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# Global measures of gender empowerment: A case study of Sri Lankan Export Processing Zone (EPZ) workers

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# GENDER ASPECTS OF GLOBALIZATION

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## GLOBAL MEASURES OF GENDER EMPOWERMENT: A CASE STUDY OF SRI LANKAN EXPORT PROCESSING ZONE (EPZ) WORKERS

Peter Hancock and Sharon Middleton

*This paper focuses on global measures of gender empowerment released annually by the UNDP and the World Economic Forum. It discusses and critiques these measures on a global level and juxtaposes this analysis against the research conducted among women who work in Sri Lanka's Export Processing Zones (EPZs). Global measures of gender equality show that in Sri Lanka the gender-based inequality is increasing despite the nation dramatically improving its economy and poverty levels and meeting some of the Millennium Development Goals. To explain this contradiction, we sampled 2,304 women to explore how they experienced gender and empowerment and to explore synergies, or lack thereof, with global measures of gender empowerment. What the data revealed was an almost complete contradiction between the experiences of young women at the forefront of export-oriented industrial development (and hence modernization) and the variables that made up the global measures. Our research clearly shows that in nations like Sri Lanka women experience 'modernization' and globalization in complex ways that are influenced strongly at the local and state level by culture, media and public discourse. The women who participated in our research lived complex lives and their experiences indicated that gender inequality and empowerment require far deeper analysis before conclusions can be drawn. The data was far too contradictory to make any claims in this regard. What we did find was that their lived experiences could not be captured by global measures of gender equality and empowerment and we suggest more social research needs to be conducted into this issue.*

**Keywords:** *global gender measures, gender and empowerment, gender inequality and women in Sri Lanka.*

### Introduction

Too much discourse assumes that women live in isolation from men, or that their problems are predominantly the result of patriarchy or dislocation from men per se. We do not live in a gender specific vacuum.

1995 was a pivotal year in the struggle for gender equality. Specifically in 1995 was launched the Beijing Global Platform for Action and the release of two internation-

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al gender-specific indices by the UNDP (the Gender Development Index [GDI] and the Gender Empowerment Measure [GEM]). In 1995, at least globally, things seemed to be on track for a significant generational movement toward greater gender equality and transparency. Gender mainstreaming (GM) was embedded in the Beijing Platform for Action as a policy tool to achieve gender equality. Both the gender indices and GM were widely influential and implemented across developing nations and by international aid agencies and national government initiatives. In 2014, it was 19 years on from the 'Beijing Platform' and time to reflect on gender equality and on the success of the Beijing initiatives. Given that gender empowerment tends to be a generational 'movement' it is also time to re-assess the global measures that have evolved over the past 19 years as well.

To bring life to the discussion we focus on research conducted among 2,304 Sri Lanka Export Processing Zones (EPZ) workers. This case study is provided to highlight the complexities of gender empowerment and the need to focus on lived experiences rather than simply relying on global measures. The rationale behind the case study of EPZ women is that it is they who should logically experience empowerment, or disempowerment, depending on your theoretical worldview, as a result of formal manufacturing export-oriented employment. They are at the forefront of economic development, modernization and globalization in developing nations. This case study provides important lessons for young women in other nations because it focuses on an area of the economy in developing nations where stable incomes and formal employment are a new phenomenon and an ideal place to 'test' impacts on gender equality and empowerment.

Two international indices developed by the UNDP in 1995 were intended to create 'gendered' indicators that were 'theoretically' appropriate for cross-country comparisons and over time. The first was the Gender Development Index (GDI) and the second was the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). The GEM and GDI were first introduced in the United Nations' 1995 *Human Development Report* and have influenced our thinking on gender equality, empowerment and status for almost 15 years, after which they were replaced (following heavy and sustained criticism) by the Gender Inequality Index (GII) in the 2010 *Human Development Report*. The GII is not much of an improvement on the GEM and GDI. Unfortunately, the problems with these indicators, discussed below, have been transferred to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and hence we are now stuck in a conundrum *vis-a-vis* the MDGs, as nations strive to meet quantitative targets by 2015. Global indicators targets do very little to enhance our understanding of gender, gender equality, status and empowerment. For example, the ways in which gender equality is tied to formal employment in the MDGs is tenuous. Further, the belief this will lead to gender equality is questionable. Indeed Kamimura (2011) argues that the 'assumed' and positive link between employment and gender equality that underpin the gender aspects of the MDGs is patriarchal and based on 'normative' assumptions that are incorrect. Our research among EPZ workers supports and expands on this position.

