The Obedient EPZ-Worker
– A case study concerning female EPZ workers’ barriers to empowerment in Sri Lanka.

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Abstract

This study analyzes and maps barriers preventing Sri Lankan female workers in Export Processing Zones (EPZs) from participating in awareness raising activities by NGOs. These barriers can furthermore be discussed as preventing them from an enhanced empowerment. The gathered data is mostly based on interviews conducted during a three-week long fieldtrip in Sri Lanka. By using both a literature analysis on the field of research together with group interviews with both female EPZ workers as well as with personnel from a women’s organization in Sri Lanka the study identifies five barriers hindering the women’s participation; time and distance; lack of motivation or interest; limited knowledge of the organization; someone opposing the choice; and fear of loosing the employment. The study derives the root-causes of the barriers to the current social norms and roles, which are internalized in the young women’s mind from their background as well as through the reproduction of them in their new environment, but also to EPZs as discouraging an improvement of the women’s situation.

Sammanfattning

Den här studien analyserar och kartlägger barriärer som hindrar arbetande kvinnor i export zoner från att delta i organisationers upplysningsaktiviteter. Dessa barriärer kan vidare diskuteras hinderar dem från ett vidare självbestämmande. Den insamlade datan baseras främst på intervjuer som utfördes under en tre veckor lång fältstudie på Sri Lanka. Genom en ingående litteraturanalys av forskningen inom området och gruppintervjuer med både arbetande kvinnor i zonerna samt med en kvinnoorganisation i Sri Lanka kommer studien fram till fem barriärer som hindrar kvinnors deltagande; tid och avstånd; brist på motivation eller intresse; bristfällig kunskap om organisationens arbete: någon som motsätter sig; samt rädslan att förlora jobbet. Studien härleder dessa barriärer till både sociala normer och könsroller som är djupt förankrade i de unga kvinnornas bakgrund samt reproduceras i deras nya miljö, men också till följd av export zonerna som motarbetar en förbättring av kvinnornas situation.

Keywords: Export Processing Zones, Female factory workers, Labor rights, Awareness activities, NGOs, Empowerment, False consciousness, Sri Lanka.
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Acronyms

NGO- Non Governmental Organization
EPZ- Export Processing Zone
# Table of Contents

1 Introduction ............................................................................................................. 1-3
   1.1 Problem statement .......................................................................................... 2
   1.2 Purpose .......................................................................................................... 2
   1.3 Research questions ....................................................................................... 2-3
   1.4 Delimitations and limitations ....................................................................... 3

2 Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................... 4-9
   2.1 Empowerment ............................................................................................... 4-5
   2.2 Development as freedom ............................................................................. 5-6
   2.3 Taking the local context into account .......................................................... 6
   2.4 False consciousness ..................................................................................... 7
   2.5 Summarizing the theories ............................................................................ 7-8
   2.6 Previous research ......................................................................................... 8-9

3 Method ....................................................................................................................... 10-13
   3.1 Ekala, Sri Lanka ............................................................................................ 10
   3.2 Method approach .......................................................................................... 10
   3.3 Data collection .............................................................................................. 11-13
      3.3.1 Semi-structured group interviews and the sampling ........................... 11-12
      3.3.2 Literature analysis ............................................................................... 13
   3.4 Reliability and validity .................................................................................. 13

4 The societal structure and the female EPZ worker ..................................................... 14-22
   4.1 Export Processing Zones .............................................................................. 14-15
   4.2 Gender roles in Sri Lanka ............................................................................. 15-17
      4.2.1 A changing environment ...................................................................... 15-17
   4.3 Barriers to join the NGO ............................................................................. 17-22
      4.3.1 Time and distance ............................................................................... 17-18
      4.3.2 Lack of interest or motivation ............................................................... 18-19
      4.3.3 Limited knowledge of the organization ............................................. 19
      4.3.4 Opposing the choice .......................................................................... 19-20
      4.3.5 Fear of loosing the employment ......................................................... 20-22
   4.4 Summarizing the data .................................................................................. 22

5 Analysis ..................................................................................................................... 23-32
   5.1 Female workers’ role in the development process ......................................... 23-24
   5.2 Well-being and the female EPZ worker ......................................................... 24-25
   5.3 Preventing the female EPZ worker’s well-being ........................................... 26-27
      5.3.1 The obedient daughter, creating the obedient worker ......................... 26-27
1 Introduction

Women’s empowerment is of great importance worldwide as it is not only favorable for themselves but also results in beneficial development outcomes (Revenga and Shetty, 2012). Today, women constitute around 40% of the global labor force (ibid.), significantly contributing to poverty reduction (World Bank, 2014). Despite women’s increased participation in society and contribution to development women are still discriminated against on a daily basis all over the world. This limits their possibilities and well-being (Batliwala, 2010).

