An intersectional approach to understanding the inequality and subordination of Sri Lankan women apparel workers

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Abstract

Contrary to the feminist research based on exclusively gendered processes of inequality in organisations, intersectionality theorists propose an intersectional approach to understanding the inequalities and subordination experienced by Global South women factory workers representing different social hierarchies and experiencing diverse social realities. This paper contributes to the literature by bringing empirical evidence from the Sri Lankan apparel industry to inform the inequality and subordination of women in Global South factory floors from an intersectional perspective. A qualitative methodology using data generated through interviews with women shop floor-level apparel workers who work in export processing zones (EPZs) and village areas was adopted to explore the interplay between multiple social categories (gender, poverty, and rurality) influenced by broader power structures (patriarchy and capitalism) as well as political inequalities in determining the inequalities and subordination of women workers in globalised apparel factories. Further, we consider how gendered and class-based factory processes produce and reproduce the inequalities and subordination of these women at work. The analysis identifies that workers' rural origins, poverty, and traditionally defined gendered roles have worked interactively in favour of capitalist industrialists by pushing these women workers to lower-paid manual jobs in the apparel industry. The

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factories utilise cheap, material-based incentives and recruitment systems for rewarding and recruiting shop floor workers, capitalising on their poverty, rurality and gender-based requirements as a source of exploitation. In addition, factory managers' behaviours create certain beliefs in these women workers, favouring the factories, resulting in the further subordination of these women through perceived cohesiveness or compliance. Finally, this paper concludes that capitalism, together with patriarchy, creates unequal and subordinated positions for poor, rural women through their collective agendas of wealth maximisation.

Keywords: *Inequality, Intersectionality, Sri Lankan apparel industry, Subordination, Women workers*

Introduction

The emergence of global capitalism and the international division of sex labour provided the opportunity for Northern capitalists to enter the Global South looking for cheap labour (Elson & Pearson, 1981; Gunawardana, 2010; Mezzadri, 2017; Mohanty et al., 1991; Ruwanpura, 2016). This migration of factory work to the Global South has significantly impacted women who have been absorbed as wage labour in export-oriented manufacturing industries (Elson & Pearson, 1981; Parpart & Stichter, 2016). The women who have entered factory work under this global restructuring process face numerous hardships, particularly in the textile and garment industry (Shaw & Hale, 2002), such as diminished rights as workers and exposure to harsh and exploitative conditions (Prentice et al., 2018; Ruwanpura, 2016, 2022). Therefore, the 'exploitation of women labour' has become a vital aspect of the discourse on labour exploitation on Global South factory floors (Elson & Pearson, 1981; Mezzadri, 2017; Mohanty et al., 1991).

The global apparel industry employs nearly sixty million people worldwide, of which 80% are women concentrated in the Global South (LeBaron et al., 2022). As past literature points out, poor women, especially whose socio-economic existence has been influenced by patriarchal subjugation, have become exploited commodities under the capitalist-patriarchy in the global production sites (Elson & Pearson, 1981; Mezzadri, 2016). The situation of Sri Lankan women apparel workers is not different (see Hewamanne, 2020; Seneviratne,

2019). The literature explicitly characterises the shop floor workforce of the Sri Lankan apparel industry as female-dominant, poor, rural, and rural migrant (Gunawardana, 2016; Hewamanne, 2003; Jayaweera, 2003; Lynch, 2007; Shaw, 2007). The women who hail from poor rural backgrounds are pushed in to the industry by their peasant family backgrounds and the resulting limited employment opportunities (Shaw, 2007), and are subject to exploitative and oppressive work practices (Hewamanne, 2020). Inspired by this backdrop, we seek to answer the research question: How are women shop floor workers unequally treated and subordinated in the Sri Lankan export-oriented apparel factory floor through the intersectional influence of multiple social categories (rurality, poverty and gender)? In doing so, we bring a broader perspective to understand the subjugation of women in the Global South production floors.

The extant literature on Global South labour has used intersectional perspectives in understanding the exploitation and inequalities of Global South workers placed within global value chains (Carswell & De Neve, 2013; Marslev et al., 2022; Mezzadri, 2017; Mezzadri & Fan, 2018; Seneviratne, 2018, 2019). These studies show the interrelations of gender, class, place, ethnicity and other social categories in determining the subjugation of Global South female labour. For instance, Seneviratne (2019) illustrates how female workers from an export processing zone in Sri Lanka are subject to oppression, given the multiple social categories they represent: class and gender. However, there is sufficient space to explore the subjugation of women apparel workers driven by multiply oppressive structures generating data from across the industry: inside and outside of EPZs. Therefore, as an extension to the extant literature, this paper first explores how multiple social categories (rurality, poverty, and gender) that are influenced by broader power structures (patriarchy and capitalism), as well as political inequalities, have interactively driven Sri Lankan poor, rural women to become shop floor workers in the Southern apparel industry. In addition, we investigate how factory processes and practices, which feed on the same intersectional influences, produce and reproduce inequalities and subordination of women workers on the factory floor. The latter part of the analysis is inspired by Acker's notion of 'gendered substructures'. Acker (2006, 2012) uses gendered substructures to illustrate gendered organisational processes that create and recreate gender inequalities. By extending Acker's characterisation, in this paper, we show how gendered processes simultaneously become class

processes[1] that produce and reproduce the inequality and subordination of women shop floor workers.

