

# Asian Working Women and Agency: Their Voices

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## Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to discuss the challenges of organising women workers in Asia, and to discuss how trade unions can facilitate their more effective participation in these movements. The paper is primarily informed by research undertaken with Southern Initiative on Globalization and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR). Formed in Perth, Western Australia in 1991 and made up of delegates from India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea, the Philippines, Hong Kong, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Brazil, the aim of SIGTUR is to promote collaborative activity by independent trade unions in the 'South' or rather countries within the Asia-Pacific. The paper highlights the effects of neo-liberalism on workers and develop appropriate international responses.*

## Introduction

'It is close to 7pm and as the sun sets on another ordinary day Shanti and her colleagues prepare to close down their machines to complete the day's work. But they will not be going home. They will not be paid for the entire day's work. They have already punched their time cards at 5pm. They will eat their evening meal, provided by the employer who will in turn deduct the food cost from their salaries. They will take a scrap piece of fabric lying on the floor and find a small space between machines to lie down and sleep until 6am when they rise and start work again. At the end of the month Shanti

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will receive her salary, in cash, with no pay receipt. She will not know her rate per hour or per day' (Brehaut 2001).

Shanti is a woman garment worker living in Batticaloa, a war zone in the northeast of Sri Lanka. The *SIGTUR* women's forum heard many stories similar to Shanti's. From these, some common themes emerged including increasing rates of casualisation of female workers, and trends such as home-working, outsourcing and sub-contracting within women's employment patterns. In summary, the stories of *SIGTUR* women confirm what the literature has identified as a key element in the neo-liberal labour management model: labour flexibility. By prioritising market interests over social claims, the use of labour flexibility matches working lives to market demands so as to maximize profitability by minimizing production costs associated with labour. Casualisation, restructuring and working conditions such as those of Shanti's depict labour market flexibility strategies. While confirming that the status of *SIGTUR* women's labour matched the concept of labour flexibility, women delegates also told stories about increased frequency of sexual harassment at workplaces and a trend particularly by workers from rural areas towards sex trafficking because of lack of traditional employment opportunities as a result of neo-liberal restructuring. Compounding this scenario was confirmation that women were still being paid lower wage rates than males, and working under sub-standard occupational health, safety and welfare standards. In summary, not only has neo-liberalism restructured working lives to match market demands; little heed is paid to the social fallout arising from these policies. As has always been the case, women more often than not bear the brunt of this fallout.

However, while verifying this picture, *SIGTUR* delegates simultaneously recounted stories of actions that they and their unions had taken to assist women members manage some of these negative effects of neo-liberalism. One aim of this paper is to recount these stories and thus confirm that the possibilities for worker agency exist, even given the restrictions of neo-liberalism on workers' lives. Nonetheless, while highlighting these possibilities, these stories simultaneously confirm that there are a number of obstacles facing Asian women workers in staging agency. The first section of this paper begins by describing the employment context of Asian women workers before describing the obstacles in organising women workers associated with this context. Amongst these is the serious issue of how patriarchy within unions themselves impedes organising Asian women workers. The second part of the paper thus goes on to relate how some *SIGTUR* members have circumvented these obstacles and organised women workers. This includes strategies to ad-

dress the question of patriarchy in trade union structures. Again, while highlighting the existence of possibilities to effectively redress obstacles in organising women workers, these stories also confirm that trade unions and even *SIGTUR* will have to seriously consider their *modus operandi* if they are to effectively increase women's participation in trade unions.

### Employment Context of *SIGTUR* Women

With the exception of Australia and New Zealand, *SIGTUR* member countries have all pursued an export-oriented model of industrial (EOI) development post 1945. Focussed on attracting foreign investors to stimulate the development of a light manufacturing sector, other attractions of EOI were said to include the transference of technology and skills through foreign investor activity; promotion of backward and forward linkages for local enterprises; and finally, of course job creation for a mass of labour with minimal education and low skills (Caspersz 2001). EOI employment opportunities were particularly targeted at women and indigenous groups. As a result women's workforce participation rates have dramatically increased post adoption of EOI policies. For instance, in Malaysia women's total workforce numbers increased from 1354.1 million in 1975 to 2244.6 million in 1990 (Yahya 1994: 39-41).