Recent decades in the developing world have shown an increase of women becoming acknowledged for their work and getting employment outside their homes. However, although an observed increase in female laborers, contributing to social changes and making women part of the economic development of nations, empowerment has not naturally followed (Hancock, 2007; Hancock et al. 2012; Attanapola, 2004; 2006). This phenomenon can be observed in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka, a lower middle income country in South Asia with a GDP per capita of $2,923 (World Bank 2, 2014), suffered from a high unemployment rate during the 1970s (Hancock, 2006). Export Processing Zones (EPZ) were implemented as a development strategy to combat the high unemployment rate (Attanapola, 2004). The zones offered favorable conditions to attract foreign investment in order to boost the country’s economy (Arunatilake, 2012). Women from the rural areas of Sri Lanka were employed at the zones because of their willingness to work under insecure working agreements and to conduct hard labor for a modest salary (Ball, 2008; Metcalfe et al. 2010; Jahan, 2014). This has resulted in the women becoming the backbone of the Sri Lankan manufacturing (Hancock, 2007).

Lack of rights, poor working conditions and exploitation of workers are some of the characteristics used to describe the zones, which have adversely affected the workers’ health (Attanapola, 2004; Arunatilake, 2012; De Silva et. al. 20 13; Metcalfe et al. 2010). The EPZs are obligated to respect the Sri Lankan labor laws but as labor unions are restricted and not recognized within the zones, few employees are aware of their rights as workers (Arunatilake, 2012). This has resulted in severe discrimination of rights (Gills, 2002). In the absence of labor unions there are however NGOs working with awareness raising activities to increase the female workers’ knowledge of rights (Attanapola, 2008; Hancock et al., 2012). The female workers’ participation in the activities have resulted in women, who are aware of their rights, opposed injustices enforced by their managers (Attanapola, 2008; 2014). This could be the result of increased and widened empowerment since the women get more aware of their
rights and take strategic actions by raising their voices to improve their lives (Attanapola, 2008; 2014; Kabeer, 1999). Thus, participation in activities by NGOs is of great importance since it increases the women’s awareness and results in enhanced empowerment that not only benefit themselves, but also their families (Sinha et al., 2012).

Despite the NGOs attempt to involve and increase all the women workers’ awareness regarding rights, not all women participate in the activities (Attanapola, 2008). Since joining the NGOs’ activities have shown having a positive impact on women’s empowerment, not joining could be seen as a stagnation of the possible empowerment the women could reach through their employment. Hence, this issue has a clear link to empowerment.

1.1 Problem Statement

Even though women play a significant part in the Sri Lankan manufacturing chain, they face severe problems at work with poor working conditions, discrimination of rights and low salaries. Participation and membership in NGOs’ activities has shown having a positive impact on the female workers, giving them the tools to overcome many of the discriminations faced. However, since many women choose not to join, the discrimination continues and the women miss out on vital information that otherwise could have resulted in enhanced empowerment.

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of the study is to analyze the reasons to why female EPZ workers in Sri Lanka do not participate in awareness raising activities by NGOs. The study will examine and map the reasons that prevent women from not taking contact and participating in the activities, and further discuss the results with respect to the idea of empowerment.

1.3 Research Questions

The purpose of the first questions is to capture the Sri Lankan female EPZ workers’ own perception of the barriers through a qualitative interview approach. By using the literature on the field of research together with aspects highlighted by the personnel in charge of the Women’s Centre organization in Sri Lanka the second question aims to find structural causes preventing women from participation.
• What do female EPZ workers perceive as barriers to participate in NGO activities?

• What factors restrain women from participating in organizational activities?

1.4 Delimitations and limitations

Aspects concerning geography, gender, and NGOs have been delimited in order to narrow down the scope of this study. The study is delimited to analyze female workers in Sri Lanka who works in factories within two of the country’s 12 EPZs, Katunayake and Biyagama. The study will analyze the organizational participation of the female workers in the NGO Women’s Centre, which has activities and offices for women working in the two zones mentioned above.

The limitations of this study concerns the sample of respondents who were chosen through a convenience sampling method, which does not make them representative of all female EPZ workers. This means that in case the study would to be remade by using another sample it could result in different conclusions. Since the personnel of the organization participated in the majority of the interviews this could have influenced the respondents’ discussions, thus having an impact on the study’s reliability. Furthermore, having group interviews with certain topics to discuss could also have resulted in important issues not being brought up during the discussions. Despite these limitations, the interviews have been very informative.
2 Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework constitute of three theoretical approaches to women in development and will, together with the approach of empowerment, be applied on the empirical data to analyze it. The three theories and the notion of empowerment relate to the case study of female EPZ workers in Sri Lanka and their lack of motivation to join awareness raising activities.

