

Sewing their way up the social ladder? Paths to social mobility and empowerment among Sri Lanka's global factory workers

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Abstract

Studies on global assembly line workers showcase how gains women make are counteracted by physical, social and psychological problems stemming from long hours of working, low wages and the precarity of work. Few studies analyse these workers' experiences after they terminate factory work. Using life histories collected over 12 years and in-depth interviews, this article highlights the different paths former workers pursue to achieve social mobility and identifies key work and life experiences that contribute to social mobility and empowerment. I argue that contrary to popular belief global factory work does lead to forms of social mobility and empowerment.

Keywords: Former global factory workers, social mobility, empowerment, Sri Lanka

Studies on global assembly line workers highlight how transnational production is a bittersweet gift to women in developing countries. They showcase how gains women make, such as new senses of self and increased decision-making powers within households, are counteracted by physical and psychological problems stemming from long hours working, stressful target oriented production and low wages.¹ Many such studies evidence how cultural norms interact with women's wage work in global factories and explicate the different mechanisms through which women are kept from escaping patriarchal power relations and achieving long term empowerment.² They also, to some extent, show how women workers resist such forces and struggle to find voice, agency and upward mobility.³

Overall, however, few studies analyse these workers' experiences after they terminate factory work. My own research⁴ has focused on how former global factory workers in Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zones (FTZ) return to villages, use social conformity in strategic ways to counteract the stigma of FTZ work and thereby negotiate new identities as enterprising daughters-in-law. Using qualitative data, this article highlights the different routes such workers pursue to achieve social mobility and identifies specific FTZ experiences that contribute to their empowerment. By analysing how differently positioned women manipulate varied circumstances, strategies and choices to achieve success, the article challenges and extends existing notions about social mobility and empowerment associated with global factory work.

Katunayake FTZ and returning to villages

Sri Lanka's first FTZ, established in 1978 in Katunayake, was part of a newly elected government's open market policies that envisioned industrial wage work at global factories leading to development via trickledown economics. Rural women were to fill the assembly line jobs for around five years and thereafter use their earnings as dowry to settle down as conventional married women in their villages. The assumption that such women, lacking alternative choices and being merely supplementary wage earners, would accept employment under any condition resulted in substandard work environments, abysmal living conditions and minimal wages. Even in 2016, nearly 40 years after the Katunayake FTZ was established, basic worker salary was Rs 10,000 (about US\$80) per month, although women could earn about Rs 25,000 by working overtime and foregoing annual leave. As in other transnational factories worldwide, Katunayake factories demand maximum output for minimal wages amidst exploitative working conditions. About 45,000 rural women from economically and socially marginalised groups work as machine operators in the FTZ's 92 factories and a similar number work for subcontracting factories located around the zone. Most are unmarried, young and well-educated, often with 10–12 years of schooling.⁵

Katunayake is located 35 km northeast of Colombo and home to Sri Lanka's premier international airport. Most FTZ workers have migrated from economically stagnant areas in North Central and Southern Provinces. Although increasing numbers of young Tamil women from especially Eastern Province have begun working there since the island's civil war ended in 2009, migrants from North Central and Southern Provinces continue to be the main draw. There are few state or factory-run hostels; instead women mainly make do by renting rooms locals have hastily and poorly built. The difficult work and living conditions are compounded by the sexual harassment workers face on city streets and the shop floor.⁶ Furthermore, intense anxieties about their mobility create an image of FTZ workers as loose women who can be easily deceived into sexual relationships. Consequently, accounts relating premarital sex, rape, prostitution, abortion and infanticide portray these women as victims of labour and sexual exploitation and their own loose morals.⁷

Despite the known travails of FTZ work, a stagnant agricultural economy, lack of alternative employment and the allure of urban, modern lifestyles touted on TV influence women's decisions to migrate. Thus, as in other South Asian contexts, global capitalism harnesses these village women's aspirations through precarious employment and contributes to the inequality in development processes. At the same time, living with other young women in an urban area causes these women to undergo social, cultural, emotional and cognitive changes. For instance, they start to value relative freedom of movement and new lifestyles; they acquire global knowledge flows; and the intense socialisation process in factories and boarding houses encourage them to dress, behave, think and desire in new ways. Moreover, their salaries allow them increased decision-making powers within their parental households.

