



Reframing employee voice: a case study in Sri Lanka's export processing zones

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Abstract

Labour-intensive workplaces in export processing zones (EPZs) are typically characterized as 'sweatshop-like', devoid of voice mechanisms. Using ethnographic data in a Sri Lankan EPZ apparel factory and focusing on social interaction on the shop floor, the findings demonstrated the way workers exercised formal and informal voice individually and collectively. These findings are understood against a theoretical dialogue between interdisciplinary perspectives of voice across different bodies of literature. Ethnographic insights on the enactment of voice illuminate the importance of worker agency and the social and cultural contextual nature of exercising voice in the workplace.

Keywords

ethnography, export processing zones, free trade zones, gender, informal voice, Sri Lanka, voice, women workers

Introduction

Workplaces in export processing zones (EPZs) offer a unique context to examine the enactment of employee voice. As sites of production in global commodity chains, EPZs are 'industrial zones with special incentives set up to attract foreign investors, in which imported materials undergo some degree of processing before being re-exported' (ILO, 2003: 1). In 2007, EPZs employed approximately 63 million workers worldwide, of whom the majority were women (Boyenge, 2007).

The proliferation of EPZs in low-income countries was linked to export-oriented industrialization (EOI) economic development over the past four decades, underpinned

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by neo-liberal economic logic stressing the importance of attracting foreign investment. Within this logic, voice, especially organized collective voice, was framed as an inflexible hindrance for competitive advantage in global sourcing and economic development (Gopalakrishnan, 2007; Kuruvilla, 1998; Teitelbaum, 2007). EPZs thus emerged as sites of 'graduated sovereignty' (Ong, 2006: 55) where local governments modified labour-related rules to create flexible conditions for investors, or where informal flexibility was derived through non-enforcement of existing rules. As control and flexibility is paramount to global production, EPZ firms are depicted as 'no-voice' spaces (Willman et al., 2006) where voice is curtailed as it threatens authority embedded in hierarchies (Allen and Tuselmann, 2009: 540).

This study draws attention to voice mechanisms that *are* present in EPZs and the way workers exercise voice through these mechanisms and outside their parameters in informal ways. Informal voice refers to the day-to-day interactions where workers are given the opportunity for input into decisions that influence work and working conditions (Strauss, 1998). This study shifts the understanding of informal voice from a deterministic focus on management-driven initiatives such as an open door policy (Harlos, 2001) or unstructured communication (Dundon et al., 2004: 1167) to examining the realm of social interactions.

The study's key theoretical contribution is to reorient voice as a form of historically contextualized agency. Focus on social interaction requires an acknowledgement of employee *agency* in exercising voice, rather than management actions to elicit voice. This is important as EPZs have traditionally been typified as silent, repressive spaces. To advance this enquiry, insights are drawn from anthropological and sociological ethnographic inquiry grounded in feminist epistemologies. These perspectives deepen understanding of voice by situating voice within sociocultural contexts to fully understand the day-to-day reality of exercising voice. Such accounts go beyond commonly used survey and interview data about what workers and employers say, to contextualized observations about what workers and employers do, helping to yield greater insight into how voice is actualized. By focusing on culturally embedded social interactions of everyday relations, the findings demonstrate that voice is a fundamental constitutive element of the labour process that persists whether or not employers provide official avenues. Indeed, voice may be an *unintended* consequence of managerial prerogatives designed to curtail voice. This finding enables us to revisit Hirschman's (1970) observation that voice is a political 'unfolding art'.

The empirical focus of this article is on the Katunayake EPZ (KEPZ) in Sri Lanka, a zone traditionally dominated by export apparel firms since first opening in 1978. Factories within it supply apparel to large branded retailers and have attracted attention for exploitative work practices, including the suppression of freedom of association (Compa, 2004; Gunatilaka, 1999). Data is drawn from 11 months of participant observation in 2003 with the Gupta Garments Katunayake (GGK) apparel factory in the KEPZ.¹

After discussing multi-disciplinary understandings of voice, forms of management-initiated voice mechanisms and emergent forms of collective/individual voice among women workers in EPZ factories are discussed, using indicative studies that draw on feminist research epistemology. Following this literature review,

background information on Sri Lanka is outlined, followed by an explanation of the research methods. The enactment of voice at GGK is then presented, followed by conclusions.