2.1 Empowerment

The idea of empowerment has been discussed and defined by many scholars, across different dimensions of society. The notion of empowerment is applicable on both individuals’ possibilities as well as the empowerment of a group as a whole (Porter, 2013). In the following section the concept of empowerment will be introduced by combining the ideas of several authors.

Generally, empowerment means the possibility individuals have to make strategic choices to enhance their personal well-being in a context where this previously not was possible (Kabeer, 1999; Sinha et al. 2012). This makes them change their given role in the society by challenging the structures and institutions that subordinate them and limit their possible well-being (Attanapola, 2008). Limitations of a person’s possibilities but also the enhancements occurs in political, social and economic structures of the society, e.g. through family, class, legal systems and labor (Attanapola, 2008; Batliwala, 2010).

The idea of empowerment is well-used in the discourse of women. It is an idea of challenging the current situation that many of the world’s women face as subordinated in a male dominated society, which affects their opportunities and conditions (Batliwala, 2010). Empowered women are individuals who use their agency to make strategic choices to overcome barriers in order to improve their well-being and life quality (Attanapola, 2008; Kabeer, 1999). An independent agency is of great significance for an empowered woman because such a person would, through her agency, make strategic choices to take control over matters that are important for her (Attanapola, 2014).

Empowerment is an ongoing socio political process aiming to improve the situation and the well-being of women and girls in society e.g. in education, health, mobility, ownership and labor force participation (Ali and Hatta, 2012). The initial phase of empowerment starts with an individual’s consciousness and with increased physical mobility, e.g. through education, a job outside the household and/or participation in social, economical and political activities (Attanapola, 2008; Handapangoda, 2012). In
theory, this development eventually leads to the empowerment becoming externalized as the woman gets a stronger voice within the household and later becomes a participant in larger communities, spreading the empowerment through other dimensions of society (Sinha, et al. 2012).

An increase of a woman’s empowerment does not only improve her personal well-being but also the well-being of her family (Sinha, et al. 2012). Furthermore, the effects of women’s empowerment can be of great importance economically on a national level as an outcome of increasing women’s participation in social and economic activities (ibid.).

### 2.2 Development as freedom

In *Development as Freedom* Amartya Sen (1999) discusses the importance of freedom as a goal in itself but also as a means to development. Sen’s theory emphasizes people and individuals as the key to development. Sen believes that people are capable of contributing to development by pursuing his or her agency. However, Sen argue that people are not seen and given their full potentials as agents in societies but are treated and act as patients. A patient is a person who is part of development but without taking own action in the process such as not pursuing his or her ideas. Sen believes that individuals who act as agents, are the driving force of development but are blocked in societies, which make them incapable of using their agency and full potential to contribute to the development. Sen name these ”unfreedoms” and argues that they act as barriers for people. The unfreedoms restrain people’s opportunities in the society from pursuing their agency to make rational choices to enhance their personal well-being. Thereby, limiting their ability to contribute to the development. Removing the unfreedoms would thus result in individual freedom, strengthening the agency to contribute to the development. But as it is a process it can take time (Sen, 1999). His theory is applicable on women.

Sen notes the current unfreedoms acting as barriers for women all over the world to pursue their agencies, which affect in particularly their individual well-being but also their relatives’. Sen highlights how the unequal treatment of women can be interpreted as unfreedoms preventing them from pursuing their agency. The unfreedoms of unequal treatment make them subordinated and patients in society, which affect their well-being and potentials. Sen argues that by removing suppressing hinders and recognizing women’s agency could result in expanded freedom, which could contribute to the women’s well being and the development (Sen, 1999). Employment outside the home, an independent income, property rights and education are all examples of pursued agency as a result of increased freedom, which contribute to women’s well-being, voice and empowerment. Sen discusses that the increased
freedom in the spheres mentioned above also influences other areas in which women before have been subordinated. For instance, an income and contribution to the family increases a woman’s position in the household with her participation and influence in the family’s decision-making, while the work makes her less dependent. Employment outside the household can be interpreted as an important freedom for women’s development as it can result in increased independence and empowerment since the experience increases their knowledge, which furthermore can enhance their agency in other areas and improve their status (Sen, 1999).

