

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)

Workers' life is a struggle

We are working hard everyday

Employers oppress us and give us no rights and freedom

Workers are suffering

Come, workers

Come to join the struggle

—The Messenger Band, “Struggle” (English translation of original Khmer language lyrics)

Kanchana Ruwanpura’s *Garments without Guilt?* opens with a lucid and heartfelt poem composed by a woman named Anu. Anu is one of the many female labourers who toil at the clacking looms and clicking lockstitch machines of Sri Lanka’s clothing and footwear manufacturing industry, making garments primarily for consumption in richer nations in the global North. Entitled “Lovingly, to you”, Anu’s poem recounts the courage and sacrifice of this marginalised industrial workforce and celebrates their role in fostering national economic development at the periphery. “For bringing in foreign exchange to Sri Lanka / You are appreciated in this way”, Anu chimes (p.1).

Anu is a participant encountered during Ruwanpura’s decade of ethnographic investigation for this book in a country that is both home and field site. The poem stands testament to the richness and depth of Ruwanpura’s “unbounded” fieldwork (p.28) over this period, including seven-and-a-half months spent on the shop floor “on an almost daily basis” (p.33) at two factory sites on the semi-rural reaches of Colombo, Sri Lanka’s capital, and weeks spent crisscrossing the island to visit further flung factories in Sri Lanka’s Northern and Eastern frontiers. In doing so, Ruwanpura’s study is able to track the footloose movement

of capital on the island and its deepening incursions into post-war regions to recruit minoritised groups through increasingly militarised means.

In a sector where securing access to factory sites and supply chain intermediaries as a researcher can be, as Ruwanpura acknowledges, “a long and arduous process” (p.29), this expansive fieldwork is already impressive. Reflections on the messy practice of “mingling methods” (p.39), conjoined across different fellowship and grant projects, and the tricky navigation of complex, shifting positionalities traversed throughout their different sites and settings, are presented with a refreshing candour, giving thoughtful insight into the manifold demands of maintaining and managing a coherent programme of work that spans such a significant share of a research career.

Above all, Ruwanpura’s book, akin to her own commendation of Anu’s poem itself, does a wonderful job of foregrounding and humanising the often hidden labour of women workers, like Anu, concealed at the end of our global supply chains. Starting from the observation that feminist and labour geographies have “largely bypassed each other—whether wittingly or not” (p.16), its apparently simple yet often overlooked core contributions—that “social reproduction matters for workers” and “[I]n labour geographies ... shape the evolution of capitalism” (p.41)—are present across the text as clear and compelling. Tracing the evolution of regulation and policy in the sector, Ruwanpura convincingly and repeatedly evidences the book’s core contention that “[w]hen the household economy is under duress, low and underpaid workers will not flinch from solidarity action” (p.84). Their resistance provokes reactions that recursively shape the very structures from which it emanates.

Indeed, these contributions are so cogent that they somewhat conflict with other aspects of the argumentation, not least the eponymous titling of the manuscript with the industry’s favoured “garments without guilt” trademark, which is taken too often at face value. On the road leading out of Sri Lanka’s main international airport on one of her field trips, for example, Ruwanpura finds a billboard proclaiming the island as the home of “the world’s first ethical apparel sourcing destination” (p.43). She wonders aloud, “How has the Sri Lankan apparel industry gone so successfully from strength to strength in the past four decades that its apparel association can make such claims without appearing hubristic or attracting condemnation?” (p.44).

Yet the ready critiques of this false claim are served up by Ruwanpura diligently within this very volume. As Ruwanpura details, the industry's primary "success" has been to "cultivate dynamic growth" (p.7) through its own restless accumulation over four decades. Whilst perhaps a boon for the national macroeconomy, growth alone does not translate into gains for workers on the ground. Indeed, Ruwanpura herself concedes that "[h]ow Sri Lankan labour has benefitted materially from this export-oriented route is ... less clear" (p.68) and that the "Sri Lankan state continues on a path of uneven development, punctured by bloody political violence and turmoil, where inequality has proved persistent and has exacerbated over time" (p.11).