When the FTZs were started, the government and the Board of Investment (BOI), the FTZ governing body, stipulated that factories will provide workers a gratuity payment when they leave employment after five years. The expectation was that the women would combine this payment with their Employee Provident Fund (EPF) and Employee Trust Fund (ETF) as dowry. EPF and ETF funds are normally released when people retire at age 55. Being able to get the accumulated funds after only five years of work meant women could collect a combined lump sum when around 23 years of age. The caveat was that women would have to produce a marriage certificate within three months of leaving employment to get the EPF and ETF payments, which ensures that women's savings from wage employment stays nested within a patriarchal institution. This policy shaped FTZ employment for many rural families in that women specifically migrated with the intention of obtaining this lump sum, which came to be known as the 'FTZ dowry'.⁸

While the arrangement appears highly disempowering, long-term fieldwork in former global factory workers' village homes evidence that many combine this FTZ dowry with micro credit to pursue entrepreneurial endeavours that challenge traditional women's roles.⁹ Indeed, over 70% of former workers interviewed (86 out of 121) felt they had achieved social mobility, and more or less credited the FTZ work for their success. Interviews also evidence that there are varied paths to social mobility and forms of empowerment connected to FTZ wage employment. Climbing up the social ladder did not always lead to voice and agency, but rather led to a quite intricate intertwining of paths to social mobility and empowerment.

Social mobility, empowerment and strategies for moving up

It is well documented that development initiatives designed and executed from global and national centres can have unexpected and harmful effects at the ground level.¹⁰ Shamsie¹¹ for instance, having focused on Export Processing Zones in Haiti, contends that they do not reduce poverty or economic inequality in any significant manner. Ruwanpura and Hughes¹² note that when three Pakistani factories created specific 'empowerment spaces' to recruit and retain women workers, rather than empowering they ended up becoming spaces where management manipulate and reconfigure worker subjectivities. At an individual level, Obeng et al.¹³ note that contrary to the general perception that global factory work disempowers women, Ghana's women workers achieve forms of empowerment via such work. However, they note that the precarious nature of factory employment diminishes the gains made by women. Matos,¹⁴ on the other hand, has pointed to how Portuguese women working in global call centres experience downward social mobility due to the stigma and shame associated with their work. Several studies on Sri Lanka's global factory work also note that despite socio-economic gains, female workers face many barriers when seeking lasting empowerment via factory work.¹⁵ Goger,¹⁶ for instance, has argued that attempts to empower Sri Lankan apparel workers through skills upgrading merely provide management a tool to manufacture consent and manipulate global perceptions of factory work. Goger thus contends that skills upgrading does not guarantee

worker empowerment. My previous research also noted how the stigma surrounding global factory work, and the anxieties about female moral degradation, ultimately undercut the economic and educational gains made by women workers.¹⁷

This noted, there is a glaring lacuna when it comes to understanding whether and how women pursue social mobility and empowerment after terminating global assembly line work. This article addresses this gap in knowledge by focusing on what happens after Sri Lanka's FTZ workers leave their jobs, get married and obtain the FTZ dowry. Since women migrate to work in a stigmatised space so they could obtain the FTZ dowry, use it to invest in entrepreneurial activities and thereby 'develop' themselves to a better social position than their parents, it is important to see the extent to which they succeed in their endeavours. Doing so will shed light on whether global assembly line work contributes to long term empowerment and, hopefully, influence policies that clear up these pathways.

Historically, occupation has been a major determinant of social mobility, to the exclusion of education, income and wealth.¹⁸ However, in contemporary capitalist societies there are other indicators of social mobility, including consumption patterns.¹⁹ Fernandez-Kelly and Konczal²⁰ coined the term 'expressive entrepreneurship' to refer to the creative pathways second-generation immigrants in the US utilise for incorporation and social mobility. Other studies on such immigrants highlight how different pathways get manipulated to activate social mobility and success.²¹ For instance, gendered inequalities excludes women from certain social goods and services, such as education and employment, which leads them to differently experience family social mobility.²² By highlighting how women's social mobility is integrally connected to their families, while actual experience of social mobility is connected to different levels of empowerment, this paper adds an important caveat to studies of gendered social mobility.

Although neoliberal regimes allow individual agency and the right to participate in the market economy as workers or entrepreneurs, it can be harmful to women and communities in many ways. While some feminist literature celebrates neoliberal economic restructuring for allowing women options outside caring roles, others criticise such restructuring for contributing to precarity and weakening the welfare state.²³ In neoliberal conditions social mobility and empowerment do not necessarily go hand in hand yet are intertwined in interesting ways. As many studies have shown, empowerment is a process that gets constantly redefined contextually.²⁴ Kabeer²⁵ defines empowerment as the ability to make strategic choices and to have voice and influence in one's own life. She also notes that empowerment cannot have one strict definition and this fuzziness calls for creative ways to understand how women in developing countries experience empowerment. Kabeer contends empowerment can only be measured against prior disempowerment and, consequently, needs to be understood as a process than an end in itself.

