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## **Colonial Governmentality and Domestic Labour: A Comparative Study of India, Sri Lanka and Kenya**

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The recent literature on colonial governmentality drawing on Foucauldian ideas of governing population through techniques of disciplinary power and bio-power and the consequent effects on subject formation have proved very useful to analyse colonial governance. Colonial subjection was also the production of alterity; how the colonized “other” was different from the colonizer and how the production of alterity was crucial for the construction of the imperial “self” and the colonized “self” as well, whose desires and conduct

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needed to be reshaped. This discourse of alterity sought justification for colonial subjection through the difference/deferral argument. Colonized societies needed to be improved; the African was still a child and the Indian did not possess reason enough to be entrusted with self government. The construction of the modern colonial state in India and other colonies elsewhere required and made use of this discourse of alterity; in fact its construction produced the discourse as well.

Colonial governmentality required the population to be counted and classified for various purposes and the decennial census was the starting point of the enumeration, aggregation and classification of population (Kalpagam, 2000). The political rationality of colonial governance everywhere had also to accommodate the classificatory requirements of a growing capitalist economy at the world level. It is in this context that the classification of a Worker became important and the Census was the first attempt to grapple with the question of who is a worker in those colonies wherein the censuses were conducted early on. While the market economy considers wage labourer as a worker, the colonies everywhere had many different kinds of working population. Especially in the case of female workers, domestic labour posed a problem that needed to be resolved. For women, the classification of “worker”



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and “housewife” and the treatment of domestic labour had far reaching implication in subsequent labour legislations both in industry and plantation sectors for the way women’s roles were conceived and normalised and their implications for wage fixation and regulation. Such classificatory norms enters the public sphere and constitutes women’s subjecthood in various ways that has had long term implications for the nationalist movement, in the life of the postcolonial nation state and for the women’s movement as well.

In this paper we will examine the colonial discourses on domestic labour as evident in the Census of India and provide comparative perspectives from similar discourses from Sri Lanka and Kenya and examine its implications and effects.

## **The Colonial India Censuses and Women’s Work<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> This section draws from Kalpagam (1994).



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The earliest of these debates is to be found in the first Population Census of 1870-71. William Farr, the Superintendent of Statistics from 1839-1879, was responsible for the British Census of 1861. He had a general classification of occupations and it was decided to adopt his classification for the Indian census. According to his classification there were six broad classes and each class had certain orders. The classes were- Professional, Domestic, Commercial, Agricultural, Industrial, Indefinite and Non-productive. The domestic class had two orders- Occupation in the family and Occupation in personal service. The first order included all women who had no occupation producing wages or fees (that is, the wives and daughters of the mass of the population). This class was included by Farr from the idea that every person should be represented as having an occupation. Farr based his conception of ‘productive work’ on the view that population was ‘living capital’ and the unit of productive activity was the individual rather than the family. This idea of Farr that everybody should be represented by an occupation was derived from the laissez-faire doctrines of classical liberalism which sought to do away with traditional privileges and to open opportunities for all on the market principle. Farr’s view that domestic work was important to the nation, and that such labour should be placed among the productive classes along with paid work of a similar kind, met with opposition from the Scottish census officials. Whereas until 1831 the





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Census in Britain had recorded only family occupation, from 1841 onwards individual occupations alone were recorded for the entire population. The 1851 Census differentiated the work of the family members-wives and adult children in farming and small businesses, assisting their husbands and fathers were recorded in their menfolk's occupational category. In the 1871 Census of Britain, these women were placed in the domestic class and were distinguished from other wives and daughters. But the 1871 Scottish Census eliminated the domestic class and redistributed its members to show how many were dependent on each occupation. In the 1881 Scottish Census women engaged in domestic duties and female relatives not reported as assisting were included among the 'persons without specified occupations' in the 'unoccupied class'. All these were attempts to define women, who did not have paid jobs, as dependents.

The official construction of the 'dependent woman' in Britain emerged at a time when capitalist development was drawing both men and women into employment in modern industries. The extent to which such a construction of women constrained them from participating on equal terms as men in the newly emerging labour markets has been debated by scholars there. Deacon (1985) argues that the alternate viewpoint to Farr sought to effect



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such labour market closures in the Australian colonies that adopted this viewpoint in their census classification. Also ‘the dependent woman’ emerged at a time when the modern liberal state was sought to be consolidated in Britain and extended to other parts of the Empire. The ideology of domesticity and the ‘dependant woman’ gave effect to a private-public dichotomy in which women was seen to belong to the private sphere and men to the public sphere. This circumscribed women’s roles in the public sphere.

I have dealt in some detail with the British experience because the debates on the censuses in England and Scotland were refracted in the census debates in many of the British colonies. In India, the statistical committee which examined the suitability of Farr’s occupational classification for India found his ‘domestic class’ an anomaly. According to the committee:

The great object of the ‘occupation’ tables is to show how the means of living is obtained by the people, how the waste of consumption is replaced and more than replaced by reproduction. So important is this fact that Dr. Farr heads his last ‘non-productive,’ showing that other classes are supposed to be reproductive. But women and children in the family are consumers, not producers. Their comfort and support is largely the object for which men



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emerge in reproduction, that is, take an occupation. To enter the wives and daughters on par with the workers of the household is to confuse the object with the means employed in attaining it (India, Census, Report of the 1871 Census).