Literature Review

Researching inequality and subordination through intersectionality

The gap in organisational studies concerning gender in organisations was effectively filled by feminist researchers who studied how gender processes produce and reproduce inequalities in organisations (Acker, 2004, 2006, 2012). Acker (2012) points out that wage gaps between genders, sex-segregated jobs, and hierarchical positions, which are identified as the most common forms of inequalities at work, have significant variations across time and place (Acker, 2012). Acker (2012, p. 215) introduced the idea of 'gendered substructures' which "points to often-invisible processes in the ordinary lives of organizations in which gendered assumptions about women and men, femininity and masculinity, are embedded and reproduced, and gender inequalities perpetuated." She identifies organising processes, organisational culture, interactions on the job, and gendered identities as components of gendered substructures. However, feminist theories that focus on merely one social category—gender—have been criticised for not acknowledging the other contextual factors at work in the suppression of women, these factors being class, location, race, sexuality, and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1990; Holvino, 2010; Romero, 2018).

Acker (2012) points out that inclusions and exclusions of women in organising processes (e.g., job design, wage discrimination, distribution of decision-making, and supervisory power) are created and recreated through the complex interweaving of several identity categories such as gender, race, and class. Therefore, in feminist studies, examining one organisational context, namely, the experiences of disadvantaged women workers, cannot be comprehended through gender or gendered processes alone, as such experiences are intersected and shaped by several other processes such as race, class, and/or some other social category (Acker, 2012). Crenshaw (1990), a founder of the intersectional perspective, claims that the case of 'women of colour' comprehensively

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[1] In this paper, both poverty and rurality driven processes can be considered class processes.

demonstrates the necessity for understanding the life experiences of Black women through the intersectionality of gender and race, rather than studying them separately (Crenshaw, 1990). Inspired by this line of thought, in this paper, we use an intersectional approach to analyse the experiences of shop floor workers, who have multiple identities, particularly in their positions on multiple social hierarchies.

Intersectionality literature emphasises the inadequacy of a one-dimensional approach in conceptualising the lived experiences of women who represent different social hierarchies and experience various social realities (Romero, 2018). Intersectionality scholars affirm that the multiple identities that people experience work as interlocking systems of oppression (Beal, 2008; Romero, 2018). Acker (2004) illustrates how Bangladeshi women apparel workers are vulnerable under the regime of global capitalism, given their gender-related poverty. This emphasises the importance of foregrounding intersectional analysis in understanding structural and political inequalities, as it helps to explicate how power works in creating overlapping marginalised identities (Cho et al., 2013). Crenshaw (1990) explicates structural inequalities by underlining the frustration and burnout experienced by Black women in minority communities in Los Angeles due to the intersectionality of class, patriarchy, and racism. Mezzadri (2016) elucidates the interplay between patriarchy and class formation in determining the subordination of women workers in the feminised Indian export-oriented apparel industry. Given their specific gender, class, and ethnicity, Seneviratne (2011) suggests that Sri Lankan women apparel shop floor workers and female plantation workers are subjected to a triple exploitation. However, there does remain an opportunity to study how gender, class, and rural origin interactively determine the subjugation of women apparel workers on factory floors through organisational processes such as incentive and recruitment systems, and factory cultures. Therefore, the next section is on the research site relevant to this study, illustrating its suitability for the purpose of the study.

The Sri Lankan apparel industry

The history of the Sri Lankan export-oriented apparel industry dates back to the late 1970s. In 1977, the prevailing United National Party government opened the country's economy to the rest of the world by introducing a radical shift in the economy: from a state-led import-substitution industrialisation strategy to a market-oriented policy (Athukorala & Rajapatirana, 2000; Jayaweera, 2003;

Seneviratne, 2019). This radical shift in macroeconomic policies was accompanied by the "stabilization and structural adjustment package" promoted by the IMF and the World Bank (Jayaweera, 2003, p. 196). Under the new structural changes to the economy, the private sector became the engine of growth, wherein the promotion of foreign investment in export-oriented industries has been a key element (Athukorala & Rajapatirana, 2000; Jayaweera, 2003). Following these market-oriented policy reforms, the government established the Export Development Board and EPZs to facilitate the country's export sector (Jayaweera, 2003). This marked the commencement of the Sri Lankan apparel industry, which now plays a leading role in the global apparel-sourcing supply chain. The Sri Lankan garment industry now has more than two hundred and fifty apparel factories established throughout the country in both EPZs and village areas[2] under the private ownership of local and foreign investors.

The economic and social significance of the Sri Lankan apparel industry is very high (Mirza & Ensign, 2021; Perry, 2012; Ruwanpura & Wrigley, 2011), with the industry achieving a 5 billion (US$) export milestone in 2018 (Masakorala, 2019). In 2020, the industry contributed 39% of the total export income of the country (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2021). In addition, the apparel industry generates more than 990,000 job opportunities in Sri Lanka (Mirza & Ensign, 2021), representing 33% of the country's total manufacturing jobs (Asia Garment Hub, 2021). Of the industry's total workforce, the majority comprises female workers who are concentrated in lower-level jobs on production floors (Gunatilaka, 2019; Jayawardena, 2014; Lynch, 1999; Madurawala, 2017; Seneviratne, 2011). Of the operational grades of the industry (such as machinists), more than 78% are women (Asia Development Bank, 2020), but the majority of management and technical positions are occupied by men (Gunawardana, 2014). This data confirms that gender-based inequalities are present in relation to the sex segregation of jobs, hierarchical positions, and working conditions in the Sri Lankan apparel industry (see also Gunawardana, 2007, 2016; Hancock et al., 2015; Hewamanne, 2008b). Following this, the next section will briefly explain how Sri Lankan traditional socio-cultural values help in creating a female apparel worker preferred by capitalists.

