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“Sugar coating”: the gender of structural violence in Sri Lanka’s sugarcane economy

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Introduction

This paper focuses on a case study of the social and economic transformations that occurred in the lives of rural women following the introduction of commercial scale sugarcane production on the island nation of Sri Lanka, a relative newcomer to large-scale sugar production. My research for this study spans over twenty years and focuses on Moneragala’s Southeastern district, the most impoverished region of the country and location of commercial sugar companies. Given the harsh lessons in colonial sugar production and Sri Lanka’s continuous production inefficiencies since it entered this economy, a recent bid to expand sugar production has sparked outcry among environmental and human rights activists, scholars and local civic groups all concerned about the environmental, economic, and social costs of commercial sugar plantations. They have pointed to problems such as continuous production inefficiencies, near-slave labour conditions, deepening poverty and the ecological implications (impact on biodiversity\(^1\), including the disruption of elephant migration

\(^1\) World Wildlife International (WWI) has reported on the singular role of sugarcane plantations in incurring the “largest losses of biodiversity of any single agricultural product” (Martin, quoted in Cheesman 2005, xiii).

Background on commercial sugarcane in Sri Lanka

During the 1980s, the government of Sri Lanka introduced sugarcane on a commercial scale, as part of its “import substitution” strategy, meant to save valuable foreign currency and spur rural development by creating opportunities for increased incomes, while generating employment. Unfortunately, over its thirty-year history, the sugar economy in Sri Lanka has yielded mixed results and benefited only a small percentage of the rural population, as I will demonstrate. For rural women, this economy has generated primarily seasonal, insecure and low-wage work, deepening gender disparities and creating new forms of disempowerment. While some negative end-results may be attributable to the nature of sugarcane production, as it requires extensive labour, and the particular agro-physiology of sugar cane, which calls for increasing agricultural inputs during each ratooning season to sustain yields, my research focuses on the gender transformations associated with these processes – which I hope to elucidate in this paper.

Ironically, similar patterns are evident across the 400-year span of large-scale sugar production in many parts of the world, in regions such as the Caribbean, Brazil, East Africa, Java and the Philippines. The work of scholars like Sidney Mintz (1986), Rhoda Reddock (1985), Shiasta Shameem (1996), Moses Seenarine (1990), Walter Rodney (1981) and more recent research conducted by Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu (1999) have documented similar patterns of impoverishment and gender disempowerment associated with sugarcane as a commercial crop. Made ubiquitous through ancient trade routes, entrenched in the horrific

2 Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu (1999) note that the greater participation of women in agricultural wage work in Andhra Pradesh, India, did not bring about a corresponding improvement in their household decision-making roles – referred to by the authors as the «Women's Empowerment Paradox». As such, women's higher participation in remunerated and unpaid (i.e. family/household) agricultural work has been associated not with more, but with less autonomy and decision making power, as well as increased subsistence insecurities and social and economic dependence on males (Kennedy and Cogill 1988), often classified as the sole providers.
contingencies of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and rendered essential to global consumption, this “white gold” of colonial and neoliberal enterprises carries the formidable symbolic burden of a commodity that has fuelled servitude, subordination and pauperisation. Haiti is a notable example of a colony that produced great wealth in the 1800s, but at its independence, save for a handful of families who became sugar barons of the island, the country was left destitute. Today, along with the demise of much of the country’s sugar production, migrant Haitian labourers provide ninety percent of the labour, on sugar plantations, in neighbouring Dominican Republic. They work and live in near slave-like conditions, are paid 3 USD per ton of cut-cane (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 1999) and generate daily incomes that fall below the poverty line. Recent reports on child labour, especially with regard to girls at harvest, on sugar fields in Central America (Human Rights Watch 2004) provide further evidence that historic forms of gender servitude continue to be perpetuated in sugarcane as a commercial crop.