2.3 Taking the local context into account

In the article *Globalization and women’s paid work: expanding freedom?* Christine Koggel (2003) criticizes Sen’s theory concerning women’s potential well-being as a result of increased freedom. Koggel’s critique refers to Sen’s argument that a paid job outside the household results in an increased well-being and freedom that would lead to an increased empowerment. Koggel instead highlights that this does not always have to be the case. Koggel argues the importance of taking the local context into account as that would reveal social structures and power relations that have a significant impact in shaping, maintaining and influencing the possibilities women have in local societies. Koggel argues that one cannot generalize Sen’s theory because of the power of social structures that influence and shape women’s possibilities locally. Using Sen’s idea, Koggel argues that women’s potentials are subordinated to the social structures in the society. Having the possibility to work outside the home change women’s current freedom but due to other unfreedoms in the society, the women are far from free to pursue their agency. Even though a woman gets employed does not mean that she is acting as an agent since she plays a part in a local context, which influences her possibilities and restrains her full freedom. Although Sen’s idea would imply that an employment automatically make a woman into an agent, there are factors in the society that act suppressive towards a woman’s agency, giving her the role as patient (Koggel, 2003).

Social norms, culture, religion, ethnicity and class structures are examples of structures in societies, acting as unfreedoms since these constrain women’s freedom from pursuing their agency. Therefore, it is necessary to highlight inequalities and injustices as the core of the structures and include them when analyzing women’s participation in the society (Koggel, 2003). Including such variables would most likely give another result of women’s freedom and contradict Sen’s argument that an employment outside the household improves women’s situation with expanded freedom to other domains (Koggel, 2003).
2.4 False Consciousness

This theoretical approach correlates to the ideas above since it emphasizes how the reality of a person affects his or her preferences and actions. In the article *Justice, Capabilities, and Vulnerabilities* O’Neill argues that individuals’ preferences can be corrupted because of the reality they face, which she exemplifies through the notion of “the happy slave”. O’Neill highlights the importance of preferences by arguing that an individual’s actions are controlled by his or her preferences. To clarify, actions are thereby reflecting the social context in which a person is part of (O’Neill, 1995).

O’Neill’s arguments are based on the idea of people as rational agents, meaning that they always aim to reach their goals or preferences through their actions. O’Neill (1995) raises the revealed person’s construction of preferences as not real but are assigned to the person as a reflection of who he or she is and what he or she does, leading to the person striving for false preferences.

O’Neill claims that preferences can be constructed and adapted to a social environment and result in false consciousness. A person’s preferences can either be adapted or constructed to the situation and the reality the person is part of. This leads to the person aiming for preferences through his or her actions, but it does not necessarily mean that the circumstances the person lives in are just or good. The preferences of a person can thus be corrupted. A person’s preferences can acquiesce to life even cruel ones such as the example mentioned above with “the happy slave”. Distorted preferences that influence a person’s actions and his or her idea of ethics and justice can dominate a person’s mind. This leaves less space for preferences with a wider perception of reality to influence a person’s actions. As mentioned above actions are encouraged by a person’s preferences and if distorted preferences are dominating it can be interpreted to what a person want to achieve and finds right, despite possible injustices. This makes their actions legitimate and just despite possible suppression and subordination and result in encouragement and satisfaction in pursuing their preferences. However, preferences of a person are not static but change simultaneously with the social environment of a person (O’Neill, 1995).

2.5 Summarizing the theories

Sen’s theory (1999), and Koggel’s reaction to his theory (2003), concern individuals but is applicable on a societal level since they emphasize individuals as the key to development. Giving a person increased freedom to pursue her agency does not only gain the individual with improved well-being but also the
nation and the family (Sen, 1999). However, unfreedoms in the society hinder individuals to pursue their full potentials as agents to contribute to the society (ibid.). Sen (1999) highlights that women face unfreedoms all over the world through unequal treatment and subordination, affecting their well-being and potentials in the society. Sen (1999) further argues that increased freedom e.g. through an employment outside the household contributes to a woman’s well-being. The main critique Koggel (2003) directs to Sen concerns the latter since she claims that an employment outside the household does not necessarily mean that a woman is free enough to pursue her agency to improve her well-being. This because social structures and power relations within societies act as unfreedoms and hinders her from becoming an active agent. An employment outside the household increases a woman’s independence but since there are other unfreedoms, such as social norms that the woman is subordinated to, makes her far from free to pursue her agency and leaves her as a patient in the society (Koggel, 2003).

In contrast to the two theoretical approaches above, O’Neill’s (1995) concern individual’s actions by analyzing his or her preferences. An individual’s preferences, which lie behind a person’s actions and choices in life, can be constructed and maintained to the reality the person lives in, even though it is unjust. This means that the preferences adapt to the reality, making the person satisfied and justifies his or her situation, thereof the idea of ”the happy slave”. However, the preferences are not static but changes over time depending on the person’s awareness and social context (O’Neill, 1995).