Writing about the bureaucratisation of grassroots empowerment in India, Sharma²⁶ claims that part of mainstreaming empowerment entails its professionalisation as an expert intervention and its objectification as a measurable variable. Although professionalised empowerment discourses have the potential of making marginalised women into law-abiding, disciplined and responsibilised citizen-subjects,²⁷ studies also recognise the unintentional empowerment that can ensue within mainstreamed empowerment programmes.²⁸ Thus based on interviews with Nepalese Gorkah women who have attended sponsored workshops on empowerment, Leve²⁹ notes that women's support for the Maoist movement is more a locally conceived notion of moral responsibility than awareness of individual autonomy that the programmes focused on. While the influence of professionalised empowerment on people and communities cannot be

disregarded, it is important to highlight individually experienced and locally mediated notions of empowerment, and how they may differ from professionalised notions. Studies also call for locally derived strategies for processive social empowerment that allows people to 'produce' their own futures.³⁰ For instance, Perera³¹ contends that development at the ground level is multivalent, contextual and understood based on individual life goals and objectives. Policymakers must therefore craft pathways to social mobility accordingly. This article, by highlighting how a development initiative impacts its female participants, seeks to aid in this enterprise.

The article is based on 121 interviews, conducted during 2010–2016, and 37 life history narratives, which were collected over a 12-year period. The latter comprised of 3–5 interviews each to discern the patterns of social mobility and felt empowerment. My longstanding association with these women and their families helped when collecting life histories. All 37 women had attended 1–3 NGO sponsored workshops on empowerment related topics while at the FTZ. The 121 interviewees roughly represented Sri Lanka's provinces, different age groups, post-marital residence and marital status. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect privacy. In what follows I highlight four former global factory workers' divergent journeys toward social mobility to evaluate paths to social mobility and how women understood and experienced empowerment in their own way.

Astute investment and hard work: Ramya

Ramya was a 44-year-old woman (in 2013) with a 22-year-old son and 20-year-old daughter. She worked for four years at the Katunayake FTZ in the late 1980s before eloping with her boyfriend, who was her boarding house owner's son. His family members were long term residents of the Katunayake area and Christians. They objected to their son marrying a girl from a very poor Buddhist family in a remote region. 'I don't blame them. I only had clothes on my back when I came to the FTZ and worship the direction where Smart Shirts (the factory she worked) is located', Ramya said bringing her hands together in prayer. 'Thanks to the factory I made gold bangles from wrist to elbow', she said the first time I visited her. Ramya typifies many former workers who combined savings, resourcefulness and creativity acquired in the FTZ with hard work and ambition to generate social mobility.

Ramya confided in me the struggles she endured to win her in laws' approval. 'They spat when they saw me in those early days', Ramya said referring to her in laws. Soon the couple moved to her village to start life anew and she 'worked like a cow' to be successful. They made a little hut in an abandoned land and Anton, her husband, went to Katunayake every week and brought gunny sacks full of leftover pieces of cloth that are thrown out from FTZ factories for her to sew into soft toys. She sewed day and night, while tending to two little ones, and he took the toys to remote areas to sell. He also raised a few pigs for meat.

When her son and daughter were five and three years old, respectively, their income turned to be inadequate; so Ramya returned to work in the same FTZ factory. Her mother looked after the children during the work week while she stayed at a boarding room with her husband who started driving a school van. 'We worked like that for six years. I left Smart Shirts to obtain the factory gratuity and other payments and with that we bought a van. He thereafter continued the school-hire in Katunayake with our own van, and I returned to the village and raised pigs'. She was looking for ways to earn more money and remembered that while in the FTZ she had heard about a woman who earned much money by raising chickens. Using this scant information, she contacted an agent for Maxies, a leading chicken producer in the country. She joined

Maxies' small chicken farm programme, which delivered chicks, medicine and food while farm owners raised the chicks for 35 days in climate and light controlled chicken farms. The first time they raised chicks, the Maxies agent swindled them out of a good profit. In frustration, and despite her husband's reservations, Ramya went straight to Maxies' headquarters to file a complaint, and thereafter signed up directly with the office. Her husband brought the chicks, medicine and food from the headquarters on weekends. Ramya worked non-stop during the week, cleaning the farm and bringing sawdust from a faraway field. They bought this motor cycle using their first net profit of Rs 50,000 (\$500 at the time). In 2007 her husband left the school van operation and opened another chicken farm and by 2013 they were raising 2000 chicks a month and earning around Rs 75,000 (\$750). They built a beautiful house and now own a pick-up truck in addition to the van and motor bike. 'Our life is a victory', Ramya said with obvious pride and delight.