Multi-disciplinary perspectives on worker voice

Writing in the journal *Human Resource Management*, Wilkinson and Fay (2011: 66) point out that employee voice is studied by a number of disparate but interrelated disciplines: human resource management (HRM); political science; psychology; law; and industrial relations. There are, they suggest, 'competing visions and expectations of employee voice' (2011: 71), adding to a lack of conceptual clarity (Dietz et al., 2009).

Dominant modes of theorizing employee voice follow the historical development of the contours of the employment relationship within a particular social, economic and political trajectory in the global North, as well as the post-World War II development of the industrial relations and later HRM disciplines (Edwards, 2003). Voice has encapsulated notions of industrial democracy, individual/collective worker representation, articulation of grievances, worker participation, problem-solving and contribution to decision-making in the organization (Batt et al., 2002; Dundon et al., 2004; Freeman et al., 2007; Wilkinson and Fay, 2011).

Historically understood as a way of tempering unequal power in the employment relationship by promoting organizational citizenship, democracy and human dignity, much of the current research on employee voice takes Albert O. Hirschman's exit-loyalty-voice framework (1970) as the starting point. Writing of consumer and member responses to dissatisfaction with an organization, Hirschman noted they may choose to exit (discontinue the relationship) or enact voice, the course of action mediated by loyalty. He distinguished between voice and exit as a choice between the political/non-market and the economic/market (1970: 15). While this distinction is problematic (see below), voice was inherently political as it was constituted as an act of agency, an attempt 'to change rather than escape from an objectionable state of affairs' (Hirschman, 1970: 30).

In contemporary understandings, voice is commonly understood as:

how employees are able to have a say over work activities and organizational decision making issues within the organization in which they work. (Wilkinson and Fay, 2011: 1)

Emphasis is placed on *how voice is enabled*, drawing attention to institutions, processes, mechanisms, structures and practices. These are state-facilitated and/or management-established outlets, including individual/collective representation, participation, articulation of employee grievances and contributions to decision-making in unionized/non-unionized workplaces (Bryson et al., 2006; Budd et al., 2010: 3; Freeman and Medoff, 1984). While workers can also make demands for voice mechanisms, such as trade union recognition, voice is treated as intentional in solicitation, depending on state and management preferences (Bryson et al., 2006) or constraints (Donaghey et al., 2011).

However, despite a multilayered in-depth body of research, the emphasis on management preferences deviates from Hirschman's original assertion that voice is a political

act, where organizational members exercise agency to challenge and eventually change the status quo. When voice is conceptualized only as a means of acting within management/state structures of voice, worker agency recedes in importance, giving an inaccurate picture of voice in the employment relationship.

Moreover, there is a relative neglect of informal voice. Examining informal voice is important in understanding the totality of the employment relationship via the interaction between actors. Strauss defines informal voice as the:

day to day relations between supervisors and subordinates in which the latter *are allowed* substantial input into decisions [...] a process which allows workers to exert some influence over their work and the condition under which they work. (1998: 15, emphasis added)

Related to the previous point, the emphasis is on management allowances for voice, through 'informal' unstructured ways, such as a worker approaching a manager via an open door policy or through social interaction outside the workplace (Dundon et al., 2004: 312). This definition again downplays worker agency in seeking voice. However, the definition is useful insofar as it stresses the relational everyday aspect of exercising voice and influencing the context of the employment relationship.

Finally, voice has not been investigated fully in environments such as EPZs. To do so would require attention to the formation of labour markets. For example, to paraphrase Hirschman, workers are said to have the option of exiting if dissatisfied. However, this conclusion is problematic in the context of a country such as Sri Lanka where high rates of unemployment and poverty and lack of alternative opportunities may constrain exit from EPZ employment. It is unsurprising to find expressions of worker satisfaction, loyalty (Hancock, 2006; Kabeer, 2004) or 'alienative commitment' (McKay, 2006) in spaces where voice is seemingly repressed but outside options are scarce.

Several studies have noted the lack of traditional voice mechanisms in EPZs. They have often attributed this absence to the composition of the workforce. Studies have demonstrated that recruitment decisions were often predicated on cultural constructions of gender (Caraway, 2007). Women tended to dominate EPZ manufacturing jobs as they were perceived by employers to be 'naturally' a better fit for manufacturing activities, having innate feminine (rather than learned industrial) skills, as well as docile dispositions arising from their socialization in the peasant economy. In other words, women were recruited en masse into EPZ employment as they were predisposed to voicelessness or obedience. Subsequent studies of EPZ workplaces highlighted the absence of formal voice mechanisms (Elias, 2005; Lynch, 2007; Salzinger, 2003).

