

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC RELATIONS IN POST-WAR SRI LANKA: THE CASE OF BEEDI ROLLERS IN VETTIKADU



Image courtesy - Gayathri Lokuge

Summary

This policy brief is based on the working paper titled “The political economy of violence: Women’s economic relations in post-war Sri Lanka” and focuses particularly on women’s engagement in beedi rolling, in a village in Jaffna. It attempts to understand the women’s continued engagement in a very precarious working environment as well as the alternative income generating opportunities available to them in the transition from a period of war to no-war.

Introduction

Since the end of Sri Lanka’s protracted civil war in May 2009, physical and sexual violence against women in the war-affected Northern and Eastern parts of the country was the focus of significant international and national attention. This study sought to look beyond these forms of overt violence, and instead uncover the structural violence generated and sustained by political and economic relations and processes, and their intersection with

gender, caste, and class oppression. The researchers adopted a feminist political economy approach to unpack the factors that contribute to women’s everyday experiences of violence both within and outside the home when engaged in income generating activities. For this purpose, the study elaborates its findings through a case study of women beedi rollers — makers of hand rolled cigarettes — in Vettikadu*, a fishing village in the Jaffna Peninsula.

Sri Lanka’s beedi industry is poorly researched, with limited information available on exploring the conditions in which it thrives, especially with regard to the plight of the women beedi rollers who have continued to toil within this industry for almost five decades. To this end, the study sought to understand, “What kept the women engaged in beedi rolling? What alternatives are available to them?”

Approaches

A qualitative approach was adopted so as to generate rich descriptions of the women's lives, economic relations, and the ways in which violence manifests. By using Vettikadu as a case study, the study was able to gain a nuanced understanding of the social, political, and economic realities of the women in this particular village.

Data was collected between September 2015 and January 2016. In total, 41 key person interviews were carried out: with representatives from women's activist groups, not-for-profit organisations, academics, government officials, women from the village, and other individuals from the village in positions of power. In addition, data collection included 15 semi-structured interviews, with follow-up interviews conducted with the same people. Finally, eight focus group discussions were conducted within and outside the village, involving a diverse group of women working from home, women employed outside the village, young women, elders of the village, teachers from schools attended by the children of the village, women's rights activists in Jaffna, and government officials of the relevant Divisional Secretariat (DS) division.

The study also used participant observation, as it enabled the team to observe and make sense of people's actions and interactions within the specific environments in which they lived and worked, as well as to better understand the respondents' words by interpreting what was left unsaid and how they delivered their responses.

Results:

Setting the context

Vettikadu is a fishing village located in the Jaffna Peninsula at a distance of approximately 4KMs from the nearest beach. Despite being a fishing village, the women of Vettikadu have historically been excluded from fishing and related activities, due to fishing's social and cultural construction as a male space. Restrictions imposed on fishers during the war affected their mobility and ability to earn an income. The war also resulted in the deaths and disappearances of fishermen, leaving behind mothers, sisters, wives, and children without a steady source of income. During such a period, beedi rolling provided a valuable contribution towards meeting household expenditure. In the post-war period, where the men do remain in the village, the income from fishing is not guaranteed or regular, resulting in women continuing to seek alternative income generation activities and resorting to borrowing for daily household needs.

Where education was interrupted due to war and conditions of poverty, women's engagement in beedi rolling within the village or in their homes provided a welcome opportunity for income generation, as it had no capital outlay and minimal skills training, while also allowing them to better manage their routine household tasks and caring functions. Post-war, the majority of the women in Vettikadu continue to engage in beedi rolling, with a few women employed in the state sector, and others engaged in the informal sector and self-employment activities in Jaffna town.

Beedi Rolling

Beedirolling is a labour-intensive production process, but being home-based, the beedirollers themselves have no direct connection with the Bharathi* Company in Nallur, which packages and markets the bundles of beedi within the Northern Province. Paid based on the number of bundles they produce, the women have no contract or employment benefits such as health insurance. The only evidence that an established company sources the bundles of beedi rolled by these women is a photocopy of the license obtained from the Excise Department, which grants permission for the storage of tobacco in a house within the village. Five such houses exist in Vettikadu, each acting as collection and distribution points from which a representative for the company (i.e. the middleman) collects the completed bundles of beedi, replenishes the stock of tendu leaves, tobacco and string, and makes the monthly payments to the women.

Extensive documentation from India provides evidence of the inherent occupational health hazards associated with engaging in beedi rolling due to the sedentary positions of work, unhygienic working conditions and the constant exposure to tobacco, which can lead to high incidences of tuberculosis, mycosis, cancer, skin problems, and other health complaints. As most of the women work within their homes, their children too, run the risk of nicotine absorption due to poor ventilation and the lack of a clear separation between the work space and the private space, where children live, eat, and sleep. Despite the recognised health hazards — particularly respiratory illnesses — workers are not given protective masks and gloves by

the company or middlemen. While some workers see the value of covering their noses and mouths with a piece of cloth, they state that they opt not to do so due to discomfort.

Working outside the village

‘Suitable’ jobs for women outside the village are limited. While jobs are available in places like textile shops and pharmacies, women face numerous forms of exploitation and harassment behind the counter. Additionally, the terms and conditions of employment are often harsh: no proper breaks or facilities, including toilets; absence of contracts, leave and statutory welfare benefits; and low wages that are often not paid in full or on time. Women engaged in wage work said that they are generally paid much less than their male counterparts: while men get around Rs. 1,500 a day, women are paid as little as Rs. 600 a day for the same hours and work. The women also reported that caste is an unwritten element of hiring practices, with some textile shops hiring poorer women from lower castes as it provides the employers greater room for exploitation.

However, women’s precarity is not limited to the working space, as they are also vulnerable when travelling outside the village. Women and school-going girls report instances of sexual harassment while travelling in buses or even when walking or cycling to work or school.

Conclusion

This study highlights the lack of control these women in Vettikadu have over their economic and spatial lives. The result is that they must choose between the danger of working outside, which complicates their double burden as breadwinners and caregivers, or working inside the relative safety of the village, through engaging in beedi rolling or other home-based activities. The latter may better enable them to carry out the gendered double burden, but ‘successfully’ managing this burden continues to endanger their physical and psychological well-being. Further challenges arise due to changes in policy directed at discouraging the consumption of tobacco-based products, leading to an increase in import tax on tobacco, which is a central component of the beedi. As a result, the Bharathi* Company has decreased the quantity of tobacco importation, consequently leading to the decrease in raw material available to roll beedis, directly impacting upon the income of the women beedi rollers.

Recommendations

One of the main steps that can be taken is to provide information regarding the hazards associated with engaging in beedi rolling, together with creating opportunities for alternative livelihood opportunities that address the structural violence women experience inside and outside the home.

It is also important to recognise the changing context — the importation tax on tobacco, and the absence of war — in creating policies to encourage people’s continuation in education with the intention of increasing the potential for alternate livelihood opportunities. It is hoped that enabling and encouraging children to attend school will provide a means of escaping the social and economic structures that restrain themselves from moving out of poverty. To this end, some of the proposed recommendations are as follows:

- Carry out awareness campaigns with regard to the health hazards associated with beedi rolling;
- Provide skills training for the women currently engaged in beedi rolling to seek alternate income generating opportunities;
- Carry out a sustained campaign to encourage continued education for the children.

This publication was made possible by the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium through funding provided by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) with co-funding from Irish Aid and the European Commission. The views presented in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the UK government’s official policies or represent the views of SLRC or other partner organisations.

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