**Theoretical framework**

In this paper, I examine the utility of the concept of structural violence for understanding the gendering of labour in commercial sugar production in historical and contemporary times. Johan Galtung advanced the notion of structural violence to refer to inequitable social arrangements and institutionalised practices that entail systemic violence, apart from overt physical violence. More recently, Paul Farmer popularised this concept through his analysis of structural violence as the root of poverty and destitution in Haiti, also manifested in largely unaddressed physical maladies that Farmer refers to as “pathologies of poverty”.

To date, the notion of structural violence has been a gender-neutral analytical construct, and the aim of this paper is to infuse it with an analysis of gender through this case study example. While gender relations in general are inherently imbued with structured power inequities, this case study offers a window for understanding how power is not simply a nominal phenomenon, but tends to be inscribed in violent practices, be they symbolic, material or physical. Such an analysis also calls for an interrogation of how rural production systems embody gendered fields of power. Therefore, in order to understand structural violence through the lens of gender, we need to examine the way gender is
inscribed in material manifestations (gender disparities in access), as well as in symbolic valuations constituted by a social signifying system, beyond basic analyses of gender roles in production. Sugar, in other words, cannot be construed merely as a food crop that serves as a sweetening agent – it is also imbued with symbolic value, accrued through historical exertions of power and subjugation. Such processes and valuations are evident in gender-specific labour arrangements, forms of labour deployment (i.e. slavery, bonded and indentured labour), types of remuneration, and discourses that are seemingly innocuous and rational.

I am suggesting that when we consider rural production systems, be they subsistence cultivation or commercial scale operations, in order to fully understand their gender differentiated implications, we must consider – aside from material differences that can include axes of power such as gender, class, caste and other social demarcations – the fields of power through which such production functions. As with other global commodities (Haugerud, Stone, and Little 2000), women’s experiences in food production systems are shaped by the power vested in global agribusiness sometimes colluding with State neoliberal policies, and the value assigned to a food commodity juxtaposed with the marginal symbolic and economic value assigned to the rural periphery.

In this case, the commercial sugar economy of Sri Lanka has rendered the rural spaces it has incorporated into social sites where newly constructed symbolic, discursive and ideological meanings of masculinities have begun to circulate, making invisible women’s work, household economic contributions, and decision-making, thereby inscribing their subordination. I am suggesting that these patterns reflect the dynamics and potency of the power invested in the sugar agro-industries as representative of modernity, progress and development, while contemporary national conceptualisations of gender are mobilised and manipulated in enacting these processes.

Power, as Foucault has helped us understand, is exercised in diverse ways, including the regulation and control of space. As Aihwa Ong has argued, “the control of space is a distinctive feature” (1991, 280) of the operations of power in the post-modern labour regimes. Foucault, as we know, illustrates the operation of power in the prison-industrial complex, while Ong applies it to export industrialisation. What I hope to illustrate with this case material is how commercial sugar operations evidenced similar practices, particularly through gendered forms of spatial regulation and control.
With regard to rural production systems, it is also important to consider the political ecology in which they are situated. If we use the feminist political ecology framework (Rocheleau et al. 1996), we can trace how the introduction of commercial sugar farming has affected the biodiversity of the region and compromised pre-existing ecologically viable livelihood strategies as well as indigenous gender constructs, resulting in gender-specific forms of social and economic disempowerment. Across world regions (as discussed by Hamilton 2000; Deere and León de Leal 1990) – i.e. Africa, India3, Latin America4, China), there are several examples of the way in which agricultural development efforts have misconstrued or blatantly ignored the pre-existing gender constructs in rural areas, including women’s productive contributions and decision-making roles. Let us now turn to the case material that considers chena farming systems, a form of cultivation and shifting agriculture historically practiced in Sri Lanka and other regions in Asia.

**Gender parity in chena farming systems**

The pre-existing gender constructs in the rural areas where sugarcane was introduced reflected a high degree of “parity”5 commonly found in swidden farming systems elsewhere. In Sri Lanka, such gender parity is institutionalised in three ways: a) gender role complementarity and often interchangeability in the division of labour, locally referred to as karata-kara (shoulder to shoulder); b) joint household decision-making encoded in the recognition of dual household headship, locally referred to as mahadenna (the two-heads); and c) household fund-management relegated solely to women.

