, as they are grounded in complex political economy, gender power relations issues that women in which workers live and work. In this context, the two fundamental questions to be taken up, are:

1. **How do we sustain the achievements of the women worker-leaders who narrated their stories boldly and address/change inequitable and unequal power relations?**
2. **How will Trade Unions address the *'gender democracy gap'* within, not only at the grassroots but at middle and top levels?**

8.2 Key Findings

In keeping with the overarching analysis on poverty (and deprivation) and violence against women, which seriously impede women's leadership in trade unions, what follows are key research findings:

- **Political economy of poverty** in the plantation sector context and women workers is shaped by post colonial social institutions and structures and neo liberal policies at the macro, meso and micro levels. As we noted, the plantation workers and the women workers – their marginalization, reinforcement of oppression, regimented power structures, violation of human rights, violence against women – all point to human deprivation and struggle-conflict - ridden situation of this community.
- In the **current global context**, the trend is for informalisation and feminization of labour which allows capital to violate minimum wage regulations, implement coercive controls and 'unfree' labour relations and practice discrimination against women workers. Women's leadership cannot be addressed unless structural poverty – inadequate access to resources, the violence against women condoned by culture and unequal power relations and denial of human freedoms.

Women Workers and the Family

- **Social positioning**. The study showed clearly that poverty is pervasive in the plantations and workers naturally will leave the plantations if they can because they can earn more doing other jobs. This mobility is difficult for women, especially those with young children. Thus those who remain need to struggle for changes in the plantation so that the issue of poverty in the plantations can be addressed. Moreover, women's capacity to access public goods [drinking water, sanitation, housing, transport, health, education services etc] is hampered by lack of freedom, choice [lack of] to negotiate freer wage contracts and hence affects their collective agency.

- **The sexual division of domestic labour** and responsibility for domestic affairs does play a disempowering role in the lives of the respondents. The disempowerment comes because women have domestic tasks thrust upon them, giving them little or no room for choice. The poverty in their situation does not allow them to cast these tasks upon other women whose services they can hire. Secondly the disempowerment comes because these are tasks that are done every day. There is no annual leave for domestic work. In addition the tasks are time-consuming and energy-draining. Thus they have little time or energy for anything else – even leisure and entertainment. In fact women bear 'triple burdens' with domestic, workplace and union/community work.

- **Supporting environment**. The times when the family especially the father or husband supported the development of the respondents have been very few. Yet when the women got the support of the father or husband they took up leadership because they had greater confidence and were more articulate. In these instances the family became an empowering agent. Thus families can make a choice to be empowering of women. At the same time the family can be disempowering for women as the study demonstrated that other factors compel the woman for example, to discontinue formal

education and take up estate work.

- It is also evident that there are women who have qualities that make them leaders. Many of these were nurtured in supportive family environments but many developed **coping strategies** that helped their leadership abilities to be expressed and used. Their capability has been nurtured by **skills and knowledge through praxis.** Here, the women have moved beyond their socially prescribed role of nurturer and 'caregiver' in the family.

- **Women's capability and agency**. We see that the hostile environment to women playing leadership roles is challenged by the women's sense of justice. All the ten women in the case studies displayed a fierce sense of justice – fierce because many paid a high cost for this. They faced social isolation by some fellow-workers, discrimination by their supervisors who tried to break their spirit and thus attempt to force them to give up the role of champion of other workers. Many women also faced domestic violence and abuse by their husbands.

Women and Workplace

- **Work environment**. There are many workplace -issues faced by women workers in vulnerable employment, equal opportunities for skill development and claiming rights are highlighted. It also links these issues to violation of women's bodies and the neo-liberal policies that lead to exploitation of `women's labour. Twin dimensions of the dominant '*patriarchal work- culture*' and the '*neo –liberal – culture*' was very clearly reflected at the meso and macro -national levels.

- The **administrative system is hierarchical** with the women workers found in the lowest and **least powerful position** in the system. Every day the women workers were at the mercy of management staff who decides on the fields where they work. Breast-feeding mothers face difficulty in getting fields nearer their homes or crèches so that they can go back to feed the child and return to work.