Measures such as the GEM and the GII gloss over more important issues such as violence, subjugation and subordination of women in many nations where long held patriarchal systems and institutions are invisible in most quantitative data. Further, many of the most impoverished and isolated women in many developing nations elude census data and social research, the reality is that economic and societal data in many nations is incomplete and focuses on those segments of society that are easy to sample,

the middle class urban based populations as a whole. What these global measures capture therefore is questionable, and research such as ours, which required three years of household sampling across Sri Lanka, provides viable alternatives to census-based measures critiqued in this paper.

### How is Gender Empowerment Measured?

Typically gender empowerment is measured through statistical means and as a result of country-level or institutional level data that show women's position in relation to men's in terms of access (to land, laws, safety, resources, decisions, *etc.*). Most agencies measure gender empowerment in this way and in so doing homogenize women, assuming they all experience empowerment in the same way and that 'access' to income, resources and property, for example = empowerment. This is far too simplistic.

The GDI was based on the Human Development Index (HDI) but was corrected for gender gaps in the three HDI dimensions of Education, Health and Income (Dijkstra 2006; Klasen 2006). Thus the GDI was an adjustment of the HDI in terms of gender gaps only and was in essence a basic measurement in gender inequality in relation to mortality and morbidity, knowledge and standard of living affecting human development (UNDP 2007). The GEM was a measure of women's relative political and economic empowerment and ranked nations according to the extent to which gender equality has changed or improved over time (UNDP 2007). The GEM measured gaps in gender equality based on income, political representation and management positions (UNDP 2007).

Rankings on these two measures varied widely. The number one ranking country (out of 177 countries) on the GDI in 2007/08 was Iceland with 0.962 (0.0 inequality to 1.0 is equality) with Australia ranked second (0.960) (UNDP 2007/2008). Sri Lanka had a relatively high GDI ranking of 0.735 and ranked 89 in 2007 (UNDP 2008). In 2008, the GEM in comparison ranks Sri Lanka 85 (out of 93 countries) with an index of 0.369 that is relatively low in equality. Thus, in terms of gender and development, Sri Lanka ranks at a reasonable level on the GDI but still has a long way to go in terms of empowerment. Sri Lanka's GEM ranking has decreased from 69 (0.372) in 2006 to a lowly 85 in 2007/08 (UNDP 2007). By 2010, the GEM and GDI had been replaced by the Gender Inequality Index (GII). By 2011, Sri Lanka was ranked 74<sup>th</sup> on the GII, Australia 18<sup>th</sup> and Sweden 1<sup>st</sup> (UNDP 2011). By 2013, this ranking was at 76 (UNDP 2013). Sri Lanka's poor ranking on the GII and its predecessors is due predominantly to very poor political participation rates and labour force participation rates which were at 5.8 per cent and 34.7 per cent respectively in 2013. Interestingly, a new global measure of gender inequality emerged in 2006, and it contradicted the GII, despite similar intent (see below).

Table 1

**Four Global Measures of Gender and Empowerment**

1) UNDP – Gender Development Index – GDI	2) UNDP – Gender Empowerment Measure – GEM	3) UNDP – Gender Inequality Index – GII	4) World Economic Forum – Global Gender Gap Index – GGGI
1995–2009	1995–2009	2010–present	2006–present

The Gender Inequality Index (GII) is discussed in detail below; however, our understanding of women's empowerment remains elusive and cursory, despite the introduction of the GII in the 2010 Human Development Report. Consider for a moment Sri Lanka's relatively poor ranking on the GII, GDI and GEM. Alongside with the GEM and GDI, the World Economic Forum developed and released the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) in 2006. It was designed to measure gaps between male and female access to resources and economic and political capital around four key areas (World Economic Forum 2008):

- (i) Economic Participation.
- (ii) Educational Capital.
- (iii) Political Capital.
- (iv) Health.