These views were so strongly felt that in no case was this order adopted in practice. In Bombay province it was dropped altogether. In the North-West and Central Provinces, all the children were returned under the occupation of the head of the household, grossly inflating figures in some occupations. In Madras Presidency (excluding Madras town), women were not included at all in the occupation tables.

The 1881 Census Report noted the following on female occupations.

The occupation of females is a difficult subject to deal with. In every country females do much hard and necessary work which is not among the trades and is not strictly productive. A yet more numerous class of females do a certain if not continuous share in the total productive work, but a share which is combined with productive work, and this in such varying degrees that it would be impossible to draw any line which should say (e.g.) this is primarily an ‘agricultural labourer’ and that is primarily a ‘wife’. In India all women work; some merely at household drudgery but in the most numerous and important of all classes,

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‘the agricultural,’ female labourers are an important part. But with the custom of early marriage, the mass of females of working age are primarily wives and whether they work in the fields or not, they have certainly to work at home. Some of these have been returned as ‘agricultural’. Some as ‘wives of specified occupations’ and some merely as ‘wives’ which is regarded as an occupation and some as ‘unemployed’ (India, Census, Report of the 1881 Census).

The 1891 Census omitted ‘wives’ from occupations. Also, instead of enumerating workers, it found out the ‘means of subsistence’ of the entire population, that is, either as workers or as dependents. Even when husbands were unemployed they were still counted as ‘principal bread winner’.

Bertillon’s 1889 scheme of occupational classification approved by the International Statistical Institute was adopted by the Census of India in 1911 and extended for Burma. This scheme was far more industrial than occupational, and although Bertillon’s original proposal was to include all married female workers in the Domestic service category, this idea was abandoned (Kumar, 2006: 385-386). Kumar (2006:383) remarks, ‘After 1911, the grouping of occupations into specific social classes, women workers were permanently relegated to a





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residual status in the economy. Accordingly, Farr’s innovative concept of ‘gainful male employment’ was progressively established in the census as the most favoured official unit of social information. The wives of men occupied in crafts and retailing had been formally recognised as workers in British censuses from 1851 to 1871. However, after 1881 the occupations of such women workers were summarily removed and reclassified within the category of the residual (superfluous) or unoccupied class. Thus, the social identity of women as workers in the metropolis as well as in colonies was shorn of value.’

In the context of Burma which is also relevant to India, Kumar (2006: 379) observes, ‘In particular, the categorisation of women workers in economic terms went through a series of sea-changes, being termed as productive and later as an unproductive residual category in the workforce. Such ascriptions of value to women workers were influenced by moral consideration borrowed from England, especially those concerning the relationship between industrial work and moral character’ (p. 379)

The census debates reveal a tension in the treatment of women’s work as ‘wives’. It was not merely the problem of rendering applicable in one context the classificatory schemes evolved in another vastly different context of a more capitalist and industrialised country, but



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there were also basic ideological positions regarding women’s work as ‘wives’ or domestic work of women that needed to be resolved both in Britain and elsewhere. Elsewhere in the colonies, women’s work was beginning to be devalued. With the growth of markets and exchange changes occurred in the sexual division of labour. With goods being exchanged on markets for cash income, activities that helped in acquiring such cash incomes came to acquire greater status than work that does not result in marketed output. A distinction between ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ work emerges thereby. Much of women’s work within households-cooking, nurturing and care services, and reproduction –comes to be devalued in the process. The statistical committee at the 1871 census noted that women and children in the family were only ‘consumers’ and not ‘producers’.

Drawing insights from Kumar (2006), Christopher (2008: 270) observes, ‘Thus the decline in the officially accorded status of women in the workforce was demonstrated in their becoming “statistically less visible as economically productive workers”, as in Burma between 1872 and 1931. At the same time, through the analysis of the census data and the process of categorisation, census officials could influence the self-perception of the population, which they were originally meant to observe’. Kumar (2006) notes, ‘Colonialism



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introduced new attitudes towards work and labour which reinforced patriarchal values which contrasted with more egalitarian Burmese socio-economic systems’ (p. 377). He rightly notes, ‘It is important to understand that the economic devaluation of workers is not simply a function of census classification alone, but also reflects broader economic changes taking place across the empire’ (p. 379)

The census construction of the ‘dependent woman’ in India followed the deindustrialisation process which, by 1871, was almost completed. Hand-spinning, in which millions of women were employed in their homes and which was done in conjunction with housework and/or agricultural work, was completely wiped away by the cheap yarn from England while India and other colonies exported raw cotton to the English mills. Labour in agriculture in many parts of the country was also undergoing transformation though customary forms of wage payments were still widely prevalent in agriculture. Deindustrialisation of the countryside since the early nineteenth century was accompanied by frequent agrarian crisis on account of drought and famine. From the 1840s onwards, indentured labour to work in the plantations of the British colonies in Ceylon, Malaysia, East



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and South Africa and West Indies were regularly sent from India which till the later part of the nineteenth century was predominantly male migration.