The shifting agricultural areas of Sri Lanka also adhere to an indigenous variant of law, Kandyan Law, which includes several norms and practices that allow women a great deal of autonomy. Karata-kara signifies the complementarity of gender roles in livelihood pursuits between a conjugal pair, the parallel responsibilities they bear in sustaining the household, as

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3 See Ganguly’s (2003) discussions of the feminisation of agriculture in West Bengal.
4 See for example Deere 2005; Arizpe and Botey 1987.
5 I use the word “parity” to suggest that there are parallel sources of autonomy for women on par with men, but that this can not be read as an egalitarian system.
well as the value attached to women’s productive contributions – considered essential for chena. In the local scheme of meanings, this labour arrangement recognises women’s work as essential and valuable for the subsistence security of the household. The valuation of women’s labour contributions are further inscribed in marriage forms common across shifting agricultural communities, and in this case as well, with bride-price rather than dowry systems being more common. In dowry systems, for example, women are considered a liability and thus marriage requires gifts from the bride’s family to that of the groom to offset the shift in liability. In bride-price systems, it is the groom who offers the bride’s family gifts and various services, in recognition of the loss of her labour to her natal family. In this case, a woman enters a marriage as an equal partner, embodied in the concept of maha denna, signifying a partnership in household decision-making. This partnership pattern has prevailed across indigenous rural areas of Sri Lanka. The significance of the notion of maha denna is that it does not contain the gender privileging embedded in the notion of a male household head or male provider.

The third feature, common in many parts of Southeast Asia, is the task of household fund management allocated to women who effectively hold the purse strings, allocating money for various expenditures – a tremendous source of social and economic autonomy for women.

The shifting agriculture areas of Sri Lanka also adhere to an indigenous variant of law, Kandyan Law, which includes several norms and practices that provide women with further sources of autonomy, such as equal inheritance rights; a woman’s right to an independent income from her land, even within a marriage; and maintenance of her paternal sir name, even after marriage. These norms signify a woman’s continued affiliation to her natal family, the absence of restrictions on her physical mobility and, as I mentioned earlier, the absence of dowry and associated expectations of virginity and chastity.

**Bitter spaces: fields of power, fields as power**

Contravening these indigenous arrangements, commercial sugar operations introduced a gender stratified labour hierarchy, placing males in positions of sole authority and decision-making while relegating women to the lower-paid, casual and seasonal labour force. Over time, these practices at the sugar plantations had a spillover effect on neighbouring communities,
gradually eroding and undermining the pre-existing sources of gender parity among subsistence cultivating communities in the southwestern area of Sri Lanka.

These new fields of power that emerged through the incursion of the sugar economy led to dramatic reconfigurations of gender norms and relations in the area. One mechanism that permitted this process was the stamp of authority, vested in the sugar plantation and its personnel as a State-sanctioned national development company. Their higher social status and consequent power vis-à-vis the local communities were effective tools to signal the sugar plantation’s gender hierarchical labour structure as the superior scheme. For local communities, perceptions of these hierarchical valuation schemes of male and female labour became the “modern” norm for gender relations both on the work site and in domestic arrangements. Associating plantation administrators with modernity placed subtle pressure on local settlers to acquiesce to these hierarchical gender norms and practices, lest they be branded as “backward”, in much the same way that colonialist practices came to be emulated by native populations, as Fanon and others have elucidated.

A second field of power that merits consideration is the class and social differentiations between settlers from the southern, more “modernised” part of Sri Lanka and the subsistence villages of the Uva region. Because of the relative social power held by the more “modernised” southerners, their hierarchical gender norms were upheld as highly salient features to the extent that indigenous notions such as joint headship and female household fund management became perceived as “ancient” (read “backward” or “primitive”) customs. Subsequently, even though women’s labour is crucial on estate cane fields, it became de-valourised as unskilled, unproductive, and secondary, and as a result became under-remunerated and regulated by male supervisors.

