Reimagining the Frontline from Heaven's Edge

written by Yasmin Gunaratnam | May 6, 2020

"I hated unions," says Sathya Vani, now Joint-President of Sri Lanka's Domestic Workers' Union (DWU). "My parents were part of a union, who did nothing for them. So for a long time I avoided trade unions."

Vani's parents work in a tea plantation in the Kandyian hill country. "We saw how our parents suffered," she continues matter-of-factly. "We wanted a better life." A better life is not always easier.

What's a typical day like for you, I ask. It begins, she tells me, at 4am when Vani cooks for her husband and three children. By 6.30 she has the kids ready and sends them off to school. She will do the laundry and housework, leaving for work at around 7.30. If there's time, she can change her clothes and have a drink of water. The agreed time to finish her day as a domestic worker is 5pm. But this is rare. It can be 6 or later before she's allowed to go home where more cooking and housework are waiting.

The journey from the plantation to domestic work is becoming more common in Sri Lanka. Informal workers account for 70 percent of the island's workforce. They work without employment protection or paid leave. Menaha Kandasamy, founder of the DWU and the first woman General Secretary of the plantation Red Flag Union, describes plantations as social wombs for domestic workers. Kandasamy estimates that around 75% of domestic workers are from plantations.

Women-led trade unions, mobilizing across the formal and informal sectors, are proving to be fierce advocates during the pandemic. Their holistic campaigns have refused to cordon off the on-going challenges of diet, housing, housework and domestic violence from struggles for just wages and adequate pandemic protections. The unions stand out in a male dominated movement, rife with longstanding allegations that plantation unions have been prioritizing party politics and clandestine deals with employers over workers' rights.

The DWU was the first union to do relief work, delivering rice, flour, sugar and spices to members

during the pandemic curfew, which began on 20 March.

“Our number one priority is our livelihood. Health is number two,” Vani says. Why this way around? Because for the poor there are two pandemics. Vani believes that many domestic workers will die, not because of the coronavirus, but from the slow violence of food insecurity and starvation. Already they are skipping meals so there is more food to go around, and several are sick with other health conditions like asthma. A consuming dread is whether they will still have jobs when the curfew is lifted.

Malnutrition was identified by a 2017 World Bank study as a pervasive problem for women and children on plantations, findings include relatively high rates of conditions such as stunted growth and anaemia. With schools now closed and children at home during the day, women are struggling more than ever to work and maintain the health of their households.

Life Support

The two unions’ different yet interconnected struggles animate discussions in social reproduction theory. Social reproduction is the work that is needed to create and sustain life. I think of it as a distributed machinery of life support. Day-to-day struggles around family relationships, care and sexual violence are seen as crucial to understanding capitalist accumulation as are traditional Marxist concepts like the economy, labour and exploitation. “The most important insight of social reproduction theory is that capitalism is a unitary system that can successfully, if unevenly, integrate the sphere of reproduction and the sphere of production,” Tithi Bhattacharya has explained. “Changes in one sphere thus create ripples in another. Low wages and neoliberal cost-cutting at work can produce foreclosures and domestic violence at home.”

COVID-19 and the subsequent restrictions on legal, care and advocacy services have had an impact on social reproduction on local and global scales. A report by the United Nations Populations Fund, published on 27th April, predicts that the pandemic will have catastrophic effects on efforts to counter gender-based violence, including female genital mutilation, child marriage and domestic violence. If lockdowns continue for 6 months, we can expect to see 31 million additional cases of gender-based violence.

From its work in the heart of domestic life, the Domestic Workers Union has felt the cascading impacts of pandemic restrictions on social reproduction across class divides. In Sri Lanka, the richest 20 per cent of the population holds more than half the total household income of the country, with the poorest 20 per cent getting 5 per cent. Elite households of inherited wealth and business owners, such as those in the capital city Colombo, are isolating with their domestic workers. Middle class families, with relatively more insecure portfolio careers, have been hit harder. With fewer reserves, they are cutting-costs by dismissing domestic staff. The union has been campaigning for those who can afford it to continue to pay at least 50% of their domestic worker’s monthly salary and to take them back once pandemic measures ease. The International Labour Organization forecasts that the sharp decrease in working hours globally due to the pandemic will mean 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy “stand in immediate danger of having their livelihoods destroyed.”

Applying social reproduction theory across global chains of production provokes questions about how we might reimagine social justice alliances and responsibilities in the pandemic. As we have been seeing, not everyone is in lockdown. “Frontline” workers, from care professionals to those in supermarkets, factories and transport have had to continue working. Faced with their increased vulnerability to COVID-19 infection, we have had to re-examine the distribution of occupational esteem, value and risk. In Sri Lanka, plantations, rice farming and fishing were among the trades exempted from curfew restrictions, bringing them into the frontline.

I have reservations about how the military vocabulary of the "frontline" has become naturalised in the pandemic, how it blurs willingness, duty, coercion, vulnerability and protection. If, as Arundhati Roy imagines, the pandemic is a portal, the frontline is a timepiece. The rate and extent of its casualties tell us how care services and workers' lives have been invested in and are valued. It stands between us and premature death. It gives time. But what if we reimagine the frontline? What if we allow it to unfurl in time and space, to include the histories and contemporary conditions of those lives that are a part of the everyday materials that sustain us?

Let's begin this reimagining with what is in your cup. It could be coffee or cocoa. Because it is my favourite, and because after water, it is the world's most popular drink, my case example is tea.

Colonial dregs

Tea is one of several plantation crops grown in Sri Lanka. Along with rubber and coconut, it is a leading export. Large-scale plantation agriculture was a crucial foundation of the British colonization of the island, beginning with coffee in the 1820s and diversifying to include tea, rubber and coconut estates.