Breman (1992) has noted that women left behind by male emigrants had to be ‘even more actively involved in local production processes, agricultural or otherwise, than they were before their men left. Many of those left behind were caught up in seasonal migration to seek work in cottage industries less distant from home, in cotton gins’ (p.286). The ginning season lasted about eight months; for five months the hands worked from 5 AM to 10 PM and the remaining three months they worked day and night. Women worked day and night for as long as a week at a stretch. The work schedules and divisions of labour in such enterprises were more flexible and less standardised. Breman notes, ‘Paradoxically this very flexibility that enable women to combine their employment with household and family obligations made their overall workload even heavier than that of their sisters on the plantations’ (p.286). In addition each of these women left behind by male migrants bore a heavy moral burden as well. Whether they stayed behind in a village, moved within the vicinity or country of her birth, or migrated to plantations overseas, they became an embodiment of the family’s, clan’s or community’s moral centre. Breman observes, ‘Keeping this moral centre above reproach





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called for relentless diligence, vigilance and work. The women who stayed behind in their villages were, in the watchful eyes of their neighbours, perennially on trial’ (p. 287).

Movements of female labour were common in the countryside resulting from regional differences in agricultural cycles or crop specialisation, but were largely unnoticed and unrecorded by census-takers and statisticians, thus rendering invisible the work of migrant women. Interpreting the 1931 Indian census, (Omvedt, 1980:192, cited in Breman, 1992) notes that : ‘One of the two major waves of migration from the northern districts of Burma in 1931, women were 1/6<sup>th</sup> of those who went to the jute mills and factories surrounding Calcutta where there was relatively little work available for them; but they were 40 percent of the migration which went to help bring in the harvests in rural Bengal where they had specific agricultural tasks’.

Breman (1992) continues, ‘If female workers in casual or seasonal employment were invisible in one way; falling in the colonial record keeper’s blind spot, women who worked in more structured large-scale industries such as mills, mines and plantations, were made invisible or only partly visible in another way. We already referred to the single woman, cast adrift from the moral centre, debased, debilitated and demoralised. The identity fractured



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woman was all too visible in the moral landscape of cooliedom. Moreover, she was more likely to be counted among the low 10 to 20 percent of female coolies appearing in the census taker's statistics than were those less 'fractured' women who were wives, mothers and sisters of male workers, who with their children, were counted as dependents, not workers. Among their reasons was the conviction that the lower the profile of a female, and the less obligated to work within capitalist enterprises' formal arrangements and contracts, the less vulnerable she would be to the predatory designs of the more powerful. But work she did-work that was acknowledged, if at all, in wages that were but a fraction of a man's (already low) wages.

The 'identity fractured' women were those not cognised either as dependents (because they are wives left-behind with no man), or as workers (as they are migrant workers). But those whose identity was not fractured but remained intact as 'dependents' and who nevertheless worked were often subjected, as Brass (1999) highlighted to 'affinal/consanguineal kinship authority that structure the socio-economic reproduction of gender specific instances of unfreedom' (p.22) Instead of making payment directly to female workers recruited, therefore, a labour contractor and/or creditor/-employer may pass the wage on to the



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kinfolk of the woman concerned, thereby reinforcing the element of control exercised by senior relatives over the disposition of female labour power (ibid, p.22).

### **Women Plantation Workers in India and Sri Lanka**

Philips (2005:112) has highlighted that in the initial stages, man and women were imported in direct proportion to labour demands, although the migration of women was restricted by the prevailing Victorian and traditional Indian patriarchal values that viewed women as dependents and homemakers. Because of the ideology of domesticity and the ‘dependent woman’, Duncan (2007) observes that the British planters in Sri Lanka saw women workers as only capable of doing domestic work and work on the coffee plantation. This perception inhibited them from making any efforts towards the education of both the women workers and their children.



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Colonial perceptions were often just a reflection of similar metropolitan perceptions in the society there. For instance, much against the principle of laissez faire, the Factory Act in England was first introduced in the 1802 first to help orphaned children of factory hands on the grounds that such children were helpless. Only later it was extended to other children and women. Duncan (2007) notes that the same argument of being ‘helpless’ was given when the Colonial Office decided in the 1840s that immigrant labour in Ceylon, though largely adult and male fit into the ‘helpless’ category, and hence the state was responsible for them. In 1865 a comprehensive labour ordinance was enacted called “The Contract for Hire and Service” law. ‘This was perhaps one of the few instances where infantilization worked to the advantage of the colonized’ (p.92) opines Duncan, wherein all aspects of contractual employment on the plantations covering both ‘master’ and ‘servant’ were stipulated (See Samaraweera, 1980). This legislation did not cover women workers on the plantations till about 1930 largely because even though they were working they were invisible on account of being perceived as ‘dependent’ women.