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[2] In this study, the garment factories which operate outside of the EPZs are called as village areas factories.

Feminised apparel workforce in Sri Lanka

Women dominate the labour force in Global South assembly lines as they are seen "not only to have naturally nimble fingers, but also to be naturally more docile and willing to accept tough work, discipline, and naturally less inclined to join trade unions, than men; and to be naturally more suited to tedious, repetitious, monotonous work" (Elson & Pearson, 1981, p. 93; Hewamanne, 2020). Indeed, Fernández-Kelly (1983) suggests that one of the main reasons for relocating global manufacturing functions in the Global South has been the availability of young women with qualities such as docility, dexterity, and willingness to work for low wages, qualities which are highly valued in export-oriented workers. The Sri Lankan literature confirms that traditional patriarchal expectations of women are that they be "*ahinsaka* (innocent), disciplined, and filial," and these have become the main qualifications for recruiting rural females to the apparel industry (Gunawardana, 2007, p. 80). Furthermore, employers prefer rural women over men, as their "village upbringing and less demanding nature made them ideal employees" (Gunawardana, 2016, p. 866). This representation of women apparel workers also suggests that locally defined subjectivities of femininity serve managers' expectations in global production networks. Further, the production of these subjectivities of productive femininity is not limited to broader society but is reproduced within factory floors as well (Salzinger, 2003). Bair (2010, p. 205) notes "that this spatial fragmentation is frequently accompanied by the feminization of manufacturing…, [where] the globalization of production is fundamentally about reorganizing the social geography of industry."

Although they have achieved some financial independence, Sri Lankan rural women who stepped into wage jobs in globalised factory sites have been stigmatised for challenging traditional patriarchal values (Lynch, 2007). The innate female value of *lajja-baya* (shame-fear of wrongdoing) in Sri Lankan society has supported male managers in their quest for disciplined and docile workers who comply with the decisions made by the factory. Female workers in EPZs who challenge these traditional boundaries are labelled as the 'bad girls' of society (Lynch, 2007) or even "no-good whores" (Hewamanne (2008a, p. 35). The reason for such labelling could well be due to societal beliefs that rural women should live a constrained life under the control of their fathers or brothers, and that society is unwilling to accept their freedom from this form of patriarchy in the EPZs (Lynch, 2007). Given this background, it is necessary to investigate how rural, poor women workers, who have been assigned a

derogatory identity in society, are marginalised in the factory context through organisational processes and practices.

The literature on female shop floor workers in the Sri Lankan apparel industry explicitly characterises the shop floor workforce of the Sri Lankan apparel industry as dominated by poor, rural, and rural migrant women (Hewamanne, 2003; Jayaweera, 2003; Lynch, 2007; Seneviratne, 2019). These women apparel workers experience an unpleasant work environment comprising poor work conditions, exploitation, and violence, though the manner in which this experience can differ across the industry (Hancock et al., 2015; Ruwanpura, 2022). To date, little attention has been paid to analysing how organisational processes such as incentive and recruitment systems and organisational culture create and recreate the inequalities and subordination of women apparel workers through the simultaneously occurring gendered and class processes on the factory floor. The same organisational processes and/or practices can be used to create and recreate multiple inclusions and exclusions driven by the multiple identities of workers (Acker, 2012). Acker (2012, p. 219) states that, "[i]nteractions at work may be shaped by racial stereotyping as well as gender and class stereotyping." In this paper, we analyse how poor, rural women are pushed into lower hierarchical positions in the apparel industry through the interactions of broader power structures and political inequalities that prevail in society. The fieldwork used in generating the data and the analytical methods are explained in the next section.

Fieldwork and Methods Used

A qualitative methodology, inspired by the ontology of historical realism followed by the epistemology of subjectivism, was adopted in this study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Howell, 2016; Scotland, 2012). The analysis sought to reveal how participants' constructions of meaning are influenced by the already established social and organisational power structures (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Forty-one interviews were conducted with women apparel workers from the Katunayake export processing zone (KEPZ) and village area factories in the Kurunegala and Kegalle districts. All participants were women operational level workers with little hierarchical differences: machine operators, cutters, packers, jumpers[3], quality checkers, team leaders and a technician. Also, the participants

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[3] A jumper can perform several sewing operations.

had a minimum of two years of experience in the industry. Choosing participants from two different locational contexts enabled us to generate a rich data set representing a cross-section of participants from broad socio-economic backgrounds. For example, women workers from the KEPZ resided in boarding places around Awariyawatta[4], mostly alone and away from their families and home villages, whereas village participants mostly stayed with their husbands, children, and/or parents at their village homes. Also, compared to the village participants, many KEPZ participants had previously engaged more in farming and worked in village-based garment factories. On the other hand, village participants, compared to the KEPZ ones, had worked more as housemaids and apparel workers overseas. Interviewing women workers from multiple locations and factories also helped us to obtain a broad knowledge of the organisational processes that produce and reproduce inequalities, oppression, and subordination. For instance, village participants had more experience with the male managers' acts of oppression over women workers than the KEPZ participants.

In relation to research ethics, we followed all the policies and guidelines of the Queensland University of Technology, Australia, for conducting ethical research with human participants and obtained formal ethical clearance. Two key elements were, obtaining the informed consent of the participants and keeping the names of all participants and business organisations anonymous to avoid any job-related, personal, or commercial discomfort they would have to experience due to the data used in this study.

