

Chapter 2

Patriarchy and (Un)Doing Factory of Women's Collective Identity in Sri Lanka's Localised Global Apparel Industry: The Glass Ceiling Revisited

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ABSTRACT

Systemic manifestations of women's subordination, such as the glass ceiling, are still a reality in organisations. Yet, the glass ceiling effect in the Global South is often conceptualised vis-à-vis (white) women's experience in 'gendered organisations' and women's domestic role in the Southern societies. In this context, this chapter, based on a fieldwork research conducted in Sri Lanka's apparel industry, critically examines the glass ceiling effect of glass ceiling on women's career advancement in the Global South. Alongside the notion of 'universal' patriarchy, it problematises the 'universal' structure of the glass ceiling. And it shows that (un)doing factory women's collective identity—as lamai (little ones)—and the glass ceiling intermingle in the process of women's subordination in the apparel industry. The chapter concludes that, in the apparel industry, the role of managerial women—as well as of men in (un)doing factory women's collective identity—is crucial in keeping the glass ceiling in place.

INTRODUCTION

Despite some 'success' stories of (managerial) women, systematic manifestations of women's subordination, such as the 'glass ceiling' or 'sticky floor'—and their effect— are still a reality for women in the Global South (Kiaye & Singh, 2013; Ahmed & Maitra, 2015; Duraisamy & Duraisamy, 2016). The shift of the global assembly line from the North to the South— the 'first global shift,' which took place in the 1970s and 1980s as part of neoliberalisation of the global political economy (Harvey, 2005;

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Dicken, 2007) —had created job opportunities for (rural young) women in the South Asian region. As a result, during the 1970s and 1980s ‘traditionally’ unemployed (rural young) women in the region had become ‘productive labourers,’ mostly in the labour-intensive global apparel industry (Jayaweera, 2002; Khosla, 2009; Jayawardena, 2014).

Even in ‘feminised’ industries like global apparel industry— such as we see in the case of Sri Lanka’s apparel industry, where 80 per cent of employees are (rural young) women— women remain a ‘subordinated group’ (Jayawardena, 2014): In fact, nearly all ‘top-rung,’ skilled jobs (on the shop floor) in the apparel industry (*viz.*, factory managers, operations managers, and production executives) are occupied by men. On the contrary, ‘low-rung,’ unskilled jobs, such as the machine operators/seamstresses, quality checkers, and helpers, remain ‘feminine jobs’ (Jayawardena, 2010; Hancock et al., 2015). Therefore, as far as the subordination of women in the Global South is concerned, the case of Sri Lanka’s apparel industry is significant. Despite the role of the industry as the largest export income generator and one of the major job providers in Sri Lanka (Kelegama, 2005; Jayawardena, 2010; Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2016), since its emergence in the late 1970s, the apparel industry has been characterised by gender segregated jobs. Yet, the gendered job segregation and women’s subordination in the industry cannot be viewed as mere organisational or industrial phenomena. In other words, the policies of the industry alone cannot be accused of ‘keeping women down,’ particularly on the shop floor of the industry. Rather, the job segregation and subordination are not only imbued with (un)doing factory women’s collective identity —as *lamai* (broadly meaning ‘little ones’) —in the industry. They are also embedded with many adverse socio-organisational forces and processes, such as sexual harassment, unattainable production targets and inhumane punishments at work in the industry, and gender prejudices in wider Sri Lankan society (Devanarayana, 1997; Hewamanne, 2008; Jayawardena, 2010, 2014, 2015; Hancock et al., 2015). Thus, these forces and processes, coupled with (un)doing factory women’s collective identity, tend to keep women as a subordinated group in the apparel industry and thereby, hinder their career development (Jayawardena, 2014, 2015).

Despite this complex nature of the subordination of (factory) women in the apparel industries of global south, the literature on the subject often highlights the patriarchal character in corporate culture (David & Woodward, 1998; Hughes, 2002), and in South Asian societies as the main reason for the glass ceiling—and its effect— in the Global South (Bal, 2004; Agrawal, 2013; Kiaye & Singh, 2013; Ahmed & Maitra, 2015; Duraisamy & Duraisamy, 2016). Yet, as some scholars argue, the glass ceiling in the Global South is not an exclusive product of the patriarchy or corporate men (Luke, 1998). Further, the literature shows the historically embedded nature of the patriarchal social relations in the South (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1991; Jayawardena, 2000). Therefore, it is doubtful whether the notion of ‘universal’ patriarchy, which explains power relations in which women’s interests are subordinated to the interests of men (Weedon, 1987), facilitates to understand the subordination of women —in the global apparel industry— in the South. In this context, women’s domestic chores and family commitments, which are firmly embedded in the patriarchal social relations in the Southern societies, appear as the main causes that tend to keep the glass ceiling in place in the Global South organisations (Bal, 2004; Kargwell, 2008; Jain & Mukherji, 2010; Kiaye & Singh, 2013). Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether the domestic chores and family commitments of women are crucial in keeping (factory) women down in the global apparel industry as the majority of these women — such as we see in the apparel industry of Sri Lanka—are young and unmarried (Jayaweera, 2002; Hancock et al., 2015).

With this background, based on a fieldwork research conducted in the apparel industry of Sri Lanka, this chapter seeks to reframe the glass ceiling —and its effect — in the global apparel industry in the

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