In Sri Lankan and South Indian Plantation, the kinds of work such women did were called ‘piece-work’. They consisted of a chore here, a job there, called upon to do one thing





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and interrupted to be told to do another or nothing at all; a couplet in an old Tamil folk song sung by female plantation workers in Sri Lanka goes thus

On pieces of paper we received pieces of work

Piecing and Unpiecing us as he wished.

The price paid for keeping intact one’s moral identity as a female was to submit to the inclusion of one’s labour price in the wage the male worker received. When payments were based on a contracted job, ‘male workers whose families resided on or near the plantations often enlisted the aid of the wives and children in order to meet the daily quotas’ (Murray, 1980: 292). In many of these cases, the women and children went unregistered and therefore, in the strict sense, went unpaid. This practice exists to this day in the tea plantations of South India and has disappeared from Sri Lanka’s plantations only after they were nationalised in the early 1970s’ (p.287-288).



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Kurian (1998) found that even in the 1970s wage payments and receipts in the Sri Lankan tea plantations were in contravention of the law. She notes, ‘Although there are some exceptions, the common pattern on estates is for a male member (normally, husband, elder brother, father) to collect the wages for all the working members of the family. This is accepted by the men (and women in most cases) and is justified at different levels....For many such reasons, it is not unknown for the money earned by the women never to reach their hands’ (p.83). What is even more shocking is that even the maternity benefit that a woman worker is entitled to is given to her husband, and is used to pay off accumulated debt. Moneylenders give more credit to the man on the strength of a woman’s pregnancy. Kurian’s observations are corroborated by the findings of Phillips (2005: 119) who observes that until 1984, men were paid higher wages than women, and women’s wages were generally collected by male household heads. Although wages are now equal the practice of men collecting their household women’s wages has not stopped altogether. Older women often have little control over the Employee Provident Fund (EPF) that they collect on retirement after having contributed to it throughout their working lives. The collection and control of women’s EPF accruals are for the most part in the hands of husbands and sons.



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Philips (2005) further notes ‘Men assume the position of the household head (*veetu thalaivar*) and enjoy the privileges associated with this position. Although women contribute substantially to household finances, men are assigned the ‘provider role’ on the ideological premise that it is the man ‘who puts rice on the plate’ (*soru poduravar*). Women refer to their husbands as being ‘*oru padi usathi*’ (one step higher), or simply consider themselves as their husbands’ ‘slaves’ (*adimaihal*). Male superiority is manifested in the household routine and etiquette.’ (p.118)

In colonial India, entire families worked in the coffee and tea plantations of southern India and in the tea plantations of the North-East. Dasgupta (1992) in his study of the tea plantations of Assam found that the colonial authority and the capitalist (British) planter pursued an active policy of creating and supporting a subsistence sector within the plantation areas and their peripheries. One of the ways it was done was to assign small plots of land for each of the plantation worker’s household and to pay them low wages for plantation work, such that the wages have to be supplemented through income/produce value from their household plots. Detailed family budgets collected by the 1921-22 *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee* suggest that income other than wage income, that is, the value of produce of the



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various activities listed constituted from 28-40 percent of the total family income [ALECR, 12921, 22:123-37]. The cost of production and reproduction of labour power was at least partly externalised to a non-capitalist economy, and borne by the workers themselves through self and familial exploitation. Women even if they worked on the plantation contributed significantly to the labour in the subsistence sector as well, they being perceived as home-makers and dependents. Women’s work on the plantations of Assam was mainly plucking the leaves. The colonial planters succeeded in creating the myth that plucking was a ‘non-skilled manual job’ on account of the ideological devaluation of women’s work made possible by the notion of the ‘dependent woman’. Bruce, a pioneer in the tea industry in India wrote in 1830, ‘The plucking of leaves may appear to many a very easy and light employment, but there are not a few of our coolies who would much rather be employed on another job’.

Buttressing our argument from elsewhere in the world, Shepherd (1998) in writing about Indian migrant women working in the plantations in nineteenth and twentieth century Jamaica has noted the following. ‘An ideological shift occurred, however, in the post-slavery period. A combination of factors, among which were European patriarchy and Victorian ideals, imported into the Caribbean, dictated that men should function in the ‘public’ domain





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of wage labour while women were to inhabit the sphere of uncompensated work in the home. This process had been taking place in Britain since the end of the eighteenth century. By the time of the Indian's arrival therefore attempts were already underway to adhere to a 'proper gender order' in the division of labour. This ideological shift had a significant impact on the recruitment of female plantation workers, explains the marked sexual disparity in migration schemes, and partially accounts for the depressed socio-economic life of the contract and post-migrant labourers' (p.90). Jain and Reddock (1998) point out that the planters did not want to employ women and so kept their wages far lower than their male counterparts but often the poor economic status of Indian male migrant workers in the Caribbean caused even married men "to privately ask planters to send their women out to work" (p.13). So the 'dependent woman' being a non-working wife was untenable in practice in the harsh conditions of colonial plantation life but served a role in deskilling and devaluing women's work.