The study's principal researcher spent three months visiting the boarding places and houses of women workers to recruit interview participants for the study. She chose participants for the interviews with the support of the organisation 'Da Bindu' (Beads of Sweat)[5] as well as her personal contacts. These field visits were beneficial for providing access to and information about the socio-economic background of the women participants. For instance, once, while she was interviewing a KEPZ participant, the husband of another woman apparel worker appeared with his wife, asking the researcher to interview his wife without her permission. The researcher refused his request, as she realised that the unwarranted influence of this person on his wife would violate the ethical conduct of research, in terms of informed consent and uncoerced participation.

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[4] Awariyawatta area, which is the town nearest to the KEPZ.

[5] *Da Bindu* is a non-profit organisation established to protect and promote the rights of women workers in the free trade zones of Katunayake and other industrial areas.

Later, she came to know that this man had attempted to insinuate his wife into the research to obtain the Rs.1500 gift voucher offered to interview participants in recognition of their valuable time spent on the interviews. This incident demonstrates the patriarchal domination experienced by women, particularly poor women (Herath, 2015).

On another day of the field visit, when the principal researcher was entering a female boarding place, an old man materialised in front of her and asked questions about herself and the purpose of her visit. After her explanation, he started berating her, "Please, lady, please do not disturb these girls on Sundays. They have only this day to do all their cooking, bathing and shopping. So, I cannot allow you to go inside." With this interference, her attempt to meet an apparel worker was unsuccessful. This incident portrays that these women are still under men's protection, even after moving to the KEPZ, away from their families and households. His refusal prevented the researcher from meeting women workers and offering them the opportunity even to refuse to participate. These incidents exemplify the gendered power imbalance, in which women's decisions are subordinated to the males (Herath, 2015).

In addition to the rich data obtained through fieldwork, company magazines[6] provided by interview participants were used as a data source for this study. These magazines are designed to show off the company's achievements, including those in relation to workers and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Most also include a couple of pages of poems and verses written by company workers. These poems and verses are creatively knitted around many themes related to life experiences, relationships, people, and life aspirations, such as poverty, weariness, sacrifices made for family well-being, and love. These poems provided an additional lens through which it was possible to understand the poverty experienced by these rural workers and the important role they play in their households as mothers, sisters, and daughters (Gunawardana, 2016). The use of relevant and multiple data sources: participants from two work contexts with little hierarchical gaps, and multiple data generation techniques: interviews and magazines, was to ensure the credibility and confirmability of the findings (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

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[6] Some apparel factories publish quarterly magazines comprising factory information related to their CSR initiatives, factories' and workers' achievements, the artwork of shop floor workers, articles related to workers' careers and personal development, and messages from factory owners and managers to workers.

The analysis process began with the transcription of interviews, which followed a familiarisation with the audio-recorded interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Mason, 2004). All the data was transcribed using the Google voice typing tool. Subsequently, we coded the transcriptions using NVivo 12 software. The interviews were retained in the Sinhalese language[7]during the coding process, and only the quotes included in the paper were translated into English. The codes were primarily data-driven, and were derived in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A few examples are 'reasons for choosing the industry', 'material incentives', 'control through coercion or conformance', and 'commodification of workers', The coded data were analysed "literally, interpretively and reflexively'' (Mason, 2004, p. 78) to expose "hidden ideology by revealing participants' places in systems which empower or disempower them" (Scotland, 2012, p. 14). Reading literally refers to reading the data, for instance, an interview transcript, in "its form and sequence, or the literal substance" (Mason, 2004, p. 78). Bringing an inside and outside meaning to the data generated is referred to as interpretive reading. The interpretations were developed based on the ideas expressed by the research participants during the interviews. Throughout the analysis, critical interpretations were made to uncover the domination of (mostly male) managers over poor, rural women apparel workers in light of the theory of intersectionality. The three subsequent sections will present the analysis and discussion, following the study's main objectives.

Analysis and Discussion

The migration of poor, rural women into the apparel industry
The data analysis shows that rurality, poverty, and traditionally defined gendered characteristics and roles, have worked interactively in favour of capitalists by thrusting these women workers to lower-paid manual jobs in the apparel industry. Moreover, it shows how patriarchy interplays with the political inequalities of the country in pushing these rural women into poorly-paid wage work.

Most participants hailed from semi-urban or rural areas in Sri Lanka, such as Trincomalee, Madirigiriya, Anuradhapura, Tangalle, Matara, and Kurunegala, and shared the characterisation of women apparel workers across the industry as

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[7] All the interviews were held in the Sinhalese language.

poor and rural. People in regional areas generally enjoy fewer facilities and resources in relation to education, employment opportunities, and infrastructure compared to people in urban areas (Amarasuriya, 2010). Among rural people, agriculture is the primary source of livelihood (Jayaweera et al., 2007). Yet, with the new structural changes to the economy after 1977, the private sector became the engine of growth, in which the promotion of foreign investment in export-oriented industries has been a key element (Athukorala & Rajapatirana, 2000; Jayaweera, 2003). The lack of attention received by the agricultural sector over the years resulted in slow growth in terms of productivity and income (Jayaweera et al., 2007). Consequently, rural men and women were compelled to move to the non-agricultural sector (Jayaweera et al., 2007).