However, there is dissonance between this representation and documented voice in EPZs in the form of collective trade union voice and indirect global/grassroots non-government organization (NGO) voice (see, for example, Boyenge, 2007; Gunawardana, 2007; McKay, 2006; Mendez, 2005; Siddiqi, 2009). These observations reorient the focus from state institutions/management prerogative to workers' agency and desire for voice. For example, Iglesias-Prieto's (2001) study on Mexican workers demonstrated how workers voiced demands to change painful work practices that impaired their health and safety on a day-to-day basis, despite being ignored, harassed or threatened.

Another area of dissonance is between the depiction of voiceless spaces and informal collective/individual forms of 'everyday forms of opposition' discussed in ethnographic accounts (Brooks, 2007; Hewamanne, 2008; McKay, 2006; Ong, 1987). The strength of this literature lies in highlighting how culture as a *process* that shapes meaning and subjectivities in the social world to construct hegemony could also be used as opposition in the global EPZ factory. This contention differs from recent managerialist comparative literature, where differences in voice practices have been attributed to culture as a mediating factor (Huang et al., 2005; Mellahi et al., 2010). Rather, culture in ethnographic work broadens the space for examining voice. These works do not look at 'voice' directly. However, drawing on the work of anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, Raymond Williams and James Scott, as well as the writing of Antonio Gramsci, scholars have demonstrated how workers have *resisted* multiple forms of exploitation in multiple ways (Bandy and Mendez, 2006; Hewamanne, 2008; Mendez, 2005; Ong, 1987).

These ethnographies used feminist understandings of voice to advance the understanding of women's working lives. Despite the diversity of feminist theory, as a research strategy, feminist-inspired research has aimed to 'reclaim', 'discover' and 'give voice' to silenced, ignored or marginalized women's voices (Hardman and Taylor, 1999: 3). Monolithic accounts of women factory workers have been criticized for their methodological approach and representative narrative leading to the erasure of worker voice (Bulbeck, 2000: 176; Mohanty, 2004). Emerging from post-structural and post-colonial perspectives exploring the agency and subjectivity of marginalized groups in the late 20th century, voice was cast as the ability of workers to present their own views, reflections and desires, in relation to their circumstances (Spivak, 1993; Mohanty, 2004).

Such developments paralleled burgeoning inquiry in labour process theory (LPT) from the late 1990s onwards (Bain and Taylor, 2000; Fleming and Spicer, 2007). Seeking to move away from the totalizing accounts of managerial control in late industrialized Western countries (see, for example, Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992), work on organizational worker resistance and misbehaviour highlighted the way workers attempted to carve out spaces of control at work, particularly in non-union workplaces (Dundon and Rollinson, 2004; Townsend, 2005). Ackroyd and Thompson's (1999) influential work on employee misbehaviour outlined how workers exercised their agency via four forms of appropriation: time, work effort, product and identity. The appropriation of identity in particular (using humour, sexual games, class/team solidarity) resonates with work such as Hewamanne's (2008) ethnography of Sinhalese workers in Sri Lanka's EPZs. Workers used culturally congruent practices such as language games, gendered behaviours such as tears or curses and shop-floor negotiations based on identity manoeuvring. Such manoeuvring involved moving between adopted constructed subjective positionalities ('indispensable rebel and loving daughter', 'political activist and little sister', 'innocent rural girl and manipulator') under different situations (see also Ngai, 2005; Ong, 1987).

Read together, LPT and ethnographic accounts of worker resistance raise an intriguing question about the relationship between voice and opposition/resistance, on *locating agency* rather than examining management enablement of voice. In LPT, resistance is about appropriating a degree of control, rather than being a subject of control (Ackroyd, 2012: 4). In ethnographic accounts, 'voice' was subsumed as a constitutive element of resistant agency (Ortner, 1995) by giving attention to the way women workers acted

within and outside the space of potentially oppressive workplaces, through negotiation, struggle and resistance (Naples and Desai, 2002).

While LPT studies of resistance and ethnographic studies of women in EPZs say little about changes brought about by voice/oppositional practices, they force us to reconsider agency as a capacity to act within a given historical context such as globalization (Mahmood, 2002: 31). Resistance offers clues as to the way voice is enacted in highly disciplined workplaces, demonstrating that voice is often an *unintended* consequence of managerial prerogatives designed to curtail voice, highlighting the agency of workers. Acknowledging these theoretical contributions therefore allows us to return to Hirschman's idea that voice is a political act. However, while Hirschman distinguished between the economic and the political, the insights from the studies above illuminate the social and cultural contextual nature of voice in the workplace. Shifting our understanding of the worker as the object of control to the worker as subject, we are able to revisit Hirschman's observation that voice is an 'unfolding art' (1970: 43). An important aspect of feminist-inspired ethnographic research and LPT has been the rethinking of 'the economic' and the significance of its relationship to the political in women's working lives. This article presents a contextual account of how voice was enacted in the tightly controlled space of a Sri Lankan EPZ.