Crafted by policy makers within the World Bank, the neo-liberal nature of EOI has been confirmed by a number of writers (Toye 1987; Colcough 1991). It was argued that promoting economic growth and market interests via EOI was the solution to reducing poverty and generating industrial development in newly industrialising economies (NIEs). Into this category of NIEs implementing EOI firstly fell *SIGTUR* member countries such as South Korea, Hong Kong and Malaysia, followed by Thailand, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh; then Brazil and most recently India and South Africa.

Adoption of EOI by successive waves of NIEs occurred because of the success enjoyed by earlier countries such as South Korea whose gross domestic product (GDP) substantially increased upon pursuit of EOI, growing at an average of 9 percent between 1965-87 (Gereffi 1990). EOI also became an attractive policy mix because of significant improvements in social indices such as life expectancy, infant mortality and educational opportunities (Haggard 1995). Thus, the policy prescription did seem to deliver what was promised: economic growth with improvement in social development.

However, commentators studying the economic EOI 'miracle' in NIEs have at the same time been critical of some of the 'costs' incurred

in pursuing EOI (Shoesmith 1986; ILO 1998). Much attention has particularly been given to the EOI labour management model, which was most exemplified amongst export processing or free trade zone (EPZs/FTZs) workers. Described as the characteristic strategy of EOI (Takeo 1977) a major criticism levelled against the EOI/EPZ model was that a guarantee of labour subordination was provided to capital as a carrot to attract foreign investors implement EOI (Frobel et al 1980; Deyo 1989). Along with restrictions on workers' rights to form trade unions, participate in collective bargaining and use the strike weapon as a negotiating tool, a key feature of this 'labour peace' model was the dominance of women as workers. It was argued that their inherent docility and dexterity coupled with their low level of skills and education made them an attractive and cheap employee (Shoesmith 1986; Caspersz 2001). As a Malaysian brochure summarized (as quoted by Kaur 1994: 17):

The manual dexterity of the Oriental female is famous the world over. Her hands are small and she works with extreme care. Who, therefore, could be better qualified by nature and inheritance to contribute to the efficiency of the production line than the Oriental girl? Women workers are considered to have nimble fingers; they are docile and compliant; they do not get involved in trade union activity and are reluctant to go on strike. They are good workers, tolerant of routine, repetitive and monotonous tasks which men abhor and shun.

In summary, not only were EOI investors assured of a labour management model unlikely to threaten their ability to maximize production opportunities; by dominating these workforces with women, they were also assured of a labour management model unlikely to threaten their ability to maximize production opportunities. Therefore, while undoubtedly increasing employment opportunities for women, the context in which they were conscripted into EOI/EPZ workforces has only reinforced the subservient status which they have always held in Asian societies. This conclusion is supported when examining other aspects associated with Asian women's work. For instance, studies confirm that the majority of female EOI jobs lacked transferable skill training. In addition, women have failed to secure substantial promotional opportunities beyond lower end skill levels within EOI sponsored workplaces (Jayaweera 1996; Caspersz 2001).

The vulnerability facing women workers are as a result of this picture was confirmed by *SIGTUR* delegates. From Indonesia it was reported that more than 38.5 million workers in the service and manufacturing

sectors have lost jobs since the 1997 Asian Crisis. Eighty per cent of manufacturing workers retrenched were women, while 55 per cent of service workers sacked were women (DS, 2 July, 2001). Between January and December 1998, over 83,865 workers were retrenched in Malaysia. Of the total number retrenched, 43.5 per cent were women. Malaysian *SIGTUR* women organisers also reported a trend towards replacing local workers with contract employees (LS, 31 July, 2001). Korean (PICIS, 13 May 2002) Pakistan (RJ, 31 August, 2001) and Sri Lankan delegates (SH, 19 July, 2001) reported similar stories.