At first villagers talked derisively about Ramya's supposedly masculine behaviour and did not afford her much respect. Surrounded by supportive relatives, this treatment hardly bothered her. 'I did not even waste a minute to sit down and think whether my success would change people's attitudes. As the money started coming, friends and relatives kept materialising. Now nobody can do without me', she laughed.

Her son joined the Sri Lanka armed forces at age 19 and her daughter, Chalani, had just started working at a FTZ factory when I first met her. Ramya proved herself to be an alternative thinker by saying she preferred her son to one day marry a FTZ worker. According to Ramya, they have good dowries and she even heard that a former worker brought a washing machine as part of her dowry. 'A girl who can do that will direct the boy to a good path and develop her family well', She said. Chalani had started a relationship with a supervisor soon after she joined the factory. Much to Ramya's dismay, the man was pressuring Chalani to leave the FTZ and stay at home till they get married. Ramya instead wanted Chalani to collect a good dowry for herself through factory work.

Chalani, however, understood why her boyfriend wanted her to quit working. The boyfriend was from a respectable family that did not want Chalani to be connected with the FTZ. She also knew her parents would be providing a substantial dowry and, with no association with a stigmatised space, she could easily negotiate a good position among her in-laws. Brought up in a relatively well off, secure and by now a more respected family, Ramya's offspring seem to pursue middle-class ideals. Perhaps not surprisingly, Ramya did not see achieving middle-class status as an end in itself.

However, she had recently begun performing middle-class social rituals and paying lip service to customs and traditions in a bid to locate her children more firmly in the middle class. 'I worked like a donkey so my kids can live like princes. Now we are middle class and she is marrying into a respectable, long-term middle-class family. I do not want her to be made fun of because of our difficult beginning. Not that I am ashamed of how we once were dirt poor. I am so proud of what we achieved. But what is the point of all that hard work if our children do not have easier lives. So when the boy's parents visited us, I wore an *osoriya* [draping the sari in a manner thought more respectable], styled my hair into a bun and even wore an *ata male* [a beaded necklace used by aristocratic Kandyan ladies]. There is no use in giving a good dowry if she is to be made fun of because of my ways. So I will act like a lady every time they come to visit', she said.

Ramya had also started devoting more time for village social activities and that forced her to maintain a tidier appearance in public. 'I cannot go to a temple meeting on my motorcycle. I have to wear long white dresses and oil and braid my hair. I do these nonsensical things so as to not shame my children who have come up to a certain level', she said. Ramya is engaging in a delayed performance of social conformity to help her

children achieve and maintain a higher social position. This is quite a contrast to many other former workers who have to perform extreme forms of conformity at the beginning of marriage to earn respect from in-laws.

Ramya's initial non-compliance certainly helped her achieve much financial success – they are arguably the richest family in their village. She found the freedom of non-compliance mostly due to her post-marital residence among her own relatives, as opposed to many other former workers who typically live with their husbands' families. Also, unlike most former workers, she returned to work in Katunayake because her mother agreed to take care of her two children. And with her husband being disowned by his family and identifying strongly with Ramya's family and village, she was able to play with social norms dealing with being a good wife and mother in ways that women living among in laws could not. Typically, social norms are rigidly applied to women who are precariously balanced between middle class and working class. Given her family's marginalised status, Ramya was able to observe social norms less rigorously. Ramya has realised that while FTZ savings and hard work can propel one towards a better social status, maintaining and furthering that status required performing requisite social rituals. Finally, Ramya was also lucky to marry her boyfriend, as opposed to someone found via family arrangement. This meant she spent less time getting to know her partner after marriage and was able to focus intently on their business activities. Ultimately, Ramya's idiosyncratic traits – fearlessness and physical and mental strength – developed within a marginalised village environment and the stigmatised FTZ environment – were key catalysts in her family's social mobility.

Consumption and cosmopolitanism as social mobility: Jessica

Jessica was one of my closest friends when I conducted fieldwork at a FTZ factory. She left the factory after six years to marry her long-term boyfriend, who made bricks for a living. After marriage Jessica invested part of her FTZ money in a brick furnace for him. As she was an only child, the couple continued to live in her house and she had a daughter within a year of marriage.