In 2007, Sri Lanka had a high ranking of 12 on the GGGI ahead of many Western nations, including the United States. Sri Lanka ranked highly on the GGGI because it had a female head of state for many years and because it has a good health care system, and for no other realistic reasons. In 2011, Sri Lanka still ranked highly on 'health and survival' and 'political participation' on the GGGI but had fallen in 'economic participation and opportunity', therefore falling to a lower ranking of 31 on the GGGI. By 2013, Sri Lanka's ranking had dropped dramatically to 55<sup>th</sup>, despite improved education and health indicators for women and the fact that Sri Lanka had moved into a 'High Development' nation category on the UNDP's Human Development Index (World Economic Forum 2013; UNDP 2013). See Table 3 below.

It is very important at this stage to compare the GGGI with Sri Lanka's HDI or Human Development Index, which is based on Education, Health, and the Economy (UNDP 2013). The similarities with the GGGI are evident in three areas at least. The most interesting aspects of Sri Lanka's HDI is that it has steadily improved from 2005 when it was ranked as a 'Medium' ranked nation in terms of human development with a GDP Per Capita income of USD \$3778.00 (UNDP 2005). By 2013, Sri Lanka was ranked a 'High' nation with a GDP Per Capita income of USD \$4,929.00 (UNDP 2013). In this period, Sri Lanka had improved economically (exports, tourism and construction), while education and health indicators remained relatively static. In this same period from 2005 to 2013, Sri Lanka's ranking on the GGGI trended in the opposite direction to the HDI, from 12<sup>th</sup> in 2006 to 55<sup>th</sup> in 2013. One has to wonder why gender inequality has increased as dramatically as human development improved significantly.

By 2010, the GGGI rankings remained the same with Nordic nations dominating the top ten but Sri Lanka had moved to a slightly lower ranking of 16 globally in 2010 from 15 in 2009 (World Economic Forum 2010), a questionable move up or down the so called ladder. However, given this ranking had slipped to 55<sup>th</sup> by 2013 shows the erratic nature of the measure. Given a high ranking on the GGGI between 2006–2009 compared to a poor ranking on the GEM and GII (see below) the problems of both macro-measures seems to provide unworkable indicators. These three indicators were the pre-eminent indicators of gender equality and empowerment, they rely on similar indices, yet they contradict each other. See Table 2 below. By 2014 they had reached some point of synergy with overall 'middling rankings' for Sri Lanka, but are still puzzling.

Table 2

## Sri Lanka's Ranking on the Four Gender Measures

Year	GDI	GEM	GGGI	GII
2002	70 <sup>th</sup> (150)	64 <sup>th</sup> (66)	NA	NA
2007/08	89 <sup>th</sup> (157)	85 <sup>th</sup> (93)	12 <sup>th</sup> (130)	NA
2010	NA	NA	16 <sup>th</sup> (132)	72 <sup>nd</sup> (138)
2011	NA	NA	31 <sup>st</sup> (135)	74 <sup>th</sup> (146)
2013	NA	NA	55 <sup>th</sup> (136)	75 <sup>th</sup> (147)

Berenger and Verdier-Chouchane (2011) stated that the GEM and GDI simply did not achieve their goal of providing a country-specific measure of gender inequality. After heavy and sustained critiques the UNDP introduced the Gender Inequality Index in 2010 to replace the GDI and GEM. Like the GEM, the Gender Inequality Index (GII) is a composite measure reflecting inequality in statistical achievements of women compared to men, but it focuses on three major areas: reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market. The empowerment components of the GII have changed but it retains a focus on political participation rates and labour force participation rates, with previous measures discarded. However, these are claimed to measure empowerment by the UNDP but still contain the flaws outlined in the GEM and GDI critique above. They are now far more narrowly scoped with one measure for political participation and one for labour force participation added to the measures on reproductive health.

In 2010, Sri Lanka ranked 72 out of 138 nations on the GII (UNDP 2010). In 2013, it ranked 76<sup>th</sup> on the same measure (UNDP 2013) despite improved education and health data in the nation. The rationale behind choosing the measures used to create the GII is very similar to the GEM. However, by introducing health and reproductive indicators (Table 3 below) the GII is placing too much emphasis on health-specific measures that are not directly proven to be related to gender empowerment or inequality. Reproductive issues and contraceptive use are far more likely to be culturally embedded with bias toward developed Western nations where contraceptive use for example is widely accepted, whereas in developing nations it is not accepted among unmarried women for example. Again we argue that the GII is a misleading measure and when we compare the poor ranking of the Sri Lanka in 2010 with a far better rating on the GGGI in the same year this is more compelling. Moreover, the new measures added to the GII related to reproductive health seem quite biased as the use of contraception is viewed as a positive gender indicator or a way in which to measure gender inequality. These indicators ignore the majority of young women in the developing world who are unmarried, and particularly those at the forefront of economic development, young women in formal employment. Moreover, the GII relies on Census data that is inconsistent and which would be unreliable, as many women would not answer questions candidly, such as those related to reproductive issues.