Field research and context: the Katunayake export processing zones and Gupta Garments Katunayake

First established in 1978 as part of economic liberalization efforts tied to economic development policy goals, Sri Lanka's EPZs have housed mainly labour-intensive apparel factories producing goods for consumer markets in the USA and the UK. In line with global industry trends, Sri Lankan employers exhibited a preference for women workers, based on gendered perceptions of their docility, political inactivity and predisposition for sewing (Lynch, 2007). By the early 2000s, the typical profile of an EPZ worker was an unmarried Sinhalese Buddhist woman with an average of 11 years of education. She first migrated to the zones at 20–21 years of age from an impoverished rural village in the North Western, Southern or Central Provinces and from a household with an average monthly income of rupees 4915 (US\$43.15) (Gunawardana, 2010).²

The EPZs are subject to an evolving complex web of national labour laws, international labour standards, local guidelines and corporate codes of conduct. Support for collective indirect or representative voice is found in national labour laws that guarantee freedom of association, trade union registration, collective bargaining and the setting up of workers' councils. The Board of Investments (BOI) labour guidelines (BOI, 2004) mandate each enterprise to set up an in-house representative workers' council. Law enforcement falls under the purview of the State Labour Department, although EPZs are managed by the autonomous BOI. The BOI also carries out inspections, as does the Department of Labour. Corporations monitor code implementation via privatized auditing processes. A key area of often reported non-compliance has been freedom of association, curtailing collective voice (Compa, 2004).

The data presented in this article is drawn from a broader longitudinal ethnographic study of the employment relations systems of the KEPZ, which began with a series of

interviews with workers and labour activists in July 2001 and ended in December 2012. In 2003, 12 months of participant observation was undertaken in the KEPZ. The vignettes discussed below are based on shop-floor interactions and observations during this time. The extended case method, in which participant observation is the primary research tool, was used to focus on how sociocultural structures, as well as institutions, shaped action in the field site, while extending out to broader global macro structures and institutions (Burawoy, 2009).

In January 2003, I moved into a workers' boarding house, residing with five other workers in one room in Liyanagemulla, Katunayake. In February 2003, access to GGK was granted by the factory Director, following an email introduction sent by an acquaintance who worked in a supplier organization. GGK was owned and managed by the 'Gupta Group' of companies, a prominent local business group, whose commercial roots originated in the late 19th century. GGK was opened in 1978 with 16 assembly lines, 700 sewing machines and approximately 1200 personnel. In 2003, the factory produced garments for leading apparel brands such as Nike, Liz Claiborne, Gap, Baby Gap, Tommy Hilfiger and Marks and Spencers. GGK was certified for ISO 9001-2000.

Following a brief email exchange with the Director, where I outlined the purpose of the project and ethical considerations and confirmed that complete anonymity would be granted to the factory, all personnel and personnel of any suppliers or buyers (but not the names of the brand names), I was invited to meet the General Manager (GM) and Human Resource Manager (HRMr) to discuss my placement.

During our initial meeting, the GM selected assembly line nine for my placement. Made up of between 40 and 45 workers, line nine was considered to be a 'bad line' as the workers and their supervisor did not get along. Over the course of the year, I worked as a helper on this assembly line, five to six days per week in the factory for 10 hours on average per day, except for public holidays and two week-long breaks in June and October.

The GGK workers were 98 per cent ethnically Sinhalese, with the majority being Buddhist; 54 per cent of the workers were from rural locales throughout the island; 85 per cent of all employees were single, while 80–82 per cent of the workers were female. Being from poor rural households meant that workers were dependent on wage labour, but it was the sociocultural understandings of 'village' (rural) and gender that made women attractive employees. Management narrative demonstrated that they preferred to hire women as they believed a worker's childhood *rural* socialization would reflect workplace behaviour (see also Hewamanne, 2008; Lynch, 2007). Sinhalese children are socialized to embody *lajja-baya* (shame-fear), an internalized disciplinary function that socializes children to fear public humiliation regardless of gender or class, so that norms of proper behaviour in all realms of life are not transgressed, including dissent against authority (Obeysekere, 1984: 504–5). Similarly, post-colonial, gendered 'rubrics of respectability' (De Alwis, 2002) were recast as skills necessary for factory production and apparel production (Hewamanne, 2008: 20). In other words, perceived propensity for voicelessness propelled recruitment decisions.