The chosen approaches above relate to the idea of empowerment since they all are applicable on women and their opportunities in societies. Women are discriminated and subordinated all over the world due to male-dominating societies that limit and affect women’s opportunities, conditions and well-being (Batliwala, 2010). However, women can reach empowerment and enhanced well-being by challenging the subordinating structures (ibid.). This is a socio political process that starts with a person making strategic choices to increase his or her personal well-being in a context where this previously was denied (Kabeer, 1999).

The theoretical framework will be used to understand the findings of this study. The theory of Sen (1999) and Koggel’s criticism (2003) will be used to problematize the social environment and employment of the female EPZ workers. The idea of O’Neill (1995) will be used to analyze the actions made by the individual female EPZ worker by examining her preferences and social context. The idea of empowerment will be applied throughout the analysis to further understand the women’s state of empowerment.
2.6 Previous research

EPZs have been used as a development strategy in the developing world to attract foreign investment and stimulate the economy whilst creating job opportunities (Attanapola, 2004; Arunatilake, 2012). The zones were implemented in Sri Lanka during the 1970s to combat the country’s high unemployment rate as well as to receive development aid (Attanapola, 2005). The zones created jobs for young unmarried women from the rural areas of Sri Lanka, which constitute the majority of the field of research. The research written about the female workers in the Sri Lankan EPZs range from their contribution to the country’s development (Hancock, 2006), as well as the employment’s impact on their health (Attanapola, 2004; De Silva et al. 2013), to a discussion regarding whether the employment acts empowering or disempowering for the women (Hancock and Edirisinghe, 2012; Attanapola, 2008). Some argue that the employment in itself creates new possibilities for the women since they leave their homes for a paid employment, which increases their freedom and gives them a bigger say in their families’ decision-making (Hewage et al. 2010). Others highlight that the employment can work contra productive to the women’s empowerment due to the current social environment (Gills, 2002; Arunatilake, 2012).

Both Attanapola (2004) and Lynch (2004) mention the role of the obedient daughter affecting the Sri Lankan women in their role as workers since the daughters are encouraged to be obedient. This together with Shaw’s study (2007) that notes that existing cultural traditions such as women not being encouraged to draw attention to themselves, could increase their tolerance to unjust treatment at work. Others emphasize the physical and verbal harassments at work as well as in public directed towards the female workers as a result of their increased independence and decreased male protection (Hancock and Edirisinghe, 2012). Hancock et. al (2012) connect the different perspectives and go to the extent of arguing that the female workers get empowered and disempowered simultaneously through their employment in the zones. Participating in awareness activities have shown having a positive impact on the female workers as they through the activities get a greater awareness of their rights as workers and as women (Attanapola, 2008; Hancock et al. 2012). The participation have even resulted in women opposing and bargaining for work related improvements with their managers (Attanapola, 2008).

Whilst many researchers emphasize different factors preventing women from improving their situation, this study intends to map the various barriers restraining the women from participating in awareness activities and prevent the women from a possible empowerment.
3 Method

In order to answer the research question, this thesis is conducted as a case study, using both literature from the field of research in combination with qualitative interviews conducted during a field trip to Sri Lanka with female EPZ workers and personnel of the NGO the Women’s Centre. The theories are applied on the data gathered from the interviews as well as the literature to analyze it scientifically.

The following section presents the different methods used to collect information during the time of this study. It includes a critical discussion concerning the advantages and the limitations of the chosen approach together with a review of the study’s reliability and validity.

3.1 Ekala, Sri Lanka

This study is based on a three week long field trip in the areas of Ekala, in Sri Lanka, in which the own data was collected. Ekala is a town located north of Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, in which the non-profitable NGO the Women’s Centre is active in protecting women workers’ rights. The organization was founded in 1982 as a response to the implemented development strategies and their adverse effect on women. The organization was established to counter the exploitive nature of the EPZ policies and is still very active in advocating women’s rights. The organization has its main office in Ekala, which is close to the oldest EPZ in Katunayake, but has other offices around the country close to other EPZs. The organization was contacted before the field trip’s departure and has been an information center through its personnel but also as a door to the female EPZ workers. The respondents of this study were either working in Katunayake or Biyagama EPZ and were living close by the zones. Both of the zones are situated in urban areas not far from Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka.