Table 3

**A Critique of the Four Global Gender Measures**

	<b>GEM</b>	<b>GDI</b>	<b>GGGI</b>	<b>GII</b>
Rationale	Opportunities	Capabilities	Gaps	Statistical Inequality
Measured Through	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political Representation</li> <li>• Income</li> <li>• Management positions</li> <li>• Professional /technical workers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Health</li> <li>• Income</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic participation and opportunity</li> <li>• Educational Attainment</li> <li>• Political empowerment</li> <li>• Health and survival</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political Representation</li> <li>• Labour Participation</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Maternal Mortality Rate</li> <li>• Adolescent Fertility Rate</li> </ul>
Homogenises Women	√		√	
Ignores women in the informal sector	√	√	√	√
Biased toward urban middle class women	√	√	√	√
Political assumptions	√		√	√
Ignores unpaid labour	√	√	√	√
Biased towards male-dominated sectors	√		√	
Complex measure	√		√	√
Ignores household	√	√		
Euro-centric	√	√	√	√

The GII claims to focus on the labour market to measure gender inequality over time. However, only one measure related to labour is used in the GII; this is the labour force participation rate of men compared to women, and in Sri Lanka this was based on 2008 Census data which indicated that 38.5 per cent of women participated in the labour market, compared to a very high 80.3 per cent for men (UNDP 2008). By 2013, this statistic had declined to 37.8 per cent for women in Sri Lanka (UNDP 2013). These figures, like most in the GII ignore the reality of life for women in developing nations, their labour maybe unpaid, or paid in kind, their labour may not be considered as work (e.g., housework and childcare) and many women work in informal markets and do not figure on this measure. Norway, for example, which ranked 5<sup>th</sup> on the GII in 2010 had very high female labour force participation rates, with women measuring 99.3 per cent, higher than males and therefore raising their ranking (UNDP 2010). However, developed nations like Norway do not have large informal markets or large rural populations where women work as unpaid labourers in seasonal conditions and commonly work for in kind remuneration. It is these sectors that are dominated by women in developing nations and are invisible to the GII. The UNDP has a long way to go before it identifies measures that will not attract constant criticism.

### Issues for Consideration

We argue that international agencies should consider deeper engagement with social research and the constant movement in the discourses *vis-a-vis* gender and empowerment circulating and competing for attention. Specifically gender-specific staff within these organizations should attempt to integrate and engage with research such as ours. In terms of constructing meaning around gender and empowerment, gender mainstreaming has been used by most development agencies in recent times; however, this approach alone is inadequate to ensure that the complexities of women's life experiences are understood, acknowledged and addressed. Simply mainstreaming gender into programs and policies is not enough. Further research and collaboration is required between international aid agencies, academic institutions, INGOs and women in developing nations. The women sampled in our research show clearly the need for a more intensive research to ensure more and different voices are heard.

One common policy response to gender inequality is gender mainstreaming. This notion has become the overarching gender policy directive of many development agencies and has merit as an ideal. It is, however, problematic to simply use gender mainstreaming as a policy initiative. This is because the notion of mainstreaming 'institutionalizes' gender into all programs, regardless of rationale or reason; it also creates a vision of women as a target for aid, rather than active agents and in many developing nations mainstreaming gender as policy will exacerbate notions that women are powerless victims. Moreover, based on the experience of this research team, mainstreaming gender into developing nation institutions that are underpinned by patriarchy will not be effective as only tokenistic support will be adopted. In our research, patriarchal structures and influences were evident at all levels of government and tended to be more extreme in rural locations, the locations where gender mainstreaming is often targeted. It is critical that these issues are considered in future discussion of gender and empowerment and the future development and implementation of gender-based policy, discourse and programs.

It is of interest to the research team to know the indices that make up the Millennium Development Goals. For example, Goal 3 '*Promote Gender Equity and Empower Women*': is made up of three goals which are to improve:

- 3.1. The Ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education.
- 3.2. The share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector.
- 3.3. The proportion of seats held by women in National Parliament.