## **Wages in the Modern Sector**

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While modern sector employment in the textile industry and in railway transport in India grew, wages in urban areas emerged as a market wage. The ideological construction of the ‘dependent woman’ did affect their labour market outcomes. The era of modern industrialisation needed trained and disciplined bodies. Regulatory measures by the state emerged with the objective of optimising human energy production and energy use so as to sustain modern industrial production organised along capitalist lines. With the diffusion of capitalist forces and new forms of industrial organisation throughout the world, international organisations to initiate and advise such statutory regulations became necessary, and the International Labour Organization was formed in 1919.

The ideological assumptions on working class families figured in a major way in the formulation of statutory regulations as the family and the household was the site of reproduction in the short and long run. Since the reproduction of labour power and labour entailed costs, the extent to which such costs had to be borne by the capitalists was an issue of consideration leading to a series of regulatory norms on wage fixation. Duncan (2007) notes, ‘Central to governmentality in Britain was knowledge of the body through statistical



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calculation of the amount of labour various sized and gendered bodies were capable of and what amount of food was necessary to sustain them’ (p.86, n.91). Colonial governmentality drew upon these ideas as well.

In the Indian context, debates surrounding the Minimum Wages Act, the Fair Wages Act and the Equal Remuneration Act expose the ideological assumption about women’s work and their role in the family. The textile industry, which is one of the oldest and most important industry employed a significant number of women in the early twentieth century. This industry also initiated a number of issues regarding women’s work and their role in the wage fixation debate. The Report of the *Textile Labour Inquiry Committee*, which deliberated on the *living wage standard* noted:

The first is the number of earners per family to be allowed in our calculation, and the second is the question of supplementary earnings. The consideration of the first question is made easy by our adopting the *natural family* as the basis of our calculations. (The natural family refers to a family of four persons, that is, a man, his wife and two dependents who would ordinarily be children under 14.) In such a family, the question can refer only to the earnings of the wife: the dependents or children can obviously not be expected to earn



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anything. Should any allowance be made for the possible earnings of a wife? It has been argued that, *under a proper interpretation of the term living wage standard, a wife should be spared for the duties of the household and for looking after the children. She cannot be and should not be expected to supplement the earnings by extra paid work....* The conclusion we arrive at is that an adult male should be held to have to support the family without the help of any supplementary earner or any other source of income (Government of Bombay, 1941, pp. 78-80, emphasis added)

Regarding the fixation of wages for women, the same committee noted that “the standard of responsibilities for the calculations of a woman’s wage is defined in a different manner from that of an adult male”.

Even though there were alternate views at the time, in the course of time this view came to be accepted as the standard justificatory one. The *Committee on Fair Wages* (1954) in post-colonial India also opined similarly when it noted:

if minimum wages, and consequently fair wages, are to be calculated on the basis of the requirements of the worker and his family, there is every justification for rating the standard family at a lower number of consumption units in the case of a woman worker than





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in the case of a man, for she will not be expected to support at any rate her husband even though she may have other dependents and encumbrances. According to this line of reasoning, the wages of a woman worker should be based on two consumption units if those of a male worker are calculated on three (GOI, 1954).

Thus the ideological construction of the ‘dependent woman’ affected women’s involvement in the labour market on equal terms with men. The modern state and the emerging capitalist forces sought to promote particular family and household forms which were often at variance with reality. Later, the *Committee on the Status of Women in India* (1974) noted:

An argument which is often raised in debates regarding women’s employment is that their employment deprives men of jobs that they need to support their families. It is assumed that all women who work are only supplementing the family income to ensure a higher standard of living. These theorists have never tried to investigate how many women who work are the sole or main earners in the family. The majority of working women whom we met were supporting either their parents and younger brothers and sisters or their own children (GOI, 1974).



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### **The Sri Lankan Experience**

Known as Ceylon during the colonial times, Sri Lanka as it was later known gained its independence in 1948. We have already referred to the experience of immigrant Tamil women as workers on the coffee and tea plantations of Ceylon in the colonial period and in the more recent times. For the British colonialists, it was the plantation sector as a capitalist system catering to the export market that was significant and important. They hardly concerned with the peasants in the feudal villages of Sri Lanka where the bulk of the Sinhalese population worked. Risseuw (1988) points out that Sinhalese women faced decreased land-rights and decision-making powers which compelled large sections of Sinhalese women to look for other sources of income as paid skilled labour or petty trading. This was because the British endeavoured to introduce primogeniture and promoted male ownership in the settlement schemes that ‘sprang from their own unsaid gender ideology’ (p.91).



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Women’s enumeration as workers in the colonial censuses of Ceylon followed the same pattern of the Indian colonial censuses reported earlier. Risseuw (1988) has highlighted in great detail the way the colonial censuses in Ceylon cognised and categorised women’s work. In what follows I borrow much of the analysis from Risseuw (1988). She notes, ‘...almost every census attempted to give a new definition of a female worker, as facts came to light on the inadequacies of the former categorisation. Nevertheless the problem remained insoluble, which emphasizes the power of the initial conceptualization over the actual figures, which were collected sincerely enough’ (p.93).