Writing in a 1984 special issue of *Race and Class* on Sri Lanka, Rachel Kurian, Jenny Bourne and Hazel Waters pointed out that plantation regimes are violently hierarchical, extractive and totalising. Under the British, the authors observed, "Every aspect of the working and domestic life of the plantation worker was subsumed to the need for profit." By the end of the nineteenth century, the machinery of late Victorian imperialism had produced what Mike Davis describes as "a huge global class of immiserated semi-peasants and farm laborers lacking existential security of subsistence."

Plantations were also a crucial laboratory for modern race-making — inventing and imposing what Lisa Tilley sees as "a racially stratified order, with granular evidence on the 'planting' of whiteness in the top layer of the labor regime." The Middle Passage and the plantocracies, defining elements of transatlantic slavery, performed an ungendering (Hortense Spillers), or a trans or regendering (Stefano Harney and Fred Moten) of enslaved peoples — reducing them, irrespective of gender, to exploitable, dehumanized "flesh." And feminist philosopher Donna Haraway has coined the neologism "plantationocene" to characterize the era of plantation regimes as enclosures built on forced multi-species labour. For Haraway, "the capacity to love and care for place is radically incompatible with the plantation."

Ecological degradation continues in soil depletion and misuse of fertilisers and economic exploitation still runs through plantation life in Sri Lanka. The work is inescapably physical, most often done by poor women from the "plantation" or "estate" Tamil communities. They are the descendants of an indentured labour force originally uprooted, with few legal rights, from Tamil Nadu in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. They are still regarded as outsiders, differentiated from "indigenous" Tamils who live in the north and east of the island. Many who work on plantations, do not own the land and houses their families have been in for generations, with poverty and debt bondage weighing heavily on estate communities. Plantation Tamil workers have a long, if ambivalent history of trade union struggles for better pay, working conditions and race equality.

Demonstrations by plantation workers as recently as January 2019 called for a doubling of the minimum wage — raising it to 1000 rupees a day (USD 5.61). The demand was not met. Buying ethically does not always lift us out of these circuits of exploitation. A 2019 investigation by the Thomson Reuters Foundation found the take-home wages in some tea estates certified by Rainforest Alliance and Fairtrade came to as little as 26 rupees a day (USD 0.34) after the deduction of debt repayments, salary advances and other fees was made.

There are differences in pay, rights and conditions between state-owned and privately run estates, but control over the socially reproductive labour of women reaches across the sectors. Successive "Family Background Reports" (FBR) are one example. The reports, vigorously opposed by feminist activists, were introduced in 2013, supposedly to protect women. The FBR required endorsement by an estate superintendent before women were allowed to work abroad. For the past twenty years plantations have faced labour shortages as more women look for work elsewhere. The FBRs tried to keep them within the plantation economy, "because if labor can escape, it will escape the plantation" (Haraway).

The plantation labor force in Sri Lanka has always been locked-down. With COVID-19 there is the risk of intensifying vulnerability that demands a new activism centered on dismantling gender, class and racialized inequalities within struggles for collective wellbeing.

Plantation Unions

The women-led Red Flag Union, one of the few plantation unions publicly raising concerns about the impact of the coronavirus, says that pandemic public health measures are a paradox on estates, for they promise the arrival of something alien to the regime: care. Red Flag have been campaigning for toilet breaks and a designated space for women to wash their hands with soap and eat their lunch since 2010. Women often urinate, change their sanitary protection or eat lunch squatting under the tea bushes. Some companies did provide a hut for women to eat in, but when these became rundown they did not restore them. The union has grown accustomed to how a concession so often reverts into a withholding.

The withholding is architecture as well as infrastructure. Estate accommodation bears the shape of its colonialist past, with workers most often housed in small barrack-type "line rooms." Each room, at around 30 metres square, is a household. Social distancing is impossible. Despite more household bathrooms on estates, the 2017 World Bank study found that more than 92 percent of the estate sector water supplies were contaminated by fecal E. coli. An outbreak of COVID-19 on a plantation would be a lit fuse.

Red Flag is using Whatsapp and Skype to keep in daily contact with local representatives. They have set up a 24-hour emergency hotline so they can respond quickly if needed. Both unions feel that workers are able to see more clearly the value of being organized. In a statement for International Workers Day on May 1, the unions declared: "Regardless of religion, ethnicity, or gender, it is important that workers come together to challenge and demand their rights to necessary health and safety, job security and freedom from exploitation. This is the only way workers' rights can be safeguarded."

Collective Protective Equipment

In the global North, and largely because of trade union advocacy, we have become more alert to the increased exposure of some of our workers to COVID-19. The global extensiveness of the "frontline"—from the production of rubber in the personal protective equipment we have been demanding so passionately, to the residues of exploitation in the cups of tea providing comfort in locked-down homes—seems to have passed us by. Yet, in a very real sense these distant lives are on and in our hands.

These chains of production and reproduction are also "underlying conditions." They attenuate vulnerability to COVID-19. The most far-reaching change will come, as trade unions like the Domestic Workers Union and Red Flag have shown, when we reframe personal protection into a more collectivized and global equipping.

Rather than the belatedness of a politics of mourning for lives lost, global equipping is of the now. It means supporting distant grassroots and trade union activism, caring about and investigating global production chains, livable wages and debt cancellation.

Recognising and valuing our interdependent vulnerability is perhaps the best and most long-lasting protection.

Yasmin Gunaratnam teaches in the sociology department of Goldsmith College, University of London.