In conclusion, while used to aid and abet capitalist interests to pursue their goals, no real attempt has been made under EOI to substantially alter the terms of women's labour force participation, thus confirming their reserve labour status. Kumari Jayawardene's conclusion in her review of the status of women in Asian countries during the 19th century still resonates when considering the employment status of Asian women in the 20th and 21st centuries (1986: 256-257):

Capitalist growth in these countries was thus able to loosen some of the traditional bonds of subordination among women of all classes, to give women some mobility and education, and to bring them out of the domestic sphere into the social sphere. However, it continued to constrain them in a system of overall male domination, even though some of the specific features of domination changed.

### **Obstacles in Organising Asian Women Workers**

A number of obstacles in organising Asian women workers stem from this scenario. A major one is the reality of 'patriarchy at work' (Walby 1986). Analyses argue that the increased participation of women in Asian workforces post second world war was specifically solicited to match the requirements of capitalist production for a mass of low skilled and cheap labour (see Mitter 1986; Heyzer 1986). However, while conscripting women into industrial work life for their own purposes, capital has combined with government (or the state) to create employment structures which not only serve to reinforce women's work as secondary, but also perpetuate wider external societal patriarchal norms and mores. For instance, studies (Ong 1987; Caspersz 2001; Gills and Piper 2002) confirm that management has deliberately deployed males into lower and middle management positions and women in low skilled assembly work, to maintain women's compliance and docility at workplaces.

An effective system of external control stems from this scenario.

However, while serious, a further effect arises where these external tactics intersect with workers own social norms and mores to stimulate a process of self-governance within workers (Dean 1994). That is, the impact of 'patriarchy at work' in subduing women's agency is not only due to external 'events' residing in deliberate manipulation of gender by government and capital; but also internal self-regulation linked to cultural norms and mores. For instance, many young Sri Lankan women workers are the major income earner for their families. Even though participation in industrial work comes at a cost of separation from these families and enduring personal hardships such as sharing a room and communal cooking and washing facilities with between 20-50 colleagues (Biyagama, 17 January, 1996), these women workers are nonetheless reluctant to participate in any activity which may threaten their ability to continue providing for their families. In summary, the social norms influencing their life inhibit their willingness to engage in agency.

Compounding this scenario is the extensive use by capital of 'corporate culturism' management techniques (Willmott 1993). Quality circles, team projects and JCCs fall under the rubric of what Willmott (1993) refers to as 'corporate culturism'. Willmott (1993) argues that corporate culturism buys compliance from workers by using these strategies to change their mindsets from being employees of an organisation to viewing themselves as members of an organisational family. The family organisation thus offers workers a 'seduction of security' against the vagaries of the outside world, such as unemployment. The overall effect of corporate culturism is to substitute workers' urge to cause disruption at workplaces with a desire to instead enhance the performance of work organisations. In the process, their willingness to express agency is dampened (Ong 1987; Caspersz 2001).

Finally, the additional reality affecting Asian working women's ability to engage in effective agency is the patriarchal nature of the trade union organisations seeking to represent and promote their interests. Most trade unions in Asia are dominated by males. In fact, *SIGTUR* itself amply evidences this claim. In most *SIGTUR* country delegations at Seoul in 2001, men easily outnumbered women. Even the Australian delegation had only 3 women delegates out of a total of 20. However, the effect of patriarchy in Asian trade unions extends beyond the issue of gender participation in the unions and encompasses a realm previously discussed, that is, the effect of wider societal patriarchal norms which relegate women a subservient status in most Asian societies. These attitudes have impeded serious consideration by mainstream organisations such as unions about women's employment issues until relatively recently. Again, *SIGTUR* illustrates this. While *SIGTUR* has been in op-



eration for 10 years, the 2001 Conference was the first time that a women's forum had been scheduled as part of the formal conference proceedings. Women's issues were previously considered marginal to conference agendas dealing with the politics of neo-liberal policies on workers' status. While agency can of course be expressed at many levels of an individual's life, it is argued that to substantially contest the power of capitalist interests, especially within the neo-liberal model which accords priority to these interests, workers need to act collectively. In summary, trade unions are important foci for workers to stage agency. However, their patriarchal attitudes and structures represent an obstacle that must be surmounted if they are to become effective advocates for women workers.

Given this scenario, two questions arise: how can Asian women workers stage effective agency? How can trade unions or trade union organisations like *SIGTUR* facilitate this quest?