### **Women’s Work in the Colonial Censuses of Ceylon**

In the 1827 census no data on labour was collected. In the 1871 census there was a lot of fear among the Sinhalese that it was prelude to a tax or labour demand as done by earlier rulers was strong. Although the 1871 census observes “we must be careful to show that women and children are to be counted, as the people take no account of them at all in many



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places; a man will tell you his family consists of three, when he has a wife and four daughters besides himself and two sons” (Census, 1971:XI), women were under enumerated. While at the 1871 census women workers could be recorded in theory and a column was allocated for that, the census enumerators were advised to deal only with the “head of the house”, who was assumed to be a male.

In the 1881 census the extent of paid female labour was again under enumerated as “practically all women without special employment was contained in the domestic class” (Census 1891: chapter XII).

In the 1891 census “wives and children not having any special occupation contributing to their maintenance were taken to be of the occupation of the person on whose labour they subsisted” (Census 1891, chapter XII). Risseuw (1988) notes that such a categorisation under enumerated many female income earners because of the applied norm of one job per family, preferably carried out by the head of the household, usually a male. Nevertheless the numbers of women in certain sectors like “Industrial class” was quite impressive. These were artisanal occupations like coir manufacture at the village level.





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Again in the 1911 census women were categorised as “non-earners” in pursuance of the norm of one main (male) breadwinner for the family (Census, 1912: 445). The tendency to enter all women as being supported by their husbands, leading to a distortion of reality, was however noted for the first time (Census 1912: 458). The 1911 census also indicated a high level of female participation in the paid labour force.

In the census of 1921 the concept of one earner per family was challenged. The term “earner” was considered too vague as it ignored subsidiary occupations. Instead the term “gainful occupation” was adopted. This was defined as “an occupation by which a person who pursued it, earned money or a money equivalent”. Risseuw (1988) observes, ‘Nevertheless the effect of redefining the term “earner” to that of “gainful occupation” was to increase the negative effect from the point of view assessing women’s paid labour’ (P.96). This is because only the “principal occupation” of a family, i.e. the one to bring in the highest and most regular income (Census 1946:255).

Over twenty years later at the 1946 census it was noted that over the years from 1901 onwards there was an overall decline in employment with a drastic reduction in the 1946 census, the decline being proportionately greater for women. This was because a distinction



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was made between “gainful occupation” and “useful occupation”. Any activity not practised regularly and which did not bring in a steady income was excluded from the category of “gainful occupation”. “Thus, a housewife who did odd jobs and earned some money and contributed it to the support of the family was not included within the category of “the gainfully employed” (Census 1946:225). Risseuw notes, ‘Even if wives and daughters were “usefully employed”, when they might “be said to take the place of domestic servants”, they were not gainfully occupied as there was “no stipulated contract of service” so, whether they helped or not, they were regarded as the responsibility of the head of the family’ (p.97). As the returns of the “usefully occupied” were not entered in the census summaries but omitted, the distinction between “gainfully” and “usefully” employed resulted in the ultimate disappearance of the majority of women from the statistics of labour. This unrealistic situation continued in the census of 1953, 1963 and 1971 and finally reviewed in 1974. But it still hampers the current statistics as well as the conceptualisation of the female worker. Also in 1946 census “unpaid family workers” were excluded from those “gainfully employed” but in the 1953 census they were counted as employed.



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Risseeuw (1988) states, ‘Thus the development of statistical data, which can be seen as logically springing from the changed notions of “a person” in capitalism as opposed to the former feudalistic system, required each individual to be categorized in some way, in relation to the state as well as the economy’ (p.101). The census construction of the new “person” was based on four preconceptions-the importance of the formal sector for employment, the irrelevance of women’s work for the family and the economy, the notion of the male breadwinner and the idea of one job per person.

The consequence of this devaluation of women’s work and rendering them invisible in statistics was that women were a non-issue in the government planning in the post-independence period and only gained visibility in policy from the 1980s onwards. In spite of the increased visibility the process of marginalisation initiated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century continues. Even now women engaged in the subsistence sector and income-generating home-based activities are regularly excluded from official statistics or are counted as “unpaid family helpers”. ‘Thus women’s extra domestic activities to a large extent remain statistically invisible and subsequently can hardly be realistically “integrated” in any further planning’ (Risseeuw, 19888, p.207).



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There was need for a standardization of categories of labour for administrative procedures, particularly after the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 when a need arose to develop a common colonial policy. Not surprisingly, the Sri Lankan colonial census debates parallel closely the Indian debates clearly indicating that a common conceptual framework with certain preconceptions and presuppositions based on the metropolitan ideas of liberalism in Victorian England were sought to be superimposed on a reality that was no doubt different. Yet the success of such preconceptions upon which colonial governmentality namely the political rationalities of rule, the technologies of rule and the ways in which the conduct of the subjects were sought to be governed was productive in its ends of articulating a gender ideology and new gendered subjects in an emerging capitalism and a universalising modern state. The success was in part because the governing ideology and practices enmeshed well with the prevailing patriarchies of the colonial societies such that “capitalist patriarchy” could be successfully redefined.