Of our participants, quite a few were engaged in small-scale farming before joining the apparel industry. However, due to the irregular and insufficient income they earned from cultivation, many decided to seek employment in the apparel industry. Because of drought, flooding, and pest infestations throughout the year, their harvests were often ruined, or even after spending a great deal of money on fertilizer and pesticides, they had a lower yield than expected. Further, small-scale farmers most often sell their hard-earned harvest to trade intermediaries at lower prices. Under these circumstances, many who had relied on farming suffered from not having a minimum income to spend, even on their primary needs. The small-scale on which they farmed made our research participants even more vulnerable than they would have been if they had been large-scale farmers. *Suranji*, a 50-years-old KEPZ participant hailing from Dambulla, explained how her bitter experience of farming drove her to the apparel industry:

> I farmed. I grew things like pumpkins and chillies. Afterwards, there was nothing left after spending so much money on pesticides and fertilizers. When we sell, there is no one to buy at a fair price. We can't even afford the bare essentials. No rain, no water. That's why I came here. (*Suranji*, packer, KEPZ).

The poem entitled '*Goviya*' (The Farmer),[8] written by a male apparel worker, was found in one of the company magazines. It illustrates the link between rural

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[8] This poem was composed in the Sinhala language by a male apparel worker named Akila Dewshan. The poem was written originally in Sinhala and the version given above is the English translation of the first author.

poverty and cultivation, highlighting how rural farmers can become suicidal due to ruined harvests and mounting debt.

Goviya (The Farmer)

I slept by the lake – as usual
Compressing my dry lips together – for her who struggles to smile as before
– to see the mockery of a mirage
that sleeps with the sun…
The paddy field today – is an ancient crone sans teeth
The borrowed paddy seeds holding thousands of dreams,
– are swallowed by the bare ground (leaving our debts intact)
and sleep without producing anything……

When the kitchen is empty – the jewellery disappears without a trace;
when the loan instalment cannot be paid
our lands are forfeit - and when this grief becomes unbearable

we reach desperately for the pesticides

(Akila Dewshan, 2020, p. 7)

The above poem reflects the sorrow-filled lives of small-scale farmers in Sri Lanka. As a result of this tragic reality, poor village farmers seek alternative job opportunities to escape their financial burdens. Unfortunately, most of these poor, rural women are restricted to a few gendered and less-paid jobs that receive little societal returns, despite their significant contribution to the country's economy (Jayaweera et al., 2007).

Many study participants revealed they had worked as foreign apparel workers and foreign housemaids before coming into the Sri Lankan apparel industry. Some indicated an intention to go abroad again to work as housemaids due to the insufficient salary they receive from apparel factories. Thus, the participants' responses revealed that poor village women are most often restricted to limited and less prestigious gendered professions such as apparel workers (domestic or overseas), and housemaids (overseas). One of the reasons for this is the lack of educational opportunities due to rurality and poverty.

The responses of several participants who had come from rural villages illustrated how poverty, together with family problems, influenced them to sacrifice their education and find jobs in the apparel industry to support their

families. Of the forty-one participants of the study, only seven had attempted the General Certificate of Education, Advanced Level examination, while the rest had schooled only up to the General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level. Among them, some had stopped schooling at Year 7, Year 8, or Year 10. In addition, several participants stated that they could not attempt the General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level though they had schooled up to year 11[9], due to various reasons such as financial difficulties and family problems. For instance, 43-years-old *Nayana* recounts:

> I stopped my education in Year 8. [I] Had multiple problems, like economic problems. Both [my] mother and father died. Honestly speaking, there was no one left [to help us] in those years. So, [my] education was disrupted. At that time [at the time I joined the KEPZ], there was nothing else to do. We farmed. So, we were not in a position to do anything [due to the insufficient income]. That is when I came here. (*Nayana*, packer, KEPZ).

Nilu (28-years-old packer)*,* also from the KEPZ, who is a General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level examination dropout, agreed, "We do not have other job opportunities." Another KEPZ participant, *Tharaka* (22-years-old machine operator), also commented, "[I] don't have enough educational qualifications for any other job. They don't ask for those things at garment factories."

Finding a white-collar job without the General Certificate of Education, Advanced Level examination, English literacy and computer literacy is challenging in Sri Lanka. English is considered the "language of business and commerce as well as being widely spoken and understood in urban areas" (Perry, 2012, p. 145). Further, *Priyanwada*, a 36-years-old village participant, had this to say: "I wanted to get another job. But I haven't learnt computer skills. It's hard to find another job without that kind of knowledge. Therefore, I joined the current factory." Fernando and Cohen (2017) discuss how class-based exclusion occurs in some private-sector organisations in Sri Lanka through the recruitment processes that favour applicants with skills such as the ability to communicate in English. Our findings demonstrate how rurality and poverty curtail rural children's opportunities for acquiring skills such as communicating in English and working with computers.

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[9] In Sri Lanka, the G.C.E (General Certificate of Education) Ordinary Level is taken by Year 11 students (at the average age of 16). This examination functions as the selection test for the G.C.E Advanced Level examination, from which students are selected for state universities in Sri Lanka, where they receive a free education.