### **New Ways of Organising**

In January 2000 the Free Trade Zone Workers Union (FTZWU) was formed in Sri Lanka. This covers workers in three Sri Lankan free trade zones (FTZs), Katunayake, Biyagama and Koggala. Anecdotal evidence suggests that 87 percent of Sri Lankan FTZ workers are young, mainly unmarried women (SLW, *SIGTUR*, Seoul, 2001). Groundwork culminating in the union's formation in 2000 had begun as early as 1980. Along with most other EOI countries (Caspersz 2001), the Sri Lankan government either banned or severely curtailed unions from operating in FTZs, because they may 'frighten away the investors'. These policies and overt action by capital and state such as inhibiting promotional opportunities for union activists and/or jailing them, had generally made women workers fearful of becoming involved in unions (KY, 18 January, 1996). This meant that worker organisers (and unions) had to develop hidden covert tactics to contact workers and instil confidence in them about the *bona fides* of being associated with a worker organisation or union.

One such tactic was when a group of worker activists formed the Katunayake Women's Centre, which was strategically located near the boarding houses in which many FTZ women workers lived. The location was important because the Centre became another building within the community of boarding-house buildings in which women workers lived. Women workers were also able to walk past the Centre when walking to and from their work place.

Rather than attempting to organise using work issues, the Centre in-

stead adopted the tactic of providing services and activities useful to women's daily lives as a route through which to make contact with workers. These included legal and health services, as well as a library (daily newspapers, books etc) and video facility. In addition, the Centre organised recreational activities such as singing, dance and drama in which the women could participate. The organisers would also use these mediums to enact real-life work problems such as confronting a harassing supervisor, to educate workers about their rights in this scenario as well as train them to manage this better for themselves. However, these activities also had the purpose of building solidarity between women workers. To further build solidarity between workers and themselves, organisers would visit workers in their boarding houses after work hours to talk to them about their working lives. As a result, organisers not only became well known to women workers; they became part of their physical environment.

By using these everyday tactics organisers were able to build confidence in workers and form a workers 'cadre' of workers from the same workplace to help organise others. More importantly, because these tactics resonated with workers internal *modus operandi* (or self-governance), organisers were able to facilitate development of a community of worker activists. Interestingly, the conservative United National Party's (UNP) decision to allow JCCs to form between workers and management aided in developing this. Workers were generally suspicious of JCCs and saw them as a management tool rather than acting on workers behalf. The fact that JCCs were not allowed to discuss remuneration and employment conditions such as annual leave because these were seen as management prerogative confirmed this perception (KY, 18 January 1996). However, Centre worker activists developed such effective relationships with Katunayake FTZ JCC members that JCC worker representatives would hold planning meetings at the Centre prior to attending workplace JCC meetings. As a result, activists were able to form a 'workers' cadre' through whom they could develop trust amongst other workers towards them, and between workers and their own 'cadre' leaders, to inspire them to stage resistance activities against management decisions (KY, 18 January, 1996). These included sit down strikes, or pickets outside workplaces.

While working at this local level, Centre organisers also sought to transpose their local campaigns onto a global level by using international networks. For instance, the *SIGTUR* network was used to mobilise international letter writing campaigns against companies threatening worker redundancies or termination. The success of this strategy was most recently noted in the campaign against North Sails Lanka, a German



owned manufacturer in the Katunayake FTZ. The company had planned to sack 200 out of a total workforce of 350, of which 300 were women. After staging a strike, management closed the company and dismissed 12 workers who were JCC worker representatives. While organising letters of protest from the international union network (including *SIGTUR*) to the North Sails Sri Lankan management, unionists also organised for the international network to send protests to the company headquarters in Germany (TieAsia, 11 September, 2002). As a result, the company has agreed to reinstate dismissed workers (TieAsia, 11 October, 2002).

The opportunity to convert this informal organising into a formal union organisation came in 1994 when the Sri Lankan government changed from the conservative UNP to the more radical People's Alliance (PA). The Joint Association of Workers and Workers Councils of the Free Trade Zones of Sri Lanka was formed in June 1996 as a vehicle for organising free trade workers. The union emerged from this organisation and formally registered in January 2000. The FTZWU has a majority of women on the executive committee and as members. However, the campaign continues. While forming 11 branches, employers have only recognised 1, thus limiting the ability of the FTZWU to campaign for better employment conditions on behalf of all FTZ workers.