## **The Colonial Experience of Kenya**

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The Berlin Conference of 1884-85 led to an agreement among the colonial powers-British, French and German to divide up Africa into different colonies under their control. The British established a protectorate in Kenya in 1895. In the early census of Kenya they sent out “hut-counters” who marked hut residents as adult, non-adult, male or female and pastoralist or agriculturist. This was necessary for the colonial authority to impose and collect a tax on every adult male. The colonialist assumption of taxing only adult males was probably anchored in their own gender ideology of women being dependents. Even in the 1931 census there was no separate report of the native population of Kenya (Melland, 1934).

The white settlers set up plantation farms in Kenya and alienated the Africans from their land by pushing them into reserves. Kenya has many ethnic groups the important ones being Kikuyu, Kalenjin, Maasai, Bantu, Luo etc. with each group having its own occupation, culture and ruled by native chiefs in various territorial units. The Africans were either pastoralists or engaged in sedentary cultivation. Landlessness was virtually non-existent in pre-colonial East Africa. As land became increasingly scarce on account of alienation by white settlers, they needed other sources of income to subsist. At the same time the white



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settlers needed hands to work on the farms. As the rural Africans were not then used to wage labour, labour recruitment for the settler farms was outsourced often to the native chiefs who used coercive methods to recruit labour for the settler farms. Even though slavery and the export of slaves was abolished in the early nineteenth century, coercive labour like slavery still continued in many parts of Africa till many decades later.

Labour on the settler farms was only for a short duration and thereafter the labourer went back to their villages to tend to their herds or agriculture. An African had often more than one wife as more wives were considered to be assets to help in cultivation. Each woman engaged in cultivation of subsistence crops for the consumption of their units comprising their children and a husband who would visit them on rotation. The men were engaged in herding cattle that was their wealth and used in making bride-wealth payments to get more wives and some were engaged in cultivation (Baumann, 1928). In order to induce them to labour on the settler farms for longer duration, they were given incentives to squatter on the farms by which they could bring and tend their cattle on the farms along with the farm work. But this also meant that productivity on farms was affected as they were diverted to their own cattle tending tasks and progressively squatter arrangements were withdrawn. Thus in early phase



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of colonial rule in Kenya the colonial civilising mission was to let the Africans appreciate the benefits of colonial rule and to reciprocate his gratitude in terms of work and to let him learn the joy of work for it was felt that the Africans were indolent and resistant to work rhythms and routines.

As cash crop, especially maize farming caught on, men got involved in maize farming even on the land that women cultivated and gained control over the cash incomes thus reducing women who were independent subsistence producers into dependent women. Whereas earlier men were head of the homestead and women the head of the house, with commodity production women lost that position and were reduced to dependent unpaid labourer and wives. It has been reported that consequent of such changes in women's status in some districts and ethnic groups women moved in large numbers to urban centres to work as prostitutes (Etienne and Leacock, 1980; von Bulow, 1992).

As mining centres, industries and port cities developed in Kenya especially after the building of railways, Africans moved to these in search of wage labour. In the initial years such labour force was migratory and seasonal returning back to the villages and was largely male which probably explains women moving into sex work. The wages were low because



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part of the subsistence cost and cost of reproduction were met by their wives working in the rural areas. At this time the colonial authorities wanted to remake the African worker much like the English worker who would live in the urban centres with his family and have a stable work and family life in the interest of improved productivity at work. They launched on what was called the stabilisation policy. Cooper notes (1996: 2) ‘Industrial man, in officials’ eyes, was indeed a male. That most migrant labourers who came forth in the early colonial years were male may have to do with whom African communities felt they could do without for a period of time than European hiring preferences. But when European officials sought to build a more stable, more acculturated, more experienced labor force, the complexities of African life were less concern to them than their own gendered imagery. What was critical to the reformers was the social reproduction of the labor force: that the new generation be brought up adequately nourished and familiarized with urban and industrial environments so that its members would be more productive and predictable than their fathers. Stabilization, as the new policy was called, implied that women should leave their villages to join their husbands near their places of work, and take up the reproduction of the labor force-under the watchful eyes of nurses, teachers, and bureaucrats. Ideas about society, as is so often the case, had their material consequences: jobs that came under formal regulation were coded masculine, while





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the kinds of things women did were more often labelled “customary labor” or the “informal economy”, with all the insecurities and vulnerabilities that such a status implied’.

According to Cooper colonial officials saw this as social engineering in which they introduced the model of ‘industrial relations’ from the metropole to the African colonies that allowed them to treat labor issues as separable from politics, and it was actually carried out in dialogue with the African labour movements. Cooper notes that as they participated in the dialogue, the African labor leaders were themselves caught up in its terms and became part of the gendering of the labor question. African unions began to demand a “family wage” enough to support a “dependent” wife and children. While African women had participated in the strikes in the 1940s the labor organisations that followed in the 1950s were masculine affairs.

However, even in the 1950s the workers did not get a family wage. In 1951 in response to the governor’s concern over the low wages of the workers, the Wages Advisory Board noted that the minimum wage “is not intended to be a fair or reasonable wage, but merely the legal minimum which may be paid. The Board therefore thought it wrong to take into account the fact that the worker is probably married, and considered it proper to base the wages on the minimum required for the man himself” (cited in Cooper, 1996: 326). The



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wages in East Africa made it impossible for workers to separate themselves from the rural economy. In the 1950s the family wage idea acquired international credibility with the ILO including it in the agenda.