When I visited the factory again five years after my first fieldwork stint, Jessica walked to the entrance of the shop floor to hug me and to present me with a welcome gift. That night she took me to dine at her parents' home and shared her story of returning to the factory. She had always been valued at the factory as a good worker who could trouble-shoot. Due to many experienced workers leaving, the factory was experiencing a labour crisis by 2005. Thus, the factory manager and the human resources manager both called Jessica several times and pleaded with her to come back. But Jessica found it difficult to leave her baby. One day, she was washing clothes at the well when a factory van came down the unpaved road looking for her house. The Assistant Factory Manager himself got down from the van and came straight to the well to request her return to work. They offered her a higher position and a salary adding up to Rs 15,000.00. Jessica could not resist the charms of the manager and the improved remuneration package. Her new designation was 'multi-skilled worker' and she was given a black apron – the only worker to wear that colour. She sometimes operated a machine and at other times fixed sewing problems associated with all lines. She was accorded many privileges that other workers did not have. She thrived in this position. 'I feel so good about myself and this new job', she said full of smiles.

Although they lived in a small house and her husband was a day labourer, Jessica by this time had adopted many Colombo styles and looked and behaved more like a factory executive than a worker. Her daughter was dressed in fashionable clothes, and Jessica was planning to enrol the girl in a prestigious school 'that has a pool'. She took the child to an upscale salon to get her hair cut. I was happy to see her being transformed from, as she put it, 'one of the ugly girls in Line C' to a confident, smartly dressed and highly valued factory

worker and mother who was intent on placing her young daughter on a different life path. 'Factory work did raise me up', she said.

Jessica was not a good letter writer to begin with, but in 2012 all correspondence ceased. Another worker later told me that Jessica had gone to Jordan to work, leaving her daughter with her mother. Although this woman speculated that Jessica was most likely working as a housemaid in Jordan, I found this hard to envision given that Jessica was well aware of the oppressive conditions and dangers associated with work as a housemaid in Middle Eastern countries. According to her mother, Jessica insisted on leaving for Jordan despite everyone's opposition and she promised to get Jessica to call me as soon as she came back. Instead of a call, I received two letters from Jessica in 2014 recounting how she fell out of love with her husband and almost started an affair with a married factory executive. Struggling with cultural norms and her own physical and emotional desires, Jessica knew no better way to avoid hurting her husband and family except to create physical distance from them. Jessica revealed that she now worked at a grocery store in Cypress and was living with a man from Ecuador. Her husband, interestingly, remained at her house looking after their daughter and her parents. Jessica's dream was to get her daughter to move to Cypress and thereafter shift to London (or, failing that, to Ecuador). The most relevant comment in her letters pertaining to social mobility was 'Now that I have travelled overseas, I cannot be happy in Sri Lanka. Everything is so clean here, you can eat off the kitchen counters. I want this life for my child too'.

Jessica's life has been interspersed with travel for work. She started as a garment factory worker who was talented and rebellious. After marriage and motherhood, she returned to the same factory in a more privileged position. Then she migrated to Jordan and from there to Cypress for work. Her letters reveal a woman who, while not flouting gender norms directly, still responded to her psychic struggle in a non-normative manner. Finding love and happiness in Cypress, her aims are set higher with the goal of settling down in London.

For Jessica, too, the post-marital residence with her parents has provided a strong foundation for social mobility. She also married after a long romantic relationship. Jessica was happy with her simple working-class life until factory bosses sought after her skills. It is unheard of for management to seek after a rural young mother and entice her to return to work by offering a special designation and higher salary. This boosted Jessica's self-esteem and she started envisioning a different life for her and her daughter. Dissatisfaction stemming from new aspirations appear to have led to the rift in her marriage, which in turn inspired her to migrate again, this time overseas, for work. Her own emotional strength, connection to the FTZ factory, and having her parents to care for her daughter, all aided towards achieving social mobility, a journey that she described as 'trying to raise my head'.

Wither empowerment? Keshani

Keshani was one of the more skilled and politically conscious workers on Line C of her factory. Being chosen factory beauty queen in 2000 led to management treating her favourably, yet her popularity among fellow workers was mainly due to her willingness to fight for fairness and justice on the shop floor. She left the factory to get married to her boyfriend, Ajith, who returned in 2002 after working illegally in Italy for three years. Two years later he again went illegally to Italy for two years. I met Ajith in 2007, by which time Ajith had a small business that dealt with getting damaged clothing from FTZ factories and selling it to village women.

Keshani's non-interest in starting an income generating activity surprised me as she was one of the most outgoing and capable factory workers I met while at the FTZ. Like many other former workers she too had performed extreme forms of social conformity to negate the FTZ stigma and won over her in-laws by 2005. Thus, embarking on a small business should not have been much of a challenge. As Ajith's house was located in Wattala, which was not far from Katunayake, Keshani could have easily used her connections at the factory to start a business. After I met Ajith I understood why she did not venture out. Ajith thought the world of Keshani and wanted to treat her, in his words, 'like a queen'. Keshani had always been somewhat embarrassed about how her beauty and sweet demeanour led to special treatment. She, therefore, did not tell me that Ajith wanted her to live a leisurely life at home, visiting her friends and family whenever she wanted, until he himself revealed this in 2009.