The book frequently returns to the issue of a living wage, for example, an entitlement consistently denied to Sri Lanka's workers since the industry's inception. It provoked me to think about the symbolic work this well-meaning appellation performs. By its very nature, failing to pay workers a living wage equates to paying a dying wage, subjecting labour to industry's indifferent biopolitics—condemning its workforce to truncated lives and the slower violence of letting die. Sri Lanka's garment labourers may have thus far been spared the ghastly horrors of fatal factory fires and lethal building collapses that torment the sector elsewhere, in places like Pakistan and Bangladesh. Yet passing this (very) low bar does not make an ethical industry. As Prentice and her colleagues have elaborated, a preoccupation with "deadly incidents runs the danger of presenting them as isolated and 'exceptional' tragedies and of distracting from the everyday, ongoing ways in which risks to health"—and life—"mark the routine workings of the 'global sweatshop regime'" (Prentice et al. 2018: 157).

Indeed, the lofty narratives of Sri Lanka's industrialists are contradicted, as Ruwanpura sets out, by previous studies that show "stigmatized young women workers, where garment work was defamed socially and culturally and poverty wages did not relieve workers' material conditions", to the extent that now "jobs may be shunned rather than sought by potential workers" (p. 50). Indeed, as Ruwanpura discovers, the "magnitude of this challenge" (ibid.) entails that the same industrialists have sought their own spatial fix by expanding into increasingly rural and remote areas, using increasingly dubious means, to recruit a labour force.

Given this, it's curious why Ruwanpura advocates that "we should champion the role of apparel sector industrialists in the upgrading process" (p.10) and calls for a "cooperative labour-management ethos" (p.xvii). Instead, as the book shows time and again, it is through struggles from below that the most significant labour reforms in Sri Lanka's history have germinated. This evokes the distinction between so-called "synergistic" (Gereffi and Lee 2016) and "antagonistic" (Alford 2020) models of labour and supply chain governance, the latter associated with Alford's (2020:59) insistence that it is "ongoing conflict, contestation and compromise" rather than complementary or collaborative initiatives that "serve to forge, challenge and transform hegemonic stability" (2020:43).

This is why I offer a contrasting set of lyrics to complement Anu's poem at the outset of my review, the offering here scribed by Cambodia's Messenger Band. For the uninitiated, the Messenger Band is an advocacy girl band formed of former garment workers in Cambodia, who tour cities and the countryside with songs that aim to inform, educate, and entertain. Their verses spotlight labour and women's rights struggles in a context steeped, like Sri Lanka, in conservative and patriarchal social norms, and a deepening crisis of neoliberal exclusion and authoritarian resurgence. Rather than a "tender call for recognizing ... [worker's] agency" (p.14), the Messenger Band present a darker analysis of a sector where workers' rights and freedoms have been historically traded for economic gain, in a process of "opening up by cracking down" (Dean 2022). Theirs is a rallying call for collective struggle as a route to regain what has been stolen from the industry's global workforce.

Garments without Guilt? is itself bookended by the spectre of political violence. Its analysis begins brightly as Sri Lanka's protracted ethnic conflict subsides in 2009, political stability luring capital investment and facilitating the expansion of industry. Early optimism about the potential of export-led strategies to foster sustainable development evaporates, however, and Ruwanpura leaves us in "dark political times" (p.xvii), as Sri Lanka grapples with a resurgence of ethno-nationalist tensions and militarised capital. Here, Ruwanpura's analysis deftly foreshadows the ominous developments in Sri Lankan politics occurring in the short window since the book was published in early 2022. "In a country, such as Sri Lanka, with a politically violent past", she augurs, "where global governance regimes do not earnestly ensure that the aspirations of workers in the sector are upheld ... they offer a breeding ground for a relapse from work place discontent to protracted violence" (p.11).

Indeed, she portends, “this neglect of class inequality may well be the beast that keeps raising its ugly head in the form of ethno-nationalism in the country” (p.69).

Events in Sri Lanka since these lines were written underscore their prescience and evidence the incisiveness of Ruwanpura’s analysis. *Garments without Guilt?* makes a potent call for recentring holistic conceptions of labour in our understandings not only of supply chains but also of wider political economy dynamics, evidencing how labour struggles from below are inextricably woven into the fabric of national policy and political change. In doing so, the work will resonate with a wide audience beyond scholars interested in empirical fields of garments manufacturing or the Sri Lankan context, offering a critical, timely, and rich account that underlines the contestations and contradictions embedded in visions of labour justice and neoliberal development.

References

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