**Spatial control**

In general, given the time-sensitive nature and arduous and extensive labour demands of sugar production, from the planting to harvesting stages, sugarcane companies tend to impose strategies of spatial control, constant surveillance of work, expectations of rapid pace and high output, along with verbal admonishments and psychological pressure. On these site locations, such spatial control was introduced through the gender-
hierarchical occupational structure where males were hired for both supervisory positions and other higher status occupational categories, i.e., in the refining plant, for administrative work, and other “technical” categories (machine operators, tractor drivers and fertiliser sprayers). Males were also delegated the task of overseeing the work of women cane cutters, which included the distribution and collection of the cutting knives. Male labour was also exclusively deployed in the middle and higher-level administrative roles as well as in the lower echelons of field administration (manning the field offices responsible for land clearing, timely harvesting, and other tasks that ensure the smooth operation of the annual cycle of cane production).

Subsequently, even though women’s labour is crucial on estate cane fields, it became de-valourised as unskilled, unproductive and secondary, newly subordinated to regulation by male supervisors, and as a result, inequitably remunerated. Despite the arduous work that women undertook in various capacities, their wages were consistently lower than those of males. With wage inequities reflecting the lower valuation of women’s work, emergent discourses on women’s vulnerability further served in turn to naturalise their subordination.

Ironically, the managerial staff on the sugar estate also stated that they preferred women field workers because of an alternate construction of women workers as hard working, easy to manage (through discipline and control) and more compliant (or submissive). Managerial discourses that shaped women as a group that could be subjugated easily, added to the emerging local discourses that constructed women as powerless. These parallel discourses prevail in a delicate tension, informing us of how women subjects are newly constituted to reflect dominant configurations of power. Ultimately, allocating the arduous tasks such as planting, weeding and harvesting, primarily to women, reflects more than an occupational division of labour. It speaks to the power inflected in the positions of authority allocated to men, and consequently women’s disempowerment. Over time, these practices at the sugar plantations had a spillover effect on adjacent subsistence cultivating communities, gradually eroding and undermining the pre-existing sources of gender parity in inter-personal relations.
Bitter talk: discourses of dependence

Contradictory to the visible evidence of women workers toiling in the estate cane fields year-round, a new discourse emerged constructing women as physically weak and unable to protect themselves from the dangers inherent in cane work. One male settler captured these sentiments as “woman’s inability to extricate herself from assault by man or beast,” referring to women’s vulnerability to predatory males and elephant encroachment on the cane fields. In this discourse, cane fields are constructed as dangerous terrain unsuitable for helpless women who need the protection afforded by male kin, who are allegedly superior in physical strength.

While they appear to be articulated with a sense of protectiveness, such discourses of female vulnerability allude more to the emerging constructions of female social, economic and physical dependence. The freedom of movement that women enjoyed in their villages of origin is not available in the settler villages of Pelwatte Sugar Corporation (PSC)\(^6\). Women settlers interviewed for this case study registered two areas of concern that effectively restrict their physical mobility: fear of the dangers of physical violation, as well as the potential tainting of their morality. “I am but a woman, I don’t know how to manage these things” claimed one very capable settler woman bemoaning the loss of most of her sugar harvest as a result of a brush fire in the cane fields. Her effort to characterise herself as a woman with limited power in the social context of the PSC sugar estate and the new sugar economy reveals the gender role expectations that are discursively constructed in this setting.

This strategy was useful not only to highlight her plight in this situation, but also to enlist the help of the PSC administrative hierarchy in resolving her dilemma. Even though her demeanour and conduct conveyed personal strength and courage, the verbalisation of helplessness served as an instrumental tactic because it was consonant with the

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\(^6\) Editor’s note: “The Pelwatte Sugar Corporation [began commercial operations] in 1986 under the management of Booker Tate, the biggest international sugar specialist in the world. Domestic sugar ventures were envisioned as part of the government’s adoption of import substitution. […] PSC incorporated over 8,000 hectares of land. Two decades later, it is considered the primary commercial sugar production operation in Sri Lanka today.” (Gunawardena 2010, 377-378)
powerlessness she was expected to display. Women’s internalisation of such characterisations, as evident in the above instance, afford them a measure of security, given that the cane fields of PSC have become a site for privileging male social and physical power. The discursive production of female vulnerability thus reinforces a new form of female dependence.