While I found her acquiescence somewhat disheartening, I could not help but be happy that things worked out for her. Although they still lived in Ajith's parents' small house in 2013, the couple was financially successful and Ajith continued to be attentive and generous. He did most of the child care and house cleaning and often tried to prevent Keshani from cooking. This leisurely life also afforded Keshani a luxury, which many other former workers found harder to come by, in that she had time and money to keep visiting and writing letters to her FTZ girlfriends. She travelled with her sister to faraway places to visit friends. Ajith not only encouraged her to do so but offered to help her less fortunate friends.

Keshani's life trajectory has thus far been different from that of her friends and was harder to analyse. Her happiness and success completely depended on her husband's love and attentiveness, which was unusual for most Sri Lankan working-class men. While she referred to their money as 'his' [*meyage*], he called it 'theirs' [*megollange*] – meaning Keshani and their son. I first thought her FTZ dowry was used to send Ajith abroad. She denied this and Ajith later told me that most of her money was in a fixed deposit fund to be used in an emergency. In 2015 they renovated his parents' house and started a Chinese food outlet by the Colombo-Negambo highway. Although she admitted they have 'progressed' economically, she was adamant that they were still 'small people'. Ajith, however, had no qualms about telling me that thanks to Keshani's support (her FTZ savings) and their son's good luck, they are doing well and are now part of the middle class.

The key to Keshani's social mobility was her beauty and desirability and her choice of an atypical Sri Lankan man as partner. His entanglement with undocumented migration to Italy together with Keshani's FTZ savings provided a good economic foundation that propelled them to reach the lower middle class. Instead of buying land together, they renovated the house he would one day inherit. Keshani did not engage in any economic activity or decision-making, and constantly deferred to her husband. I worried about what would happen when she eventually loses her beauty and/or if he changes his kindly ways. When I related these concerns to her, Keshani said, 'We try to develop together as a family. Giving him due recognition and respect for his hard work make our family strong'. Keshani thus erased her important contributions via wage work at a global factory from the story of their social mobility. As someone who was inclined towards labour politics and was in the forefront of protests at the factory, her views now surprised me. It seemed her idyllic life had made her retreat into the old-fashioned middle-class respectable-lady mould more readily than other former factory workers. Yet, her reluctance to claim credit does not necessarily mean she has lost the voice she frequently exercised at the factory to influence desired outcomes. As she said, 'I can choose to do what I want within certain conditions. But I will exercise it only if I cannot get Ajith to do what I want'.

Keshani chose to deny having attained social mobility, although it was abundantly clear that they have climbed up the social ladder. However, whether she is empowered is more difficult to ascertain. Considering she was a leader among assembly line workers and influenced managerial decisions in small ways,³² it seems fair to question whether she had lost whatever voice and influence she garnered while at work. On the other hand, she understood her life as being empowered because she influenced decisions via Ajith. She is an atypical former global worker, whose particular circumstances elicited a different form of claiming empowerment. It was integrally bound to her husband, and thus gives me pause in determining whether her social mobility necessarily entails empowerment.

Pretty bride to lady of the manor: Shamila³³

When she was working in the factory, Shamila constantly tried to distance herself from fellow workers. As she once put it:

I come to work from my house which is right across the road. My parents do not want me to work, but I am bored at home. Whatever salary I get goes for my clothes and make-up. I don't like all these glitzy FTZ clothing. I want to wear what other Colombo people wear. I don't shop here in the bazaar. I go to Majestic City in Colombo to buy my clothes. The others come to the factory because they have no other choice. I am here so that I could have fun before getting married.

Through her consumption patterns and emphasis on not being a rural woman, Shamila attempted to create a difference between the 'migrant garment factory workers' and herself. She attempted to show supervisors how diligent she was and volunteered to help when a crisis occurred. She also tried to claim that factory executives were her friends. She left the factory to get married to her gem businessman fiancée. Shamila was a devout Catholic who attended church every Sunday. Other workers who were resentful of her boastful manner laughed that Shamila will be residing 25 miles away from the nearest Cathedral preventing her from attending church and gleefully claimed that she had effectively given up her religion for wealth.

When I last visited her in 2016, she was living in comfort in their palatial multi-storey house and seemed happy and content with her life. She obviously did not need to engage in any income generating activity and neither did she try. Shamila seemed to have fulfilled her dream of attaining middle-class status through her rich husband but found life boring in rural Rathnapura (her children are boarded in Kandy when school is in session), except when she engaged in networking to help poor village women get FTZ jobs. Considering the elite status of her husband's family in the village, I suspect that she never advertised her own stint at the FTZ. Even though this increased the danger of getting exposed, the pride and joy she experienced in using networks of friendship and kinship to help women in need seemed to be too attractive for her to resist.