The disparities in resources and facilities between urban and rural schools in Sri Lanka restrict rural children's opportunities to develop the skills expected by the current labour market (Alawattegama, 2020; Amarasuriya, 2010). Therefore, educational success is determined primarily by parents' ability to spend on their children's education, despite the fact that Sri Lanka has a free education system that is supposed to provide equal access to all students (Alawattegama, 2020; Herath, 2015). Students from low-income family backgrounds tend to drop out of the formal education system in the middle of their primary or secondary education. Consequently, these students are driven to find jobs to escape their financial problems and support their families. In particular, rural women who drop out of mainstream education enter gender-stereotyped professions such as apparel workers or housemaids. Another important revelation of the data analysis is that many of these participants, because they need to shoulder the family responsibilities, have been compelled to forego their education at a relatively early stage:

> I have passed the Advanced Level (A/L). I received 1C [credit pass] and 2 S [simple passes]. I did not continue my studies. The main reason was that [my] dad was a little sick. After that, we found it difficult to make ends meet. My family has an elder sister and a younger sister. My younger sister also wants to study. So, [my] dad was a supervisor at a garment factory, and I thought I should explore possibilities in that industry (*Jinadaree*, 23-years-old packer, village).

The sexual division of labour and lack of exposure to the broader society are additional factors that constrain the job opportunities available to poor, rural women. Sri Lankan research finds that there is a set of gendered jobs: "teaching, weaving, nursing, picking, labelling, assembling, sewing work in the apparel industry, agricultural activities, tea packing, rubber-tapping and coir production work in the plantation sector (that) are the most popular jobs among women" (Herath, 2015, p. 10) and their paid work is effectively a continuation of their domestic roles within the household (De Alwis, 1995). Rural women are trained from childhood in household activities like childcare, cooking, washing, and sewing, assuming that such training is a prerequisite for a successful married life. Therefore, rural women are perceived as being skilled at manually dexterous tasks, and, by extension, these skills have become a qualification for apparel industry employment (Elson & Pearson, 1981).

The limited exposure of rural people, particularly women, to communication technology has disconnected them from the wider society and limited their understanding of the dynamics of that society (Jayaweera et al., 2007). For instance, *Sada* a 37-years-old machine operator from the KEPZ described how she was placed in the apparel industry without her knowledge by a third-party institution that supplies labour to different industries:

> We were brought saying that there is an electric goods manufacturing factory. But I was put in a garment factory. At that time, we didn't have enough knowledge to go and find another job. In those days, we didn't even know that we could go for an interview and get a job. So, we just stayed on, in spite of the difficulties. (*Sada*, KEPZ).

Sada's experience empirically confirms that in Sri Lanka, "rural girls, in particular, may be cruelly exploited when they travel to urban centres looking for jobs and other, better opportunities" due to their limited exposure to society (Herath, 2015, p. 6).

The above findings demonstrate that the interplay between rurality and poverty (which often go hand in hand) and their gender has resulted in these women ending up as low-paid operational-level workers in apparel factories. However, it is not simply a matter of gender. Had it been simply their gender, this would have been common to all women in Sri Lanka. On the contrary, Sri Lankan literature shows that many women are in highly paid professions, such as doctors, and university lecturers; however, it has also been identified that this trend cannot be seen across Sri Lankan society, as women represent a wide spectrum of socio-economic experiences in the country (Herath, 2015). Thus, obtaining a complete understanding of the subordination of marginalised people in society is impossible when studying the social categories that lead to their marginalisation, separately (Crenshaw, 1990). This study explores how multiple social categories—rurality, class, and gender—are influenced by the broader patriarchal and capitalist power structures that interactively push these women into lower positions in the apparel industry by demonstrating that intersectionality transcends the additive impacts of multiple social categories as separate factors of inequality (Choo & Ferree, 2010; MacKinnon, 2013). In the next section, we show how, having been pushed into these low-paying jobs, inequality and subordination are perpetuated through organisational processes that feed on the same intersectional subjectivities.

Incentive and recruitment systems of inequality and subordination

This analysis shows how, hidden in plain sight, gender and class-based incentive and recruitment systems tailored to the female-dominant shop floor workforce are strategically adopted by managers, in which gender and class look neutral (Acker, 2012). As per the interview respondents, many apparel factories from both KEPZ and village areas have instituted incentive systems for shop floor workers, which are different from standard, target-driven financial incentive systems and those of the executive and managerial level workers. For instance, some factories offer incentives, such as a *haal malla* (a bag of rice) or a *badu malla* (a bag of groceries), to encourage employee efficiency and regular attendance. *Nishadi* a 21-years-old machine operator from the KEPZ, stated, "In our factory, if [we] achieve 100% [of the target given], we are given a grocery bag worth Rs. 7500." The participants appreciated the factory's practice of providing groceries to reward performance, as, due to their abject poverty, receiving groceries like rice[10] helped them to meet their responsibilities for food and health requirements of their families, as mothers, sisters, or daughters. The practice of using these meagre handouts as incentives appears to be capitalising on the significant contribution these women are expected to make to the daily requirements of the household, despite their secondary position within the patriarchal family structure (Elson & Pearson, 1981; Hancock et al., 2015; Jayaweera et al., 2007). In many Asian countries, for various socio-economic reasons, women have become the breadwinners of their families (Mies, 2014). In Sri Lanka, rural women, in particular, have become the breadwinners of their families due to limited contributions from their 'drunkard husbands' (Herath, 2008, p. 8). Indeed, many respondents from this study indicated that they shouldered the economic burdens of their families due to their husbands' alcoholism.