Measure 3.2 was heavily criticized by Kamimura (2011) who stated that it was based on misplaced assumptions, and inappropriately tied to neo-liberalist and modernization schools of thought. Kamimura argues that this measure is affiliated to a particular cultural-political regime and ignores the realities of women in developing nations who dominate the informal and family-care sectors and by doing so creates a false premise from which many developing agencies make assumptions about the gender equality and economic development.

### **Gender Mainstreaming**

Gender mainstreaming as a result of the Beijing Global Platform for action as defined by the UN (2002: iii) as

the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic and social spheres so that ... inequality is not perpetuated.

Gender mainstreaming (GM) when actioned in conjunction with other specific policies and programs focuses on women's empowerment and is seen by many as the key ingredient in achieving gender equality. Gender mainstreaming involves the development, implementation and delivery of programs, policies and services that consider women's and men's issues as a core theme (see Australian Council for Overseas Aid 2004). Most development aid agencies have adopted GM in many parts of their service delivery and program development.

However, evidence from the field has indicated that mainstreaming women's and men's issues may also result in the 'mainstreaming' of patriarchy back into the systems they were meant to change.

Ines Smyth (2007) from the Asian Development Bank and previously Oxfam GB, claims that GM is the most commonly adopted policy among development organizations, stemming from the need to make gender issues central to an organization's practice, rather than on the periphery where they had been. In her previous positions she has witnessed the process where organizations that adopted GM found that this in turn led to decreased resources for women-specific programs. She also found that GM tended to create even further institutional distance between women and men and development organizations.

Smyth (2007) stated that terms like gender, empowerment and GM have become so used, and over-used that they have lost their salience. In development organizations she argues terms around gender have lost their nuanced meanings and the

groundings and debates from which they came – they have been depoliticized. GM has become so unclear in its meaning that it has become the anti-thesis to gender equality. Smyth surmises that the hectic and real worlds in which women and men live, and the incredibly complex power structures which they negotiate, have now been hidden behind a blanket term of ‘gender’ and concepts such as gender equality and GM allow complexity and reality to be glossed over.

One critical point to come out of the debate on GM from our Sri Lankan social researchers was that women's groups had opposed it (GM). They had done so because they believed that gender inequalities could also be mainstreamed in the process, making things worse. Women-specific programs are preferred to avoid this and the homogenization of women evident in GM. It is of interest that women-specific programs would run counter to the Beijing Platform for action; however, this call cannot be ignored.

### MDGs in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka there is no single cause for gender inequality. There is a commitment from many nations to eliminate gender inequality by 2015 by espousal to the Millennium Development Goals. The MDGs consist of eight development goals that are to be achieved by 2015 by 193 nations.

As shown in Table 4, Sri Lanka has already achieved gender equality in primary and secondary education as early as 2004. For example, Goal 2 of the MDGs is on track to be achieved by 2015 as shown in Table 4 (Indicator 9). Sri Lanka is also on track to achieving part of MDG Target 3a ratio of literate women to men 15–24 years old (indicator 10). In universities, the number of women accounts to just over half the number of men. Sri Lanka's high literacy rate amongst women has not translated into well-paid and qualified jobs for them, as well as into women's participation in Sri Lanka's political life (World Bank 2004). By 2014, Sri Lanka had almost achieved parity in education levels and MDG 10 and had the highest education satisfaction rates in South Asia (UNDP 2013). Despite this, gender inequality persists and is indeed increasing and many patriarchal structures remain intact. We pose the question, ‘*if Sri Lanka met all the MDGs by 2015, would women there have achieved equality?*’

Table 4

### MDGs in Sri Lanka (World Bank 2004)

#### Scorecard

Indicator	1990	2001	MDG target	
			2015	Status
1	2	3	4	5
9. Ratio of girls to boys in Primary Education	93.1	95.3	100.0	On track
Ratio of girls to boys in Secondary Education	104.0	104.2	100.0	On track
Ratio of girls to boys in Tertiary Education	66.2	89.8	100.0	On track
10. Ratio of literate women to men 15–24 years old	100.0	101.0	100.0	On track

1	2	3	4	5
11. Share of women in wage employment in the non-agriculture sector	29.0	31.0	–	Not on track
12. Proportion of seats held by women in National Parliament	5.3*	4.9**	–	Not on track

(10), (11) North and East are not covered due to data limitations.