In 1963 when the Kenyan government decided to set up a Provident Fund scheme as a social security measure it was to cover only men in the formal sector. Women were excluded. As part of the stabilisation policy they sought to provide housing to workers in the urban centres. Even here single and unattached women were overlooked while the model male worker with his family, his wife and children, were to benefit from the housing. Cooper (p.335-336) notes, “The model worker’s family may have made its appearances in African cities in the 1950s, but for women and men trying to survive as market sellers, small-scale artisans, domestics, or beer brewers, faced with the difficulties of finding and keeping jobs and of sustaining marriages, and confronting inadequate wages and urban resources, the experience of labor bore little resemblance to discussions in London”.

This rapid run of the long and complex historical process indicates how even in the Kenyan case with altogether different social and gender relations, the ideology of the dependent woman and the British/European notion of the ideal family with a male



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breadwinner and a dependent wife instituted itself in the making of the African working class even when the bulk of Kenyan women in rural and urban areas were working to provide sustenance to their family even after their status was considerably changed under colonial conditions.

### **Contemporary Relevance**

Today all over the world, irrespective of the economy and society, working women face common structures of workplace discrimination such as unequal wages, difficulties in moving up the job hierarchy, occupational segregation, problems of balancing home and work roles on account of sexual division of labour, child care responsibilities and so on. Our analysis thus far has sought to highlight how “capitalist patriarchy” was constructed in different societies that had varying traditional conditions, some in which traditional patriarchies were stronger like India and Sri Lanka while in others like Burma and Kenya it was weak. Yet over time, the development of capitalist industrialisation transformed all societies in a similar direction tending to the devaluation of women’s work, a greater burden



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of housework and care work and lack of public child care support. Such a common tendency was on account of the gender ideologies that were introduced through colonial rule that sought to introduce the European notion of the ideal family of the male breadwinner and the dependent woman, which even in the European context had only evolved in the recent historical past.

Reiter (1975) makes a sharp observation-‘The radical separation of home and work place in industrial capitalism transforms and buttresses the distinction between private and public domains that has long had ideological legitimacy through state formation. Women are increasingly defined by their roles within a realm that has been systematically sapped of its resources and authority. Yet the domestic realm produces and sustains the one resource most necessary to all extractive classes: people. Kin groups can be seen as the first colonized structures within emergent states, for their goods and personnel are expropriated by a public authority over which they have little control. It is women’s labor that underwrites the capacities of families to produce these resources. Yet this labor is socially unrecognised or accorded a subordinate status while power and prestige are vested in the public domain, which is increasingly controlled by a class of men’ (p.281-282). Debates on domesticity and the





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delineation of public and private spheres in the colonial context of India and of the nationalist responses to it have concerned scholars recently (Chatterjee, 1994). As the Indian and Kenyan case indicates, nationalism reworked the colonial gender ideologies to its advantage even as it left unchallenged the subordination of women in the domestic sphere and their dependent status, which had implications for their outcomes in the public domain.

All through the 1980s feminist scholars and activists raised this issue and volumes have been written. One of the powerful voice has been that of Mies (1986) who observed about the new international division of labour-‘In this division, the manipulation of women as invisible producers in the Third World and as atomized, visible yet dependent consumers (housewives) plays a crucial role. The whole strategy is based on a patriarchal, sexist and racist ideology of women which defines women basically as housewives and sex objects’ (p. 142). There have been sporadic attempts at groups of women organizing in different parts of the world to claim wages for housework; more recently even in Kerala, India. This critique of the eighties have led to concerted efforts to improve the data on women’s work so as to render them from invisibility to visibility in the hope of more effective policy interventions. In the US scholars like Nancy Folbre have done much to highlight the cost of care services rendered



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by women in the domestic sphere and of ways of bringing it within the ambit of both market and public policy.

The debates on women’s domestic labour have by no means been resolved. The period of structural adjustment in the early 1990s found women everywhere being pushed back from employment to the domestic sphere with greater workloads in the domestic sphere on account of the roll-back of subsidies which now had to be met in the domestic realm through women’s work (Bakker, 1994). Commenting on the labour market flexibility and feminization of the labour force in the era of globalisation, Standing (1999) has noted that the types of employment and labour force involvement traditionally associated with women-insecure, low paid and irregular have been spreading to male employment as well and he warns that it is ‘not possible to presume (as too often has been the case) that the “family wage,” “breadwinner” model of labor force behaviour is anything like the norm, either currently or likely to arise in the near future’ (p.600). In this context the survey results released today of young British women preferring the traditional “male as breadwinner” model is not surprising; it is more a commentary on the macroeconomic situation rather than of women enjoying subordinate status in the household realm. For the millions of women in the rural



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and urban sectors of developing countries the “male as breadwinner” model or the “family wage” was never a reality and hence they cannot claim it nostalgically in their present predicament.

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