Some apparel factories offer material incentives such as pizza and top-ups for pre-paid mobile plans (Rs.50/Rs.100) to shop floor workers to celebrate production target achievements and improve attendance. Pizza is a western food that is very popular among the recently formed upper-middle and bourgeoisie classes who live in a few urbanised main cities in Sri Lanka. As such, pizza is a somewhat novel and rarely affordable type of food for these women apparel workers who hail from rural areas in the country, and is therefore considered a

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[10] Rice is the staple food of Sri Lankans.

treat by these workers. *Ganga, a* 43-years-old packer from KEPZ, described her experience in such a situation:

> On some days, when a target was achieved so well, they [the factory management] would bring food such as pizza and distribute it to us. If they [the factory] have more [production] than their target for the year, they will give such things to workers. Then the *lamayi* (shop floor workers) are very happy.

The information that emerges from this data points out that these trivial material handouts pacify these women, which is a way of capitalising on their extreme poverty and rural background.

Due to the industry's high turnover rate of shop floor workers (Hewamanne, 2008b; Madurawala, 2017; Seneviratne, 2019), apparel factories utilise special recruitment methods tailored to shop floor workers. One such recruitment method is the use of third-party labour suppliers. Some third-party labour suppliers visit rural areas of the country in order to recruit workers for factories. As *Sada,* from the KEPZ, mentioned, she was manipulatively brought to the factory by a third-party labour supplier under the guise of employment at an electrical equipment manufacturing company. Despite these questionable tactics, apparel factories tend not to correct such manipulative practices of third-party labour suppliers so long as they receive a steady supply of semi-skilled or unskilled labour to meet production targets.

Another recruitment strategy that these factories deploy, which is unlikely to be seen in the upper layers of the hierarchy, is incentivising existing shop floor workers to entice new workers to the factory. For instance, *Shamalee*, a 19-years-old machine operator, said they were awarded a gold pendant for recruiting a new shop floor worker to the factory. Hewamanne (2003) identifies apparel workers' penchant for jewellery, make-up and overall grooming as rebellious behaviours that challenge middle-class values. Gathering gold jewellery is also a common practice of young working-class women, because gold jewellery is an important item of the dowry for an arranged marriage (Jayaweera, 2003; Seneviratne, 2011). Gold jewellery and Sri Lankan womanhood have a strong historical relationship, as gold is an integral element in all precious and important moments in women's lives, such as puberty and marriage. Therefore, offering a gold pendant to women workers, on the one hand, inspires poor women workers to find new workers for the factory; on the

other hand, offering a gold pendant for new recruitment can be understood as an act of commodifying poor women's labour.

By analysing these material-based incentives and recruitment systems that focus mainly on the gendered shop-floor workforce, it can be observed that inexpensive, material-based incentives and recruitment systems are designed around the intersection of gender, poverty, and rurality. The intersectionality of multiple divisions has created an opportunity for managers to exploit these women workers, in which they are not only treated unequally but are also established as a subordinated workforce. Even though these incentives appear normal, they cover up class and gender-based inequality and subordination, which are carefully "hidden in 'management' and 'bureaucracy' discourses" (Acker, 2012, p. 219).

Perpetuation of subordination through factory cultures

Culture is "a more or less cohesive system of meanings and symbols, in terms of which social interaction takes place", and it continues to change over time and space (Alvesson, 2002, p. 5). This study illustrates how certain (predominantly male) manager-inspired organisational beliefs support the perpetuation of the capitalist patriarchy that produces oppression and subordination and discourage female workers' resistance attempts (Acker, 2012). Furthermore, the data reveals how broader patriarchal relations are reproduced differently inside individual factories, yet have commonalities across the industry.

Our data revealed that in some factories, male managers uphold an oppressive work environment through patriarchal domination, which women workers endure submissively, given their vulnerability to poverty and lack of alternative employment opportunities. Moreover, as per the experience of some participants, male managers have created an oppressive work environment, sometimes even going against factory rules and regulations. These women work in an environment where they are conditioned to accept managerial practices built on ideas of '*taking revenge*' (*paligannawa*) and *'fear' (bayayi)* which favour the power of male managers. *Sada's* (from KEPZ) experience explains how this impacts workers:

> The workers are less likely to come forward as a group on a worker's issue. Because workers *fear* coming forward for someone else's problem. Because, if the problem gets bigger, [managers and/or supervisors] ask the worker,

"Why are you interfering in this problem?" Then, it creates a problem for
that worker. Problems are created for the worker by transferring her from
one production line to another. The worker is not allowed to work in one
place. There are things like that. Then that worker is persecuted [by
managers and/or supervisors]. Some supervisors *take revenge* against them
[workers].

The feeling of '*fear*' was repeated in the responses in relation to the voice
suppression of female workers. For example, *Nadee* (quality checker from a
village) explained that some managers possess powers that supersede those
prescribed by the Department of Labour, and that they berate women workers in
a disgraceful manner. Given this overt oppression of managers, workers are
afraid to raise their concerns. Similarly, *Padma* (37-years-old machine operator
village area) noted that some managers and/or executives use force to suppress
workers. Furthermore, as she pointed out, managers and/or production
department executives '*follow*' (persecute) and '*hate*' workers who raise
concerns in relation to work-related matters in the factory. In this oppressive
work environment, many women workers choose to be silent. Through these
implicit cultural processes of *'taking revenge'*, *'fear'*, *'following'*, and *'hating'*
that reproduce male managers' power, factories socialise and reproduce workers
to accept managers' orders (Acker, 2006). These findings sit in contrast to the
extant literature on Global South (see Carswell & De Neve, 2013; Hewamanne,
2008b; Perera, 2008) that portrays the formal and informal ways that women
workers enact their resistance at work and outside. This could probably be
because even though workers' acts of agency enable women workers to gain
"some control over their working space and time", such acts can rarely become
progressive and transformative without challenging the existing broader capital-
labour relations (Carswell & De Neve, 2013, p. 69).