\* 1994, \*\* 2004

Source: (9) – SC, DTET, (10) – DCS, (11) – QLFS/DCS, (12) – DOE.

Women in Sri Lanka have exhibited very strong education and health indicators for many decades, due mainly to government policies implemented in the 1960s. Universal education and comparatively good health indicators have not led to important steps towards gender equality as the MDGs imply. It is of great importance that Sri Lanka has exhibited ‘very good’ education and health data for women for many decades, but this has not translated to, for example, more women in government or in managerial and formal employment. In reality, the links between gender equality indicators are far more complex than first thought and require far more rigorous research and debate.

### Debate Surrounding the MDGs

The MDGs are presented by many organizations as the solution to poverty and gender inequality. An example would be measuring the proportion of seats held by women in national parliament. This aspect of MDG 3 implies adherence to the tenets of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action. However, the realities of gender inequality and the lives of women cannot be so simply homogenized, or compartmentalized, a ‘magic bullet’ approach as suggested in this MDG with respect to gender equality and political representation is far too simplistic.

Some argue that there must be a better focus on the empowerment of women if any of the goals are to be achieved and in the worst case scenario to ensure that the other MDGs are not adversely affected. According to the UN Women National Committee Australia (n.d.), ‘as we consider how the MDG structure will continue after 2015, if we are to truly renew our intentions and actions to ending poverty and injustice women must be the main characters of the story’. The notion of a story is important here, as it is women's stories and experiences which are critical, and stories cannot be told quantitatively.

We argue that gender equality is not something easily measured or attained and it cannot be simply attained by achieving pre-set quantitative indicators by 2015. While the MDGs in and of themselves are important, they lack an insight into the realities of gender-based subordination. We contend, for example, that simply having an increased proportion of women in national parliament will not automatically lead to gender equality. The processes of achieving gender equality through the mechanisms of parliamentary representation are far more complex and as yet unproven.

### Case Study – EPZ Women in Sri Lanka

This case study is based on research that was funded by AusAID's *Australian Development Research Award* and conducted by investigators from Edith Cowan University

(ECU) (Australia) and The Centre for Research on Women (CENWOR) (Sri Lanka). The research sampled 2,304 women who worked in factories in Sri Lanka's Export Processing Zones. The research was designed to give voice to women working in factories. The data they provided was designed to provide alternate and empirical data with regards the lived experiences of women in a developing nation at the forefront of international development and the most likely to be empowered – simply by receiving a regular salary. The research was also designed to question the legitimacy of macro- and positivistic measures of gender empowerment used globally and which focus on binary census data (comparing women's data to men's) the GEM, GGGI, GDI and GII.

Our research found that these measures conceptualize gender and empowerment in simplistic and unrealistic ways. To counter this reductiveness, this paper provides new insights to the ways in which women experience formal employment and the myriad of ways in which they are empowered and simultaneously dis-empowered as a result of working in export-oriented factories in a 'developing' nation. The points of discussion that stem from this are outlined below.

In summary, our data found that respondents living and working in the Export Processing Zones are relatively young and well-educated; the large majority have migrated from rural areas to work predominantly in garment factories. 74.8 per cent of women were 25 years or younger, with the average respondent aged 24.02 years.<sup>1</sup> Only 10.3 per cent of women were aged 26–30 and 14.9 per cent aged 31 and over. This indicates a relatively young workforce typical in EPZs in developing nations. Most had worked less than three years; in fact the average length of employment was 3.1 years. They work long hours in mostly low status positions with 95 per cent of women working overtime with limited opportunities for promotion. Our data showed that 100 per cent of women worked 40+ hours per week, 80.6 per cent of women worked 50+ hours per week and 15.1 per cent of women worked 60+ hours per week. These working hours were far higher than national averages for women in other sectors. However, despite the hardships of working and living away from home, the women appear resilient and focused on the benefits that employment has brought to them and their families.