Women were employed in assembly operations, while men occupied technical and managerial positions. Workers signed an individual open-ended contract and labour laws and BOI guidelines were used to delineate terms. Production floor staff and workers laboured between 69 and 77 hours per week with overtime. HRM records showed that at

least one assembly line worked every Sunday every month. The base monthly wage for workers was Rs5500 (US\$48.29), although with overtime and incentives, they earned up to Rs6500–7000 per month (US\$57–61). Workers experienced few opportunities for promotion, although a handful of workers were ‘stood up’ as supervisors.

I followed EPZ workers’ daily routine, rising at 5.30 a.m. in the morning and walking 2.5 km from my boarding house to work with my roommates. We parted and went to our respective factories inside the zone. I joined GGK workers for breakfast in the factory canteen between 7.30 and 8.30 a.m. As GGK employed between 1000 and 1200 people, meals were taken in shifts. At 8.30 a.m. production began, followed by a 30-minute lunch break mid-afternoon and a 15-minute tea break in the late afternoon, when I again joined workers in the canteen.

Working as a helper enabled me to physically move on the line (as I was not seated in one spot and was asked to work with another new helper), make observations and complete my work tasks, allowing me to experience the labour process and observe how voice was enacted on a day-to-day basis (Stoller, 2005). All the participants knew of my role as a researcher. Consent letters were distributed to each member of assembly line nine. A copy of the letter was placed on the GGK canteen noticeboard where workers gathered to view other company announcements. A similar statement was read to officials, such as management, government officials and other interview participants. Rapport and trust was built over time, as I worked the same hours, spoke the same language, was of the same ethnic background, fell into the same age bracket as workers, performed similar daily routines and maintained confidences of workers. Importantly, senior workers ‘vetted’ me informally at the beginning, although once they began to interact freely with me, most other workers felt comfortable around me.

I took jottings of observations and conversations while I was on the assembly line. I also kept a notebook in the sick room for longer entries. I was granted an unofficial ‘special status’ as I was allowed to take a brief break whenever I wanted. I went to the sick room at least once between breaks to make notes before returning to the floor. I timed these breaks to ensure they did not disrupt production and the entire process of walking to the sick room, taking notes and returning took approximately 10 minutes. Notes were then written up in long detailed form in the evenings back at the boarding house. In analysing data, field notes and other documents were read and re-read to identify items relevant to the research questions. I then engaged in a close line-by-line reading of transcripts of interviews and observation notes, through open coding followed by a closer fine-grained focused coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The codes were then organized to discern patterns in the data. I then produced integrative memos before writing the ethnography (Emerson et al., 1995: 150).

Voiced but unheard? Exercising voice through official channels at GGK

Although GGK management placed importance on trainable politically inactive workers, voice was expected and, in some instances, encouraged. Mechanisms made available reflected legislated labour standards, HRM practice and culturally congruent practices. In 2003, GGK rolled out strategic HRM practices into the organization such

as administering engagement surveys, resulting in management articulating that providing voice dissuaded conflict, hence minimizing lost productivity, absenteeism and turnover.

The main voice mechanisms available were: initiating instrumental emotional ties between supervisors and workers; espousing a management 'open-door' policy; administering employee attitude surveys; grievance reporting based on the chain of command from the supervisor up; a letter box where workers could submit anonymous letters to top managers; employing a counsellor; running a welfare association; and establishing a workers' council.

The workers' council was emphasized by management as the primary means of engendering formal voice. Management convened workers' council meetings usually once a month in conjunction with the welfare committee. The written constitution of the welfare committee expressly stated one of the purposes was to 'prevent trade union formation'. The committee was comprised of five managers, seven staff members and five worker members from the assembly lines. In the workers' council, the president, vice president, secretary, assistant secretary and treasurer were all drawn from staff ranks, while workers formed an elected general committee. The general manager ran council meetings with some assistance from the HR manager.