3.2 Method approach

This study is conducted as a case study with a qualitative approach using semi-structural interviews together with a literature analysis to gather the data. The choice of combining these methods was made to satisfy the purpose of the study, as the literature on the field provides a broad perspective of the workers’ situation together with the interviews giving an insight in the individuals’ perception (Widberg, 2002). Moreover, conducting a case study sheds light on a specific local phenomenon and allows it to be further analyzed on a higher dimension by using a theoretical framework and various definitions (Moses and Knutsen, 2012).
3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Semi-structured group interviews and the sampling

Semi-structured group interviews were used to gather the female EPZ workers’ own perception of barriers as well as with the personnel of the Women’s Centre. As the research questions for this study emphasizes to grasp what factors constrain women from taking part in organizational activities, a qualitative research method was desired, thus the choice of semi-structured interviews (Trost, 2010). The chosen approach has its main focus on the participant’s story to fully understand his or her point of view (Bryman, 2008). This contributes to the flexibility of the interview, giving the participant the chance to express his or her view of the phenomenon and the interviewer a chance to emphasize important details that come up during the interview (ibid.). The room for details in a semi-structured interview was desired in contrast to a quantitative structured interview in which the purpose is to collect information adapted for coding, which makes the interview well structured to avoid too many details (ibid.). The participants’ stories were of great importance as these drew attention to barriers and social structures, which later could be mapped in combination with the literature analysis (Widberg, 2002). Both a quantitative as well as a qualitative approach have the ability to cover patterns but as the aim of this study was to observe the perceived barriers a qualitative approach was more convenient (ibid.).

With the research questions in mind, the participants for the interviews were selected through a convenience sampling method, through the snowball method. The snowball method was used as the Women’s Centre organization assisted me in getting in contact with female EPZ workers who in turn recommended their friends to participate. In total 16 female EPZ workers were interviewed and the participants were a mixture of non-members and members of the Women’s Centre. They also varied in age, employment, marital status and years in the zone. The snowball method does not give a representative and random selection of participants because it is constituted on social contacts, but having the purpose of the study in mind makes the chosen method convenient since the sample is sufficient for an analysis of the female workers’ perception (Bryman, 2008).

The female EPZ workers were interviewed in small groups between 2 to 6 in each group. The interviews were conducted in focus groups meaning that although the interviews were flexible the discussion had a certain focus under specific themes (Trost, 2010). Matters concerning participation in the organization, purpose of employment, the future and non-participation in the organization were themes that were discussed during the interviews. This method was useful as it provided a greater understanding of the
respondents’ subjective view on their situation and barriers by observing the participants’ discussion of the themes. However, limiting the discussion to different themes might have resulted in vital points and ideas to include in the data were missed (Trost, 2010). The interviews were not recorded nor transcribed. This choice was made as a recording tool might have disturbed the respondents during the discussion, affecting their answers. However, this might have resulted in important details were missed during the interviews.

There are both advantages as well as disadvantages with group interviews. Discussions in group interviews can give individual participants ideas for reflection from other participants’ arguments, which further encourages a more broad dialogue (Widberg, 2002). However, the size of the group can have a negative impact on the discussion resulting in everyone not feeling comfortable to speak out or that a few participants dominate the discussion (Trost, 2010). Other known disadvantages can be that the participants do not have trust to one another resulting in them not taking an active part in the discussion (ibid.). Common norms, attitudes and interpretations to a phenomenon can also affect the discussion, and therefore also the reliability of the data (ibid.). Furthermore, the size of a group can make it difficult for the interviewer to keep track of who says what in the discussion, also affecting the reliability (ibid.).

Although these factors were considered when planning the interviews some problems were encountered. Even though small groups were preferred there was one group interview with six participants, making it partly difficult for me to keep track of who said what but also for the participants to feel comfortable and to speak out in front of the other participants. This particular interview took place in one former respondent’s boardinghouse with her neighbors of different age and connection to the Women’s Centre participating, making the group a well mixture of workers. Therefore, one could argue that the place of the interview could have contributed to the participants feeling comfortable since it took place close to their home environment. Moreover, one of the respondents' husband joined that specific interview, which could have had an impact on the dynamic of the interview. During two other group interviews there were personnel of the Women’s Centre participating in which one of them also actively spoke up during the discussions. This had a clear influence on the interview with the younger participants who whenever felt insecure with answering a question looked at the field officer to get support, thus affected their answers. Another problem that appeared during the interviews was that some respondents believed they did not have enough knowledge regarding specific matters or that they had not thought about it enough to be able to speak out or have an opinion concerning it. This lead to fewer discussions concerning some themes. Furthermore, three different interpreters were used during the field trip. This
resulted in different translations of expressions, notions and ideas I wanted the discussion to focus on, thus having an impact on the outcome of the discussions.