In some other factories, managers become the heroes of rural women workers
through certain symbolic actions via which these women workers willingly
accept their subordination. *For example, Priyanwada,* a team leader from a
village factory, shared her memory of her friendly male Human Resources
manager, whom she perceived as both a role model and a superior. In her
retelling, the Human Resources manager often visited their production lines,
and if the line was untidy, for example, with threads fallen on the floor, he
would attempt to clean it up:

> Some days, if there is dirt in the lines, sir will come, and pick up the broom. Then, we can't allow him to do that, can we? He sweeps, and then, the *lamayi* cannot allow that. After that, we take the broom [and sweep the line]. Otherwise, sir doesn't blame us. He just sweeps. One day this happened to me. Sir came to our line and swept the line floor. I asked him to give me the broom, but he didn't. He said, "Won't the floor get swept, if I sweep?" So, now I make sure that the line is clean before sir comes to the line. (*Priyanwada*, village).

Shamalee from the KEPZ explained that the Human Resources executives and some managers choose to maintain very close and friendly relationships with women apparel workers at events like parties and trips:

> We got to know only after attending the party [organised by the factory] that *Kumara* sir does not denigrate *lamayi* because he treats everyone the same. [On another occasion: a factory outing] he took a selfie [with female workers] and brought food when we went on the trip. (*Shamalee,* KEPZ).

Shamalee shared that these experiences outside the factory had been very pleasant, because both managers and workers were free of their daily production targets on those days. Some of *Shamalee's* interview responses imply that she may have had some experiences of discrimination due to her position in the factory. She attributes the friendly and kind behaviours of managers, which she understood as equal treatment meted to female shop floor workers, to the unusual circumstances they were in, and considers these novel experiences in her work life. On occasions when male managers snapped a *selfie* or sang a song with women apparel workers, the former became *celebrity figures* to these poor rural women workers, illustrating the power hierarchy between managers and women workers.

A deeper reading of these experiences points to how the 'capitalist patriarchy'—"the mutual dependence of the capitalist class structure and male supremacy" (Eisenstein, 1999, p. 3)—is produced and reproduced on the factory floor through the construction of new subjectivities within women workers through processes in which sometimes, male managers become the heroes of poor, rural women workers. This leads to the women workers voluntarily accepting their subordination. A close look at these processes suggests that gender is not the only basis on which the interactions between male managers and these women workers are based. Instead, the relationship is a consequence of the interaction

of the multiple social identities of these poor, rural women workers (Acker, 2012). The experiences of *Sada*, *Nadee*, *Padma*, *Priyanwada*, and *Shamalee* point to how these male managers (un)consciously create "images of multiple masculinities" which construct definitions of gendered behaviours that the women workers willingly or reluctantly adopt (Acker, 2012, p. 216).

Conclusion

Can the marginalisation of women on Global South production floors be understood only through examining gendered processes? In this paper, we attempted to show that understanding the inequality and subordination of women apparel workers in Sri Lanka needs a broader analysis of the interaction of multiple social categories influenced by the power structures of patriarchy, capitalism and political inequalities. Most Sri Lankan apparel workers are identified as poor, rural women. Through this study, we illustrated how they are placed in a lower hierarchical position in the industry, given the intersectionality of their rural origins, poverty, and gender. We explain how these social categories are influenced by the patriarchal societal system and the socio-economic inequalities resulting from the neoliberal arrangements adopted by the country in 1977. Subsequently, we illustrated how organisational processes and practices, namely, incentive and recruitment systems, and culture, which are also based on the very same intersectional influences, produce and reproduce the inequalities and subordination of women workers within the apparel factories. Thus, we claim that the Sri Lankan apparel industry, as a local supplier of the global apparel supply chain, capitalises on the vulnerabilities of the poor, rural women workers by creating inequality and subordination of women workers through numerous gendered substructures to meet cost, quality, and time requirements of the global retail brands without compromising their profit goals.

The study contributes several ways to the literature on the Sri Lankan apparel industry. First, this study adds to the extant literature on intersectional perspectives on the subjugation of Sri Lankan women apparel workers (see Seneviratne, 2018, 2019) by illustrating how their subordination as female shop floor workers is determined through the intersectionality of rurality, poverty, and gender. This study especially enriches the existing knowledge on intersectional perspectives on female worker subjugation in the industry by bringing in additional empirical evidence from the village-based factories and

factory-published magazine materials, which had been sparsely utilised in previous research. Additionally, by using two theoretical perspectives, intersectionality and gendered substructures, in combination, this study introduces a broader theoretical perspective to understanding the inequality, oppression, and subordination of apparel workers.

Elson and Pearson (1981) claim that any recommendations made to formulate solutions to problems of third-world women factory workers should be aimed at increasing their capacity for self-determination. One such means to increase this capacity is organising them for collective action, in either formal or spontaneous and sporadic ways, since a collective voice exerts more influence over management than an individual voice (see also Carswell & De Neve, 2013). Accordingly, we suggest conducting research in the future on what actions trade unions, activist groups, and NGOs can take to initiate a social discourse and mobilise women apparel workers to form a collective voice and how they could do so effectively against their subjugation at factory floors. Such investigation could even take the form of action research (Burns, 2009), which could intervene to enhance the collective voice of women workers.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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