Since my first visit to see her in 2004, Shamila has transformed into a complete lady in her mannerisms. Referring to the considerable weight she has gained, she said, 'very appropriate for my age, and status'. On the four occasions I visited her, Shamila gathered groups of village women by saying she wanted to help my research, but at times it seemed that she wanted me to see how poor village women regarded her as the lady of the mansion. The intensity of her showing-off decreased as the years passed and by 2016 women were calling her '*Sudu Menike*' (fair lady) with reverence and waited on her and fussed over her needs. She

continued to find jobs and boarding houses for women at the FTZ and helped others locate jobs in the Middle East. She also assisted women in navigating various bureaucracies and even provided some with financial aid so they could start small businesses. 'I have helped at least 10 women start small businesses', Shamila said with obvious pride.

Shamila noted that her children being away at boarding school was her only unhappiness. But thanks to occasional inadvertent comments (amidst her triumphant narratives) I gathered that she and her husband have an emotionally distant relationship, mostly due to his constant travels for business. He also seemed to make the important decisions pertaining to the household. For instance, Shamila said that she did not want the children to go to boarding schools until they reached grade six. But all her children started boarding school at grade one, because her husband felt that was best for them. 'I compensate by helping and spoiling village children', Shamila said.

When asked what was most responsible for the success she has achieved, Shamila said she credits FTZ work. After praising the FTZ for making her a strong woman, she complained about a new garment factory in a nearby town centre that was attracting village women despite paying lousy salaries. She complained, 'It is always better to go to a FTZ where there are rules and regulations about salaries and benefits'. She added that not only was she able to meet her husband thanks to the FTZ – when he came to the area to scope out investment opportunities – but the FTZ dowry also allowed her to come to a rich marital home with some dignity. This dowry was her first step toward social mobility within marriage on her own terms.

Her marriage, in her perception, was only one aspect of her social mobility. She had to work hard to be accepted as a worthy 'lady of the manor'. This included becoming a benevolent woman in her own right. Providing financial help to villagers was always associated with her husband. She alone, however, received credit for the efforts put into helping women find jobs in the FTZ and Middle East and starting income generating activities. Her felt empowerment, therefore, was achieved through recognising nuances of respect, and then working to independently earn respect. Thus, her mobility from 'pretty bride' to 'lady of the manor' happened through her purposive actions in negotiating her own space within the marriage.

Conclusion: complicating social mobility and empowerment

All four women discussed above, along with many other former global factory workers I interviewed, have achieved social mobility via several key paths: astute investment of FTZ earnings, returning to work in the FTZ, migrating overseas for employment and marrying up while carefully balancing and navigating marital power relations. Social mobility was aided by matrilocal post-marital residence and supportive husbands and parents. But are these women empowered? All four of them agreed that they felt empowered overall and felt ebb and flow as they journeyed through different stages of life. In fact, 103 out of the 121 (85%) women interviewed noted they felt empowered at some levels. Their responses also demonstrated that the conventional notions of standardised empowerment – one that is rooted in personal autonomy, agency and voice that characterise all aspects of life – is not what they understood as empowerment. Rather they experienced empowerment in relation to the disempowerment they felt before achieving success as former workers. All four women discussed above and 98 of the 121 interviewees also saw FTZ work as one of the reasons for their success in life.

Naila Kabeer ³⁴ has noted that women's paid work is instrumental in poverty reduction, human development and economic growth and that it has the potential to transform their lives. She also notes that these positive outcomes are only possible if paid work empowers women to exercise voice and influence in the key domains of their lives. The above narratives show that exercising voice and influence do not come easy or in a linear format. While their hard work and astute manoeuvring may allow these women influence in key domains of their lives, the next constellation of contextually intersecting power relations will diminish or erase that influence, which they then work towards recapturing. This delicate dance of achieving influence did not make women feel disempowered. Rather they found power and strength in the dance itself, and thus saw themselves as winners as long as they were in the struggle to better themselves. Their narratives extend other studies that note how empowerment is a process even as they highlight how women do not feel empowered just because they climbed up the social ladder. They instead consider the struggle to gain voice and agency in social situations to be an empowering experience. Thus, these women's exercise of agency was similar to Kabeer's contention that women's agency included a wide range of purposive action, such as negotiation, bargaining and subversion. ³⁵ Their narratives also evidence that the inability to exercise full autonomy does not necessarily imply passivity.