Among workers, the criteria for selecting representatives was that the representative should be able to voice the concerns of fellow workers: speak well, lack fear (*bayanethi*), be experienced and be knowledgeable of rights. Thus, as a voice mechanism, the success of the workers' council was perceived to depend upon individual worker representatives' confidence in negotiating with managers. This emphasis on the representative's predisposition for proactive, competent articulation reflected the fact that despite regular meetings, workers felt the council did not offer an opportunity to be heard and required a confident speaker. As Nadeeka, a worker representative, articulated during a disagreement about a policy change:

The girls will talk to the management about it ... see, they [management] tell [us] that there's a discussion about issues, but they just tell us the decision.... (Nadeeka)

The council operated for management to communicate to workers, while workers had the opportunity to bring up concerns at the end of the session. However, in the presence of the general manager and, at times, one of the directors of the group, Nimesh Gupta, workers refrained from speaking up in meetings. Norms of respect for elders, coupled with excluding the beloved Mr 'Nimeshew' (an affectionate corruption of his name) from accountability for day-to-day working conditions, was one reason.

Yet, as a representative member of the workers' council and a long-time worker at GGK, Nadeeka turned towards voicing workers' concerns, despite cynicism about efficacy. Observations and perusal of written meeting minutes demonstrated that workers raised matters pertaining to dates of company social activities, work calendars, annual holidays, 'covering' hours, planned overtime, incentives, buyer requirements such as wearing of identification, uniforms, canteen food, machine faults and other housekeeping matters.

Informal voice: the importance of interpersonal relationships and interaction

Both management and workers relied on personal, contextual social interaction to gain control. Voice became a part of a management repertoire focused on fostering close, interpersonal relations with workers. Reflective of broader paternalist tendencies in Sri Lankan management, it represented a form of 'instrumental personalism' (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007), emotional intimacy encouraged to ensure a particular gain. Management believed there was a lack of teamwork in the factory caused by an underlying 'gap' between workers and management. To close the gap, workers, supervisors and other staff needed to 'get close to people [workers] to get to know their feelings about the company. Otherwise, you are working in the dark' (Production Manager).

Intimacy was fostered through activities inside and outside the workplace, to build social relations to generate affective bonds between individuals. Strategies included downplaying hierarchical relations (e.g. eating the same food as workers in the same canteen), organizing social trips, finding out about the women's personal lives and programmes such as the 'Foster Parent' programme, which linked one line with one manager. Intimacy was used to encourage the workers to voice their thoughts. Managers gauged whether workers were close to them by assessing whether workers 'spoke their minds' openly. They encouraged workers to voice their concerns, work troubles and personal problems, providing a direct, individualized, informal voice, but one that extended beyond work grievances.

A factory counsellor was hired to 'hear' workers' voices. Integrated into the HR function, counselling outcomes were tied to productivity, conflict management, controlling absenteeism and turnover. The counsellor, Manoshi Miss, spent time on the factory floor chatting to workers, learning about their work and personal problems, encouraging confidences and emphasizing she was their *kata handa* (voice, advocate). Like other managers, she stressed the relational aspect of her work. Although established as a formal role, the counsellor relied on her informal discussions and rapport to minimize disruptions to productivity.

This emphasis on social relationships was utilized by workers manoeuvring within everyday relations of authority to enact voice. In the following example, the personalism of the employment relationship was exercised in responding to attempted control over executing work tasks and a derogatory insult by a supervisor to a worker.

Niroshan, a 19-year-old Statistical Process Controller (SPC), was assigned to assembly line nine. He stood beside 37-year-old Prema. She was attaching buttons to the Liz Claiborne pants swiftly working their way down the line. After a few minutes of observation, Niroshan kneeled down to suggest a 'work improvement' to Prema, who ignored him. When he repeated himself, she told him it was a silly idea and that she would not follow his suggestion. He walked away muttering angrily '*hoothi!*' (cunt). Prema waited until he was out of earshot to exclaim angrily:

Did you hear what he said? That's the second time he said something like that to me. I'm going to tell him that if he says it to me a third time, I am going to go to the GM Sir and report it. See if I don't, if he says it again. I'm just waiting for him to come down here again to tell him off.

Prema enlisted the assistance of the other surrounding women workers and waited. Niroshan returned 20 minutes later. Continuing her work, Prema softened her voice and adopted a semi-scolding tone:

- Prema:* Niroshan, I have been waiting for you to come over again. Now what was that word you used with me earlier?
- Niroshan:* Why don't you do your work in an orderly way? And listen to something I say!
- Prema:* That's not important. What was that word you used? I was going to ask you whether you were born from a lotus flower. I know I was born from one of those other things.
- Niroshan:* I try to tell you improvements to help you and you don't like ...