The FTZWU case highlights that to effectively organise Asian women workers given the confines of their working environments, unions have to consider alternative ways of organising. As SH, a key women organiser for FTZWU, states (19 July, 2001):

Discussion must go outside of traditional trade union thinking and address how women can be empowered to face these challenges. For example how community based solidarity, already existing in South Asian communities can be used by unions to fight against these challenges and allow women to self organise and determine their destiny.

SH issues a clear challenge. In order to stimulate effective women's agency trade unions have to develop strategies that first and foremost respond to their issues. The route chosen by the FTZWU to offer workers activities useful to their daily lives and matching their everyday internal cultural frameworks is one example. Similar strategies can be found amongst other *SIGTUR* member unions. For instance to organise casual women domestic workers into the Hong Kong Domestic Union (HKDWU), the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HCTU) offered training courses to women domestic workers. The training

helped women negotiate substantially higher wages, thus making it a very useful activity for them to be engaged in. It took a year and a half for the HKCTU to build up both support as well as raise awareness of the need for these workers to unionise. Most recently the HCKTU was able to help workers organise a protest against a labour hiring agency which was threatening to change workers' status to self-employed, thus denying them any protection under labour laws (Union Action, Sept 2001: 1-2).

Studies confirm that developing organising strategies which draw on bases workers consider 'useful' and everyday, is not only important because they are effective; it is also because management has pursued similar strategies to cultivate worker commitment to the organisation rather than their own working interests. That is, by demonstrating to workers that they care about workers' non-working lives (through schemes such as providing scholarship schemes for workers children, health benefit coverage for extended family), worker willingness to engage in activities threatening the ongoing nature of these becomes dampened. Current research confirms this 'corporate culturism' effect on worker agency (Caspersz, 2001).

To counteract this, the challenge for unions not only lies within the types of organising strategies they may deploy; but also in ensuring that their own structures are 'attractive' to workers. Constructing avenues for effective participation by workers is one way in which unions can achieve this. As DS states (2 July, 2001):

Neoliberalism is not only restructuring the world economy, big and small enterprises; it even changes the structure and function of the family. It affects women both in her productive and social reproduction. Any union and women's movement that doesn't reflect and later, redefine their movement based on this analysis, would never be able to respond to any challenge effectively, and would only become a half-hearted struggle that never goes into the root of people's oppression.

Responding to this challenge however requires unions to address issues of patriarchy within their own internal structures. Again, stories from SIGTUR illustrate some ways in which this can be done.

RJ is a key organiser in Pakistan. RJ said that while her union covered nearly 20,000 workers, there were few women members. When asked why, RJ confirmed that patriarchal attitudes both within and without the union were key factors (November, 2001):

We have a patriarchal system in my federation also male dominated officers. They dislike women to sit on the mainstream of the union.

In recognition of the need to redress this attitude within her own union organisation, RJ co-ordinates 'gender sensitisation' programmes. She invites 'experts' into her union organisation to address male union officers and workers about issues facing working women, in the hope that that this may change their attitudes about the value of women's work.

However, addressing patriarchy within unions has to extend beyond this level. To reach into the 'root of people's oppression' (DS, 2 July, 2001), trade unions not only have to formalise acculturation or gender sensitisation programmes; they have to also become serious about instituting affirmative action policies. Recognition of this led to a recommendation from the *SIGTUR* Seoul Congress that at least 50 percent of delegates to future *SIGTUR* Congresses would be female.

At the very, least trade union organisers must match the 'private interests' of the target group; that is, women need to organise women. Again as RJ states (November, 2001):

Male members are not allowed to go to the women workers' families. Because it is our culture, it is not allowed for them to organize women workers. So it is the responsibility of the female activist to organize women workers. To have a close relationship with the family of the female workers. If there is any problem inside the family, we tried our best to resolve the family problems too.