Constructing women as helpless subjects on the cane fields has had a spillover effect into the domestic arena, where women’s financial contributions are increasingly dismissed as insignificant by males who claim sole household headship. This also leads to reduced participation in household decision-making as men claim household leadership as a strictly male domain and deride women’s ability to make effective household decisions.

Sugar coating: the social mechanisms that confer structural violence

Farming communities in this region of Sri Lanka were encouraged to shift to sugarcane as a commercial crop with the promise of lucrative returns. Yet, the outcome has been neither equitable nor uniformly favourable across participating communities. The power differences inherent in the structural location of local communities vis-à-vis large, well-established agribusiness operations placed the former in a clear position of disadvantage, with little power to negotiate the terms of their engagement in sugarcane production. Their occasional resort to acts of resistance (i.e., setting fire to the cane fields) was met with swift, punitive actions. It was upon the first protest by machete-toting male cane cutters in 1994 that administrators of the sugarcane plantation Booker Tate took an executive decision to transfer the role of field supervision to male community members while recruiting women exclusively for the task of cane harvesting.

Furthermore, as discussed above, from the perspective of the state as well as local communities, agribusiness operations are vested with far more value and power (Haugerud, Stone, and Little 2000) in comparison to the marginal symbolic and economic value assigned to the rural periphery – this kind of juxtaposition shapes the experiences of women in subsistence production systems.
Conclusion

Contrary to the expectation that participation in commercial agriculture would provide women a source of independent income and empowerment, the introduction of sugar as a transnational agribusiness into Sri Lanka's previously subsistence economies has had a detrimental effect on women. Emergent gender reconfigurations and associated discourses dismiss the contributions women make to household income, contrary to pre-existing norms that assigned a high valuation to women's productive labour. The structuring of gendered labour hierarchies and wage differentials in globalised agriculture, and the ideologies of dependence and subordination they summon, means that mere access to a source of income is insufficient for empowering women. Moreover, focusing on income as the sole source of autonomy and empowerment obviates an understanding of cultural sources of valuation.

This paper has documented the shift in agricultural labour relations via the gender hierarchical configuration of production relations in commercial sugar plantations in southeast Sri Lanka. Despite the relatively high degree of pre-existing gender parity in this region, dominant conceptualisations of gender and notions of social hierarchy mobilised and manipulated by the sugar economy have set in motion a transformation of gender and labour relations and women's social position. I have traced the discursive production of distinctly gendered forms of power that confer uneven privileges in the sugar economy to the structuring of the sugar agribusiness PSC as a neoliberal capitalist enterprise that relies on a cheap and manageable labour pool. While the practices associated with appropriating land for PSC and the injudicious allocation of non-productive land to settlers have worked in tandem to create a semi-proletarianised labour force, it is the circulation of disempowering gender ideologies in the hiring practices and occupational structures of the sugar economy that have proved to be most detrimental to women.

The relative social status and economic power vested in PSC administration served as a discursive field for establishing a new form of gendered power relations. The associated discourses constructed only partial truths about local social/gender arrangements and cultivation practices, normalising males as the preeminent holders of agricultural knowledge, subsequently leading to women's increasing marginality, contrasted to men's growing centrality in the sugar economy. Ironically, the tendency of
rural populations to emulate the practices of urban and middle classes in a struggle to overcome their marginal social status has complicated these processes. Hegemonic gender constructs and associated practices are increasingly subscribed to by rural populations in attempts to shed their stigmatised social positioning in this deeply class-polarised society. This nexus is the route through which a transformation of the pre-existing gender parity has been made possible, and a form of disempowerment of women based on structural violence has begun.

References


While ethnic and political polarities are additional axes of the social hierarchy in Sri Lankan society, I refrain from including these in the present analysis, given that this research focused on an ethnically homogenous location.