Prema interrupted him and appealed to the workers surrounding her, who confirmed they heard him say it too. Nimna, keeping pace with her work, began to shame him:

Why do you use such words with us? We are your big sisters. You shouldn't use such words with us. Try to understand little brother, listen to what your big sisters tell you.

Niroshan sheepishly retorted, 'Yes, yes.' Niroshan hovered around the table for a minute, then moved down the line; Nimna remarked approvingly, '*hadala gana onei*' (must reform/mould them). The workers' joint disciplining of supervisory staff was a typical response to verbal abuse. Workers referred to SPCs by name or as *malli* (little brother)/*nangi* (little sister), rather than the honorific *aiya* (big brother) or 'sir' reserved for managers. Instead of using the official voice mechanisms available to lodge a complaint, Prema and her fellow workers asserted themselves using the cultural currency of kinship relations, respect for elders and shaming, to shift the focus off Niroshan's instructions. Reframing the gendered insult as a positive attribute, Prema and her co-workers voiced their concerns directly to the SPC. They garnered a symbolic victory and for the rest of my time observing the factory floor at GGK, Niroshan did not use disrespectful language towards the women.

While workers relied on each other to give weight to their individual voice as in the situation above, interpersonal relationships between workers were also important in enacting informal collective voice on the factory floor. Collectivism was embedded in a strong sense of shared identity among workers, based on friendship as solidarity (see also Hewamanne, 2008). Close, often emotionally intense, friendships between workers were mobilized during conflict with managers. However, this was also a risky strategy. For example, Renu, one of the line nine helpers, had been experiencing difficulty keeping up with preparing the waistbands for a pair of Liz Claiborne pants. Four other workers, ahead on their own targets, were helping her. The supervisor, Ruwan, stopped them and berated Renu. When she began to defend herself, Ruwan cut her off and furiously sent her to the floor manager's office. We could see her in the glass-walled room overlooking the production floor, crying, her head down as the manager admonished her.

Back on the line, an intense discussion unfolded. 'Poor Renu! She didn't do anything. It's not her fault, Ruwan doesn't understand. Maybe they are making her write and sign a letter [to resign]!' Jaya was becoming increasingly angry. Prema suggested in passing

they should follow Renu into the production manager's room: 'He shouldn't have called just Renu into the room.' Jaya and Shilpi agreed. Jaya stood up, a rare instance of stopping work and asked if anyone else would go with her. Prema agreed and got up. Nimna continued working. Shilpi got up but when Prema and Jaya walked away, she walked back to her machine, sat down and continued sewing.

We watched the other two in the room. Prema stood back in respectful posture. Jaya began to talk, but was soon standing in the same posture as Renu. About five minutes later, Jaya and Prema returned. Shilpi asks her what happened, but Jaya remained silent. When asked again, Jaya snapped without looking up: 'My friend said she would come but didn't.'

Such moments demonstrated that workers sought to exercise various forms of informal voice as the need arose, even if their voices were not ultimately heard at the point of authority. Workers tried to challenge the existing power relations and exert their voice even where voice was curtailed. While friendship and collectivism was important to exercising voice, workers did not always exercise voice in solidarity with each other. Workers like Shilpi were afraid of being disciplined, despite the bonds of friendship.

Voice as a bargaining tool

The workers used not voicing grievances as an informal bargaining chip. An official avenue for voice was the interviews conducted during buyer monitoring of factory compliance to corporate codes of conduct. Workers withheld (demonstrating loyalty, for economic security) or exercised voice as a form of negotiation with management. For example, when a rumour began to spread on the factory floor that Labour Day (a public holiday) would be a 'covering' day,³ workers on assembly line nine were indignant. They began protesting as they worked with remarks such as: 'They [management] have to give us Labour Day.'; 'It's a day given to all workers in the entire world!'; and 'This is just like when we worked on Independence Day! But this is Labour Day!'

Then, the workers began to change tack: 'See if we lie on the 2nd' was repeated by many. A Liz Claiborne inspection was scheduled for the second day of the month. The workers had been rehearsed by management to 'tell lies' needed to pass the inspection. Workers were adamant that if they had to work on the public holiday, then 'This is what we should tell them about, in the audit! See if we tell lies then!' In exchange for loyalty, workers expected their entitlement would be delivered. Rather than keeping silent, workers would voice their experiences to the auditors. This example shows how workers selectively chose to manoeuvre between voice, silence, loyalty and resistance.