Research with Malaysian women FTZ workers has confirmed a similar reality. This was particularly in the case of the BP workers movement, which formed a branch of the Electrical Industries Workers Union despite government policy prohibiting them from doing so. The key activist was a Muslim Malay female who led a workforce of 1,700 to stage a two week lockout of the Japanese electronics parts manufacturer, until both state and capital acceded to their demand to be allowed to organise (Caspersz, 2001). And again, K, the female union organiser of New Zealand call centre workers, re-affirmed the importance of having a woman organising other women (November, 2001):

But also that, there was a really strong stereotype of what unions are and what union organisers are like. Which is kind of old and male and things and a lot of young (female) people don't identify with

that and so they see unions as being something that is for older people.

However, while having a like-to-like match is extremely critical, at the same time long term change within unions will only occur when women occupy officer and especially senior officer positions. For instance, rather than having all male office bearers, at the very least there should be an equal mix of genders or adoption of an FTZWU model. This union is dominated by female union officials in recognition of the gender composition of the workforce. Recognition of this need led to a recommendation from the *SIGTUR* Seoul Congress that at least 50 per cent of delegates to future *SIGTUR* Congresses would be female. K's story confirms the importance of this strategy. K has now become a member of the executive of the EIWU, a traditionally male dominated union. Most significantly, K's voice is 'heard' at this level because it is well known that without her, the union at the workplace will falter. As K stated (22 July, 1995):

But compared with me because the majority of the worker is female and A (another union organiser) is male and then communication a bit different between male and female and then they trust me more.

## Conclusion

The stories told here highlight some lessons that should be seriously considered by those concerned about the issue of union revitalisation. Firstly, the stories illustrate the importance of 'everyday' tactics which match internal cultural constructs if union organising is to be effective. For instance, there is no point in only using male organisers to work with female workers. Secondly, they highlight the importance of unions addressing their own patriarchal structures, if their own integrity is to remain unchallenged. In other words, they must not only become more culturally and gender appropriate in their ways of organising; they must also be gender appropriate in their structures.

The question remains however: while stimulated, how is consciousness maintained? That is, when considering the tactics used by both state and capital to manage Asian women workers an additional challenge emerges; this is the task of developing worker consciousness which is sustainable and long term and encourages commitment to agency beyond an immediate issue. The 'seduction of security' stemming from 'corporate culturism' strategies of team work, quality circles – in sum

converting workers into the one happy workplace family – cannot be underestimated in the effect that it has on subduing worker agency. As ‘corporate culturism’ attempts to replace working class consciousness with company consciousness, traditional workplace antagonisms between workers and managers (or employers) which have stimulated worker agency in the past have become diluted. This thesis is all the more applicable to women workers suffering a marginalised work status, which is manipulated, when market priorities desire. Given this, how does worker consciousness get developed in the long term? Again the stories told here offer some lessons which can be considered.

The first is that the process of consciousness raising amongst women workers has a slow gestation period because of their work context. It took FTZWU organisers 20 years before the union was formed; HKCTU organised for 1½ years and K, the BP worker, agitated for 5 years before motivating others to stage strike action which culminated in union formation. Overcoming workers’ fear of retaliatory action from state and capital (job loss, non promotion) is undoubtedly one reason why gestation is slow; however convincing workers that their interests differ from capital is another reason why consciousness raising takes so long. Marx’s adage ‘all that is solid melts into air’ befittingly describes the social disarray stemming from neo-liberalism where workers and capitalist see common instead of different interests. Those seeking to organise workers such as Asian women must deal with this reality; not ignore it as an aberration which will ‘right’ itself.

While important, of perhaps greatest importance is the need to focus organising on an issue considered unjust or an affront to human nature. In the FZTWU, unfair dismissal of women workers at a garment factory in the Katunayake FTZ motivated activists to establish the Centre. Discriminatory pay scales between ethnic groups inspired BP workers to mobilise with K to stage their mighty lockout. And again feeling aggrieved and unjustly treated motivated women workers in Hong Kong to form the HKDWU.

Researching this question of how consciousness is maintained in the long term is of vital importance to worker organisations or trade unions and to workers themselves. It is a research agenda, which must be pursued if worker and trade union organisations are to remain relevant to Asian women workers in tomorrow and the next day’s neo-liberal world.

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