The analysis revealed that 47.37 per cent of women who had worked six years or more were promoted into managerial or supervisor positions compared to 25.56 per cent of women who had worked five years or less. The women across all EPZs were well-educated with 98.4 per cent having an O-level or above education. A further 38.2 per cent had completed A-level education, with 1.1 per cent ( $n = 25$ ) women engaged or having completed tertiary studies. Women with higher education levels are more likely to be employed in a management position than women with less education. This is supported by a chi-square analysis that found higher education was associated with higher job level  $\chi^2(12, n = 2301) = 52.41, p < .001$ . Women's salary increased with both age and number of years worked with each variable accounting for 1.69 per cent and 7.51 per cent of the variance in salary respectively. Salary was also compared across job title and marital status via one-way ANOVA's. Results indicated that higher job status led to significantly higher salary. Analysis of total monthly income with overtime was conducted against age and years worked. Results indicated a significant (though rather weak) positive correlation between total monthly income with age ( $r = .09, p < .001$ ) and also year's worked ( $r = .28, p < .001$ ). This indicated that women

were paid significantly more as they became older and were also paid more as they worked more years in the factory.

On average women across the sampled EPZs earned 44 per cent of the total family income. Looking further we found that 3 per cent ( $n = 70$ ) women earned 100 per cent of the total family income and only 11.6 per cent ( $n = 267$ ) women earned 20 per cent or less of total family income. It was also interesting to note that 24 per cent of fathers and 66 per cent of mothers made no financial contribution to the family. These are interesting results highlighting the importance of women's wages to family income. Every month 75.60 per cent of women sent money home to their family. An average of 2646.84LKR was sent home every month, with the maximum being 15,000LKR. From this data we again point to the importance of women's wages to family well-being. The money sent home was used in positive ways including home renovations, assistance with sibling's education needs, family medical fees and living expenses. Moreover, these remittances proved to be the major focus of the debate on work and empowerment. Qualitative data revealed that earning relatively good salaries, and being able to remit to family, led to many young women feeling a sense of empowerment that they had not previously experienced.

We found complex and extraordinary ways in which women were empowering themselves and their families, whilst at the same time facing enormous forces that would see them dis-empowered. These included global forces of neo-liberal development, and also patriarchal powers within the nation and harsh working conditions, a position supported by Kamimura (2011). However, this paper does show that wages were used to empower women and their families, but not in the sense that neo-liberalist advocates argue, where empowerment is viewed in simplistic ways. Our research found that it was through the participant's self-determination and obligation to family, village and society that income caused a complex process of empowerment to develop. Importantly, a significant majority of the women we sampled had very specific and pre-conceived monetary strategies that they employed, in essence planning to work for 3–5 years and then leave formal employment altogether once a familial or nuptial goal had been realized. This finding is at odds with modernist and liberalist notions that formal employment of women reported in census data should indicate levels of gender equality or other. This finding also contradicts, albeit not completely, global patriarchal arguments that women in EPZs are victims of a globalized economic shift in manufacturing to developing nations where women can be easily exploited.

In the process of sampling more than 2300 EPZ women, we found new and exciting findings that add to the debate on gender and global measures of empowerment. We did find that many of the women were exposed to gender-based subordination and subjugation at national, factory and community levels. However, we found active resistance to these forces and that women were not one-dimensional actors in a one-act play of domination, they resisted power and patriarchy and according to our data were doing so strategically and with some measure of realism. One of the major themes to emerge from our data is that the women sampled were using measures of self-determination, resilience and resistance to ensure that they benefited from EPZ employment. They did this in spite of forces arrayed against them. They did this with familial and community support in most cases and in spite of a society and public domain that continues to attempt to stifle women's attempts to move out of poverty in Sri Lanka (see Hancock *et al.* 2011, 2012).

In summary, our research (fully reported in Hancock *et al.* 2011 and 2012) found that either explicitly or implicitly the women sampled experienced empowerment in the following ways:

- new knowledge, experience and attitudes gained from formal factory employment and associated lifestyles (modern training methods, leadership skills, teamwork, financial planning, problem solving, organising, social skills, risk awareness, exposure to modern machinery and appliances, bargaining, exposure to other cultures);
- earning significantly higher incomes than their parents and siblings;
- significant financial contributions to their family and the ability to solve problems with regular income;
- increased decision making inside the family and at societal levels in some EPZs;
- regular savings and goal-oriented employment strategies;
- coping with living away from home, long hours of work and harsh working conditions;
- exposure to modern production methods;
- positive opinion about factory work and respect from the village and their family;
- resilience shown by women despite public humiliation and harassment. Many spoke of the strategies they had used to overcome their fear and humiliation, such as always travelling in groups, ignoring comments and remarks and being careful not to react or provoke negative behaviour.