Voice, leadership and outside actors

Senior workers were important leaders in exercising informal worker voice. They often instigated action, gave advice, looked after the general welfare of newer workers, were knowledgeable of labour laws and helped socialize new workers. They provided advice about workplace policies and laws and voiced concerns on the behalf of other workers.

Line nine's Danika was a prominent figure in the factory. She explained her role in the factory as follows:

No matter what [the problem] they come to me first. They get me to ask Ruwan [supervisor] and get it [their request] for them. In those instances I help the girls a lot.

Despite management dissuasion of union activity, contact with trade unions and NGOs outside of the workplace was important for leaders like Danika. While working in a previous factory, she had taken part in trade union activities. Trade unions were seen to be powerful vehicles for workers to disrupt management authority:

They have a WC so we do not have a trade union. They would have to do as we say. Workers would go on strike otherwise. (Danika)

She explained that she continued to be in contact with the trade union and NGO staff that assisted during previous strikes in her former factory. She asked people from these organizations about labour laws:

I ask them, if there is a problem like this, how do we face it? How do we talk if there is this type of problem? I call them, write letters, get their paper.

Danika was not a current union member, nor did she advocate forming one at Gupta, because of time pressures and management disapproval. However, she imparted information about working conditions to her activist contacts. She stressed the importance of knowledge in strengthening workers' ability to voice grievances and pursue rights in the workplace. Having knowledge about rights and entitlements under the law strengthened her ability to speak up with conviction, to hold management accountable.

Concluding remarks

While research suggests that EPZs around the world continue to offer restricted voice mechanisms (Gopalakrishnan, 2007), in Sri Lanka's KEPZ, management provided some voice mechanisms. In the case of GGK, management valued voice for purported gains to productivity and for containing conflict, turnover and absenteeism. However, in line with global trends, management preferred internal, individualized voice mechanisms to broader collective forms such as trade unions and informal personalized methods such as emotional intimacy. While management did encourage upward communication, workers' articulated voice was often unheard. Furthermore, management continued to rely on gendered recruitment practices to negate the desire to exercise voice.

Yet, despite gendered recruitment practices, an emerging body of literature demonstrates that EPZ workers are demanding voice or indeed are attempting to carve out their own voice practices (Anner, 2011; Salzinger, 2003; Soni-Sinha, 2010; Ustubici, 2009), belying the image of the docile apolitical worker. This study contributes to empirical knowledge about everyday voice practices in EPZs, as well as theoretical insights on voice and opening up the space for further explorations of voice in contexts of union decline (Donaghey et al., 2012). Rather than examining only management-led strategies for voice, this study highlights the importance of employee agency in carving out spaces for voice.

This study highlights the way EPZ workers readily engaged with voice processes provided by management, or sought to carve out spaces for expressing voice themselves. At GGK, workers enacted voice in three main ways:

- 1) utilization of management-sanctioned voice mechanisms while highlighting limitations and manoeuvring within other official channels for voice (e.g. buyer audits) by making decisions about when to enact voice;
- 2) voice was practised informally on a day-to-day basis outside formal voice structures, often relying on the collective solidarity of fellow workers, as well as informal leadership from senior workers; and
- 3) workers engaged in 'distant voice', whereby they engaged with outside NGOs or trade unions.

In each scenario, social interaction and agency mediated outcomes. In the case of voicing concerns in formal settings, social relations such as respect embedded in hierarchies curtailed voice. In relying on interpersonal relationships to voice concerns, socio-cultural elements such as kinship, age and authority shaped the way voice unfolded. Loyalty was exchanged for silence, while the maintenance of relationships with outsiders helped workers voice concerns inside the factory. The findings contribute to a growing body of research into EPZs and hyper-flexible production spaces which disrupt the idea of a totalizing hegemonic capitalism.

In voicing concerns, workers exhibited oppositional agency and set about attempting to appropriate control, as per observations presented in LPT accounts. This politics of everyday life resonates with studies of worker resistance in both labour process analysis and ethnographic insights into how voice develops outside management and state-sanctioned mechanisms, illuminating the importance of worker agency in enacting voice. While structural transformation of working conditions was limited, voice was significant as it enabled workers to prevent deterioration of existing conditions.

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Notes

1. All names, including the name of the factory under observation, have been changed.
2. Fieldwork conducted by the author in 2011–13 demonstrates that this profile is changing, with more Tamil and Muslim workers (in Sri Lanka, Muslim is designated an ethnic category).
3. 'Covering' refers to an overtime practice whereby annual leave or public holidays resulting in lost potential working time is made up by additional working hours on a normal day.

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