3.3.2 Literature analysis

Combining conducted interviews with research on the field gives the research a broader perspective as previous research provide with useful information that can be used to compare and question the own collected data. Lots have been written on the field of research, which make the search for useful data convenient. Almost all the data used were peer reviewed scientific articles, except for a couple of reports and books. The majority has been found on Södertörn University College’s library database for articles, whilst other articles have been found through Google Scholar. The words used during the search for articles have been combinations of words such as; Export Processing Zones, Female EPZ workers, migrant workers, Sri Lanka, Free Trade Zones, and working conditions.

3.4 Reliability and validity

Since all research is based on other research, the reliability and the validity are of great importance to discuss in a paper as it says a lot about its limitations (Bryman, 2008). The reliability of a study concerns its replicability, whether a study can be remade in a different time-period or in another social environment with equally relevant results (Bryman, 2008; Moses and Knutsen, 2012). This can be difficult in a study like this both because it is based as well as dependent on the social context and the participants’ reflections at the specific time (Trost, 2010; Bryman 2008). Due to these reasons, some even claim that a qualitative study is impossible to replicate (Trots, 2010).

The validity regards whether the results of a study can be generalized to another social context or population (Bryman, 2008). It includes whether the study’s research questions measures what they intend to (Trost, 2010). Since this is a case study based on a specific social context and of interviews with few participants with relation to this specific environment, it has a low ability to be generalized (Bryman, 2008). Even though it can be generalized to nearby and similar environments and populations, it cannot be fully generalized as a common (ibid.). By putting this specific research into context one can argue that the study’s generalization is low due to the fact that the respondents were found on the basis of a convenience sampling method and not through a statistical sample of all women working in the specific EPZ, thus affecting its validity.
4 The societal structure and the female EPZ worker

The collected empirical findings is presented in this section. It starts with a longer description of the Sri Lankan EPZs and continues with current gender roles in order to provide an insight of the female EPZ workers’ life. The last part will present the identified barriers to join the awareness raising activities.

4.1 Export Processing Zones

Export Processing Zones (EPZ) are areas within countries that are established by the national government to suit for industrial manufacturing (Attanapola, 2004). The purpose of the zones is to attract foreign investment in order to create job opportunities whilst at the same time stimulate the domestic economy (BOI; 2014; Hancock, 2006; Jayanthakumaran, 2006). Favorable conditions such as tax reduction, minimum of state interference and infrastructure are some of the benefits offered by states to create incentives for investors to establish clusters of industries within the zones (BOI, 2014; Gunawardana, 2014; Jayanthakumaran, 2006). Sri Lanka implemented EPZs in the 1970s as part of new economic liberalization policies, which were promoted by the IMF and the World Bank in the era of the Structural Adjustment Program, in order to combat the country’s high unemployment rate (Hancock, 2006). The Sri Lankan EPZs attract non traditional manufacturing industries, such as garment- and electronic factories (Attanapola, 2004; BOI, 2014). Currently there are 12 active EPZs in Sri Lanka (BOI, 2014).

The Sri Lankan EPZs have been successful in creating jobs of which the majority of the work force is constituted by young unmarried women who have migrated from rural areas (Attanapola, 2004; Hancock, 2006; Shaw, 2007; Interview with personnel of Women’s Centre; Discussions from Focus group A, B, C, D). The women were preferred due to lower cost of wages (Ball, 2008), their willingness to work under insecure working agreements and as part time workers (Metcalfe et al. 2010; Jahan, 2014). Young women’s obedience and non-motivation to mobilize have also been argued as an incentive for the industries to employ young rural women (Attanapola, 2004; 2008). This development has lead to women becoming the backbone of the Sri Lankan export industry (Hancock, 2006). In addition to the economic administrative advantages offered in the zones Sri Lanka also provides with literate (BOI-2, 2014) and cheap labor force, unaware of their rights as workers due to the restriction of trade unions within the zones (Arunatilake, 2012; Attanapola, 2008). The laborers are often un- or semiskilled, requiring a low wage (Hancock, 2006; Arunatilake, 2012; Attanapola, 2008; Interview with the personnel of the Women’s Centre). All the mentioned factors contributes to the benefits of the
investors and the factory owners however at the expense of the workers as they have to cope with a substandard salary, poor working conditions and work related health problems (Gills, 2002; Da Silva et.al 2013).

Young women are motivated to apply for jobs in the EPZs since it is fairly simple to get a regular employment (Shaw, 2007; Interview with the personnel of the Women’s Centre), at the same time that it is easy to find a place to stay nearby while the women can get paid on a daily basis (Personnel of Women’s Centre, Focus group B).