Studies on empowerment note that women's empowerment was more stable if they organise collectively for common ends. ³⁶ The women described above, however, experienced empowerment individually and have not exercised voice in organising for collective politics. Parpart ³⁷ notes that individual autonomy and agency are necessary but not sufficient conditions for effective collective action. My previous work, ³⁸ however, contends that Sri Lanka's former workers' purposive actions have led to a gradual process of changing gender norms in rural areas. Even if preferred forms of radical social transformations are absent, former workers' individual actions lead to positive social change and contribute to understanding locally perceived and shaped forms of empowerment. Life histories and interviews also show that, contrary to popular perception, FTZ work does lead to social mobility and forms of empowerment among rural women. This paper further highlights how, while FTZ savings and networks are necessary conditions to attain upward mobility, strategising, creativity and family support play important roles when it comes to women achieving a sense of empowerment. It is perhaps at this juncture – where FTZ gains meet individual and familial skills, resources and barriers – that future policies can intervene to help further the monetary and social capital gains from global factory work towards more sustainable paths to social mobility, empowerment and social structural transformations.

Notes

1. Fernandez-Kelly, *For We are Sold*; Wolf, *Factory Daughters*; Ong, *Spirits of Resistance*; Lynch, *Juki Girls, Good Girls*; Mezzadri, *The Sweatshop Regime*.
2. Mills, *Thai Women*; Pena, *Terror of the Machine*; Pun, *Made in China*; Hewamanne, *Stitching Identities*.
3. Prentice, *Thieving a Chance*; Hewamanne, *Sri Lanka's Global Factory Workers*.
4. Hewamanne, "Crafting Social Change."
5. Hewamanne, *Sri Lanka's Global Factory Workers*.
6. Hewamanne, *Sri Lanka's Global Factory Workers*; Hewamanne, "Negotiating Sexual Meanings."
7. Hewamanne, *Stitching Identities*.
8. Hewamanne, *Stitching Identities*; Hewamanne, *Sri Lanka's Global Factory Workers*.
9. Hewamanne, "Crafting Social Change."
10. Korth, "Ecotourism in Fiji"; Manjengwa, "Problems Reconciling Sustainable Development."
11. Shamsie, "Export Processing Zones."
12. Ruwanpura and Hughes, "Empowered Spaces?"
13. Obeng, Wrigley-Asante, and Kofi-Teye, "Working Conditions in Ghana."
14. Matos, "Call Center Labor."
15. Lynch, *Juki Girls, Good Girls*; Hewamanne, *Sri Lanka's Global Factory Workers*; Hancock, "Gender, Status and Empowerment"; Hancock, Middleton, and Moore, "Gender, Globalization and Empowerment."
16. Goger, "From Disposable to Empowered."
17. Hewamanne, *Stitching Identities*; "Suicide Narratives"; Hewamanne, *Sri Lanka's Global Factory Workers*.
18. Van Leeuwen and Mass, "Historical Studies."
19. Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Osella and Osella, "From Transience to Immanence."
20. Fernandez-Kelly and Konczal, "Murdering the Alphabet."
21. Niekerk, "Afro-Caribbeans"; Borjas, "Making it in America"; Zhou et al., "Success Attained, Deterred."
22. Branisa, Klasen, and Sieglar, "Gender Inequality in Social Institutions"; Abelmann, *The Melodrama of Mobility*.
23. Nazneen, Darkwahand, and Sultan, "Researching Women's Empowerment"; Fraser, "Feminism, Capitalism."

24. Leve, "Women's Empowerment, Rural Revolution."
25. Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements."
26. Sharma, "Crossbreeding Institutions, Breeding Struggle," 78–81.
27. Sharma, "Crossbreeding Institutions, Breeding Struggle"; Sharma, *Logics of Empowerment*.
28. Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*; Leve, "Failed Development"; Hewamanne, "Crafting Social Change."
29. Leve, "Women's Empowerment, Rural Revolution."
30. Nagar and Raju, "Women, NGOs."
31. Perera, "Development from Within."
32. Hewamanne, *Stitching Identities*.
33. "I have used different pseudonym for Jessica, Keshani and Shamila in my previous publications about their FTZ time. All three of them requested new pseudonyms to minimize the chance of being connected to earlier stories."
34. Kabeer, *Contextualising the Economic Pathways*; Kabeer, "Economic Pathways to Empowerment."
35. Kabeer, *The Power to Choose*.
36. Akchurin and Lee, "Pathways to Empowerment."
37. Parpart, Shirin, and Staudt, "Re-Thinking Empowerment."
38. Hewamanne, "Crafting Social Change."

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