- The **management style is very feudal** with bosses who can speak with the workers as rudely as they please. Workers have little recourse to complaints as complaint mechanisms do not appear to exist in the workplace except for Labour Day which is being practiced in many places. Complainants have to face reprisals against angered supervisors and so many women just put up with the abuse.

- Many challenges women workers face, such as **sexual harassment and violence** in the home and workplace, reflected their powerlessness in the plantation community. This too needs to be addressed as women constitute the majority labour force in the plantations. There is clearly a **cycle of poverty-violence-sexual harassment –powerlessness** among women workers in the plantations.

- Issues that women workers confront in their everyday lives in their family and at workplace [at micro and meso levels] and their capacity to negotiate with power relations are made complex by the **blurring of the boundaries of the workplace and homestead.** However, the diverse experiences, struggles of women workers and strong grassroots women leaders proved their **capacity to negotiate and resist the patriarchal culture and exploitative work culture** to change the power relations at the local-micro and meso levels.

- There are some **windows of opportunities** for women workers to interact in the public sphere to widen their public activism, break isolation, increase mobility, knowledge on societal issues and access other resources – informational base. Ensuring **social security and public entitlements** of women workers will also add value but needs direct state intervention. In the current political economic policy approach that is unlikely, especially in the plantation context.

Women and Trade Unions

- **Representation and Interest**. The general picture here is that women's membership in the trade union is welcomed by the women members and leaders as well as by the men. There is also consensus that **women leaders are reliable and honest**. The case studies also showed that the women leaders have commitment and imagination alongside their ability to organize and lead. They have shown that they were able to concretely address many workplace issues. Thus it is clear that women have the **ability, commitment and skills** to lead in the trade unions. The immense capability of the grassroots leaders and their resistance in the face of disempowerment also showed that they can **push the union boundaries/spaces to exercise rights and agency.**

- The trade unions have **not succeeded in reaching out** to the women members and **educating** them about the basics of the trade union and the labour law, especially sections pertaining to women such as maternity leave and feeding time. The women have also not been educated on the use of the Labour Day to raise their issues. This appeared to be a very accessible way of raising issues by the estate committees, even more accessible then going to the trade union office for most women members. It is a pity that this avenue was not better used.

- Trade unionists in this survey said that they welcome women leaders and yet the unions have done little more than set up a women's wing. This wing does **not have much resources and influence over trade union decision making and policies**. Most of them act like little islands outside the trade union structure.

- It was also clear that male leaders do **not have a vision or a strategy** for involving women in the leadership. The women's section could contribute both towards increasing the membership of the trade

unions as well as discovering and training **effective women leaders**. For example, their strategy of getting and training women leaders to use the Labour Day on the estate is something that can be easily used by all trade unions to increase participation of women leaders in union issues. The campaigns that they used such as collecting your own wages, keeping record of the daily harvest brought in by the workers themselves were concrete ways in which women can be made aware of and defend their rights. These are not difficult for any union to emulate. In fact the women's sections can be used strategically to transform gender power relations for women workers to **claim rights and benefits**.

- While the external forces of poverty, domestic responsibilities and violence continue to discourage women from public life it must be acknowledged that women workers have **tremendous leadership potential** that can and must be tapped in the interests of the plantation workers in Sri Lanka. Investment in women workers will greatly benefit the workers themselves as well as the plantation unions.

- The Trade Union as an institution is affected by the macro external political economic context – its inherent contradictions and its unequal structures and power relations within the union. The struggles and critiques of neo-liberalism and globalisation, political economy and interrelated poverty, deprivation that Trade unions wage on behalf of plantation workers also equally apply to the unions as a political entity, i.e., to **critique its own internal contradictions on democratic praxis,** changing unequal structures and power relations within. Then, the unions will be the effective legitimate voices of the marginalised plantation workers and more so of the impoverished and violated women workers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Vision and Structure

a) Women should have representation at all levels of trade unions. Representation involves reflecting the interests of the workforce, with the workers themselves being the ultimate decision-makers in the Union. In the plantation sector, women constitute 60% of the membership and the leadership of the unions needs to reflect this to sustain the union in the face of the current challenges.

b) The nature of leadership needs to be sustainable in the face of the global backlash and the failure of centralized trade union structures. Future leadership needs to be collective and reflective of the strength and solidarity of the grassroots in order to fight the global onslaught of capital.

