

Book Review Forum

Kanchana N. Ruwanpura, *Garments without Guilt? Global Labour Justice and Ethical Codes in Sri Lankan Apparels*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9781108832014 (cloth); ISBN: 9781009032315 (ebook)

Can there ever be justice for workers within global capitalism? In *Garments without Guilt?*, Kanchana Ruwanpura investigates the potential of ethical governance codes to deliver this. Despite international supply chain pressures and tumultuous domestic politics, Sri Lanka has successfully positioned itself as an ethical sourcing destination for the apparel sector. The book explores how it has done so and examines the role of and outcomes for the sector's workers. Challenging the view that labour power has been weakening in recent decades, the author argues, through a nuanced look at the plural labour histories and geographies on the island, that workers continually exert agency, even within uneven and constrained politico-economic terrain. Illustrative of its centring of workers' voices, the book opens and closes with a poem by Anu, a factory worker; lines from her poem are threaded in throughout the text.

The question of labour justice has never been more relevant in Sri Lanka. Since early 2022, protestors, including garment workers, have been demanding state accountability for a protracted economic crisis that is causing profound and widespread human suffering. In the island's North and East, the basic injustice of being unable to afford to eat converges with unresolved longer-standing rights violations, perpetrated mainly by the Sri Lankan state against Tamil and Muslim citizens during the decades-long civil war. These citizens have been protesting for justice and accountability for many years already. Therefore, it is welcomed that the book questions what "justice" means and on whose terms it is enacted. Significantly, Ruwanpura positions apparel sector development in the former war territories as core—not peripheral—to understanding the sector and meanings of "ethical governance". This is a key strength of the book, even as it reveals the need for further research.

The introductory chapter situates the case in regional and global context. A primary motivation for global garment production to move first to Asia and then to the global South

was to access cheap labour, and yet Sri Lanka was able to insert into this process as an “ethical” producer. Ruwanpura homes in on the domestic political economy and institutional factors that enabled this development trajectory; of especial relevance is the role of the state.

Chapter 2 sets out the theoretical framework, bringing together two strands of literature, feminist political economy and labour geography scholarship, which the author points out typically bypass each other in apparel sector research. Chapter 3 is a sensitive and reflexive discussion of research methods over a decade of fieldwork. Chapters 4 to 6 explore the evolution of Sri Lanka’s apparel trajectory, with 5 focusing on labour struggles from the economic liberalisation period of the 1970s onwards, and 6 examining how workers interpret ethical governance initiatives. Having set out these plural labour geographies and histories, Chapter 7 looks in more depth at the distinct geography of the war-affected North and East (though data from these areas are also brought into earlier chapters).

Although centring the role of labour, the book contains a trove of fascinating primary and secondary data on how the state intervened in the apparel sector to selectively support specific domestic capitalists; discursively and actually positioned itself on labour ethics; and was understood and challenged by workers. Ruwanpura draws on heterodox institutionalist economic literature, especially Ha-Joon Chang, in her analysis of how development is driven by state intervention rather than withdrawal. Distinct from Chang, though, she emphasises tensions in the state’s relationships with (capital and) labour. One paradox is how the Sri Lankan state helped set strong health and safety standards in the apparel sector yet sidesteps the matter of a living wage. Another is how it positions itself as an ethical apparel producer while actively repressing wider labour struggles. Such frictions, always presented as dynamic and shaped and challenged by workers, draw attention to the state’s violent tendencies and its brutal relationship with workers and citizens. This becomes especially clear in Chapter 7. The chapter deepens investigations that Ruwanpura and other feminist and Marxist scholars and activists have been undertaking for years, on neoliberal development and gendered labour shifts in conflict-affected parts of Sri Lanka. By connecting these investigations theoretically and empirically to the central enquiry on labour justice, the book brings attention to the distinctly uneven application of ethical codes within the same country. Chapter 7 is therefore valuable for both apparel sector researchers and broader rights-focused scholars and activists.

The chapter considers the capital–military nexus in labour recruitment to the apparel sector, and whether this breached ILO core conventions around forced labour. The line of argument lays important ground to further investigate development in the wake of a crisis and examine what ethical codes and capitalism “without guilt” mean against such a backdrop. Sri Lanka’s war-affected territory remains heavily militarised, and the military, feared for its extreme, ethnicised violence, is perceived by many there as an occupying force. Capital expanded into this space supported and incentivised by a state that stands accused of war crimes, arguably genocide. In addition to militarised labour recruitment, the chapter analyses how this mode of development happened as a purported attempt by the state to heal divisions via job creation. Instead, the chapter—using fieldwork carried out in 2019—reveals continuing psychological impacts and unresolved tensions of the civil war, as workers share experiences of division, discrimination, and abuse. For example, factory managers discipline Tamil workers in Sinhala rather than Tamil language, and through abusive and sexually explicit language. Ruwanpura indicates that these findings undermine Sri Lanka’s claims of ethical sourcing. Nonetheless, she judges firms surprisingly favourably: as politically insensitive but with good intentions. While the data are presented with nuance and care, they raise questions about the extent to which this can or should be described as insensitivity. Regardless of the loftiness of intention, it is surely violence in its multiple (including psychological and gendered) forms.

In my view, the greatest strength of the book is how it reveals workers as not only central to shaping the garment sector but also themselves motivated by the wider socio-political context, not just their working conditions. On the first point, the book is something of a rejoinder to the widely held claim that labour power remains weak. On the second point, Ruwanpura argues that globalised factory work structures create opportunities for collective struggle, and indeed Chapter 7 shows garment factory workers in the war-damaged North are—in common with the sector’s workers across the rest of the island—questioning the ethics of an industry that does not pay a living wage. Yet she emphasises that other shared histories—colonial, nationalist, shaped by ethnicity, religion and gender—also bind and inflect work politics. This distinguishes the book from some other feminist contributions on women workers, opening up space to bring together, in future studies, common conditions of workers across the island while staying alert to the variances of their experiences.

Through her theoretical framework, Ruwanpura skilfully highlights how plural labour histories and geographical specificities shape how workers resist capital and hold states to account. There is much potential to take the research forward, adopting the methodological positioning of foregrounding labour voices and agency. The post-war context makes investigations on these matters more complex and perhaps uncomfortable, raising tensions that cannot be ignored: solidarities may not be forged in “ideal” worker-oriented ways; political struggles may not appear directly relevant to labour struggles. The book points out, though, that these aspects are highly relevant to workers’ lives and therefore to challenging the power of capital. As Ruwanpura concludes (p.148), while the Sri Lankan state today “acts in consort with capital at the expense of labour”, the “voice of labour ... never goes away”.

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