Adding to the discussion, our research found the following were dis-empowering:

- public humiliation and harassment associated with the EPZs and views on young women in Sri Lanka;
- sexual harassment in public and in the workplace;
- lack of time to engage in community, social and political activities due to long working hours;
- harsh working conditions and long working hours in repetitive and low skilled work;
- poor diet and nutrition;
- continued exclusion from decision-making at community and political levels.

The social, economic and skill-based capital the women gained from formal employment has led to empowerment and increased inclusion for many, as well as a feeling of self-determination and individual self-respect as a result of successfully negotiating formal employment and at the same time enabling their families to move away from impoverished bases. Being acculturated and involved in formal employment has caused increased levels of decision-making at the household level; indeed, 55.8 per cent of women in our study reported this. It should be noted this increased decision-making was more prevalent among married women by a factor of three to one but is important nonetheless. Gender identity and the ranking of siblings was also a major indicator that affected increased decision-making in the home, also dominant in the data was the issue of traditional male-dominance in rural society. Significantly, 70 per cent of women reported that they experienced increased 'social inclusion' since employment, but this was reported mostly at the family and village level and was less prevalent at wider societal and national levels. Increased social inclusion was a major indicator of empowerment for the women sampled.

In spite of the above, women also reported a number of major factors that worked against empowerment. The data indicated that, in spite of positive economic factors and skills development and the financial inputs to family, communities and indeed the economy, women had no time for sustainable community and political involvement. Indeed, 78.3 per cent of women sampled stated that could not become involved in community, societal and political decision making due to long working hours and lack of free time outside of work. The most commonly cited reasons for lack of engagement, after lack of time, were related to a continuing negative cultural reaction to women working in EPZs in Sri Lanka and a significant social trend to exclude these women. These are related to tradition and the continuing low participation rates of women in Sri Lanka's economy reported above.

Macro-positivistic indicators such as the GEM, GII and GGGI do not capture women's empowerment or gender inequality '*they did not meet this task*', according to Berenger and Verdier-Chouchane (2011). They must be supplemented by studies like the one presented in this paper which can delve more deeply and empirically into the ways in which women from various sectors of society experience empowerment and inequality. In this sense, our research found that in the formal factory sector in Sri Lanka, women were significant financial contributors to their family's well being, as well as to their community. Women were also empowered, for example, as a result of gaining skills in factory work; these indicators are not mentioned in the GGGI, GEM or GII. On the other hand, women in our study were significantly dis-empowered by societal subjugation, public harassment and negative stereotyping of women who work in Export Processing Zones (EPZs), again concepts not captured in macro measures. More research is required to allow fuller understanding of gender empowerment; research which should also erode myths and break down some of the societal barriers faced by women in Sri Lanka and other nations.

### Conclusion

Given that 2015 is the year when the Millennium Development Goals will be reviewed, this year would serve a good time also to review the UNDP's Global Inequality Index (GII) and the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI). A review of Gender Mainstreaming would also be a valuable venture and the suggested use of women-specific programs offered as an alternative has been suggested in this paper. As we found, these indicators showed little or no traction with the lived experiences and constructions of gender and empowerment revealed among the women sampled in our research.

Further research is required to ensure that gender equality and empowerment do not continue to be only measured and contextualized and based on the global measures discussed in this paper. Indeed, the concepts of gender equality and empowerment do not fit with the 'accepted' wisdom and policy in this regard. Our research found them to lack traction in many areas. For example, formal female employment is used as a positive indicator in the GII, GGGI and MDGs and to inform policy. However, we found that formal employment can lead to significant dis-empowerment, especially when it occurred in large numbers. Again more rigorous debate is required on these and other issues. Once this debate and discussion occurs at a global and inclusive level, new protocols for development policy can be discussed and if appropriate, implemented.

To achieve a constructive change requires further social research such as that presented in this paper. Social research should be considered as important as the macro measures often used by policy-makers, development agencies, INGOs and academics when seeking to understand gender and empowerment and indeed in developing gender-based development policy and programs, especially at the global level. To ensure this research makes a difference to the lives of those researched we should continue to speak on their behalf.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> The full version of this summary can be found at Hancock *et al.* 2011 and 2012.

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