Policies and Strategies

c) Trade unions need to provide support for women who are in or aspire to leadership so that they can deal with the social and institutional barriers that are stacked up against them.

d) The constitution and the election process should be tools of empowerment for the grassroots members; these should not just be there on paper nor should they be used as tools to perpetuate the power of a few individuals or political parties.

e) There is a need for women's structures in the trade unions that go beyond tokenism. These structures should be an integral part of the constitution with adequate resources.

f) Women should constitute at least 33% of the leadership at all levels.

g) The issue of equality should be evident also in collective bargaining. Women should constitute at least one-third of the collective-bargaining team. In addition, the collective agreement itself should reflect the issues of women in the plantations.

h) Trade unions should adopt a policy that is women-sensitive that makes it easier for women to take part in meetings. This would include not only the venues and timings of meetings but also how meetings are run, child-care during meetings, transportation for women to attend meetings etc.

i) Trade unions should adopt specific strategies to increase the numbers of women in their decision-making bodies. These can be in the form of affirmative action programs, targets, a time-plan, monitoring and assessment mechanisms.

j) As women in the research have indicated, the biggest problems they face are poverty and violence. The policies of the trade union should include strategies that address these two problems.

k) Trade unions should conduct campaigns and produce educational material in suitable formats to educate women about their rights in the workplace and the implementation of labour laws. These will include: collecting your own salary, taking note of the harvest that you bring in everyday, using Labour Day and so on.

l) Trade unions should adopt a systematic training program to prepare women to participate in trade union activity and leadership. Women and men must have equal access to awareness raising programs for example on gender power relations and training. Leadership training is also essential to help women take up leadership and it should be a continuing process.

m) A mentoring program would help women leaders immensely. Advice and support from experienced persons, both men and women would be an invaluable help for women trade unionists who want to take on union responsibilities.

n) There should be a trade union policy about care work, which recognizes that men and women have equal responsibility for reproductive, domestic and care work.

o) An inter-union solidarity forum to bring women from the trade unions together periodically would help to raise women's issues in the trade unions and in the country as well. It will build the solidarity of the women in the trade unions and strengthen them. This Forum can compile "*Good practices*" in terms of equality and the participation of women in trade unions that can be circulated to all the trade unions. The forum should also look at the possibility of reforms and policy advocacy for women in plantations. It would be a good place to lobby for actions and laws to address the issues of poverty and violence in the plantations.

A Call to Women in the Trade Unions

a) While recognizing that the nature of the union affects the lives of the women, women need to reclaim the unions by strengthening bonds among themselves and working together to transform the unions.

Future Direction:

a. The research findings should be discussed with as many trade unions as possible in Sri Lanka and the region. The problems of women's leadership in trade unions extend to all trade unions in the sector and only with their involvement can these issues be addressed effectively.
b. It will be helpful to conduct further specific action research to investigate some of the key questions on the role of trade unions in different contexts and women's leadership. The research focus needs to underpin the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, class, poverty and violence against women in the analysis.

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Annexure 1

Table - List of Unions and number of Respondents

Union	**Members/Respondents**
Ceylon Workers' Congress [CWC]	106
Lanka Jathika Estate Workers [LJEW]	03
Red Flag Union [RFU]	32
Lanka Estate Workers' Union [LEWU]	08
United National Party [UNP]	02
Upcountry Workers' Front [UWF]	02
Upcountry People's Front [UPF]	06
National Workers' Union [NWU]	10
Sri Lanka Freedom Party [SLFP]	01
United National Workers' Union [UNWU]	01
Others	26
Not mentioned	12
Non related	01
Total	**210**