

IMAGES OF WORKING WOMEN

M.R. GAMBURD

Introduction

This paper examines changes in images of women and women's work. The data come from anthropological fieldwork done in a village on the Southwest coast of Sri Lanka. In specific, analysis focuses on the new economic opportunities provided by work in the Middle East and in the local garment factories¹.

Patterns Of women's Work

In contrast to the late 1960's, when the village was relatively self reliant, the local economy now survives and develops on infusions of money from external sources, including garment exports and migration of labour to the Middle East. Garment factories employ or have employed about 3% of the adult population, 95% of them female. More significantly, over 1/4 of the households have sent someone to work abroad. The vast majority of the migrants are married women, and over 1/3 of the adult women in the village have experience overseas. Many families rely on this migration for daily consumption and bettering their lot in life. Access to jobs in the Gulf States and the garment factories has opened up unprecedented employment opportunities for women.

Garment Factory Work

There are several garment factories within easy walking distance of the village, one of which was constructed and opened under the 200 Garment Factory Programme. All these factories recruit young unmarried women. Factory jobs for women are often gruelling, and the hours sometimes long, though few complain of the conditions. Some of the young women with whom I spoke looked on the job as an opportunity to provide themselves with a dowry. They often buy themselves jewellery or a wooden wardrobe, both of which are traditional items a girl's parents would offer with her in marriage.

Images of Garment Factory Workers

Factory women, who work and earn their own money, are often considered somewhat Westernized through their earning and spending. They are also branded as "Of Loose Morals".

For modesty's sake most women who work at the factories go in large