4.2 Gender roles in Sri Lanka

The role of women and men in Sri Lankan society is influenced by a traditional patriarchal structure since a woman traditionally is associated with reproductive work. This means that she is responsible for looking after and taking care of the husband and the children whilst men are associated with productive work, which implies paid work and makes him the breadwinner of the family (Attanapola, 2004). However, the roles they are given are not static but can change over time due to different societal factors such as education, economy, and employment opportunities (Wijayatilake, 2001). This has been observed in Sri Lanka referring to the increased female work force applying for jobs due to economic hardship (Attanapola, 2004; Hancock, 2006; Shaw, 2007). Economic difficulties in the rural areas act as push-factors in creating incentives for families to let their daughters apply for jobs outside the household and thereby challenging the traditional gender roles (Attanapola, 2004; Shaw, 2007). Similar patterns were observed with the majority of the respondents of this study as many expressed domestic economical hardship being the reason to why they applied for a job in an EPZ. Most of the participants in this study expressed that they wanted to take care of their families and/or pay for their siblings’ education with the money they earned from their employment. Attanapola (2004) found similar results in her study in which she interpreted it as the women still were acting after the traditional reproductive roles since the female workers’ salaries were spent on taking care of their families, thereby reinforcing the reproductive work.

4.2.1 A changing environment

Young women from the rural areas of Sri Lanka are seen as innocent and pure, guarded by the protection of the family and are expected to be obedient daughters by helping out at home (Attanapola, 2004; Lynch, 2004). However, economical problems within their families in combination with the women not wanting to be an economic burden for their families, since the parents are expected to pay a
dowry for their daughters’ marriage, the young women are motivated to apply for an income generating activity outside the household (Attanapola, 2006). Thereby opposing the gender roles and norms (ibid.). This was also found in this study among the majority of the respondents in all the focus groups. However, some respondents mentioned the work experience as an incentive to apply for a job in the EPZ since they wanted to learn to sew or make embroidery (Respondent 3, Focus group A, respondent 2 and 3, Focus group B) while another participant mentioned that she was bored in her home village and the modern urban areas attracted, which explained her reason to apply for a job in the zone (Respondent 3, Focus group C). Although their action goes against the current norms the families accept their decisions since they do not see another way out to alleviate the families’ poverty (Attanapola, 2006).

However, there are prejudices against women migrating to urban areas to work in the EPZs (Attanapola, 2006). The employment in an EPZ imply an adjustment to the new environment in which the women suddenly find themselves independent and without the protection of their families meaning that the women have to cook and handle their economy by themselves (Attanapola, 2006). Almost all the respondents between the age of 20-25, who recently had begun their employment at the EPZs, expressed a feeling of loneliness since they missed their families and did not enjoy cooking and taking care of themselves as they found this boring. The freedom and independence have also led to women having boyfriends, and in some cases to unwanted pregnancies (Personnel of Women’s Centre, Focus group B). Sexual relationships before marriage is not perceived appropriate in the Sri Lankan society, and in some cases lead to suicide among the female workers (Personnel of Women’s Centre, Focus group B). Female EPZ workers also face harassment in urban areas, which is a consequence of the current prejudices in the society regarding female workers in the zones (Attanapola, 2006). Many of the younger respondents highlights men calling them names in the streets and public spaces and trying to touch their hands (Discussion, Focus group B). The personnel of the Women’s Centre confirm that there are many incidents of sexual harassment in the streets, which results in an unsafe environment for women (Interview with the Women’s Centre).

At work many of the younger respondents, who had been working in the EPZs between one month to 4 years, express that they felt less freedom working in the zone in comparison to their home villages because at work they were not allowed to talk with their colleagues or use their phones (Discussion, Focus group B). While older respondents, who had been working in the zones for more than 6 years and who had either been working in another zone before that (Respondent 1, Focus group A) or had been working as a migrant domestic worker abroad (Respondent 2, Focus group A and respondent 1, Focus group D) complained on low salaries but that they were pleased with their work since the work had
increased their freedom in comparison to what they did before. For the former migrant domestic workers, the work at the zone had resulted that they now were working and living closer to their families (Respondent 2, Focus group A and respondent 1, Focus group D) and many of the more experienced workers expressed that they, with assistance of the Women’s Centre organization, had put pressure and negotiated with their managers concerning work related issues leading to improvements (Respondent 1, 2 and 3, Focus group A and respondent 1, Focus group D). The same results did Attanapola (2008) also find as the respondents in her research, who were active in the organizational activities, put pressure on responsible institutions to improve their health situation, and increased their voices. Another respondent from this study also highlighted that the activities and the knowledge she had got from her participation in the Women’s Centre organization had encouraged her to start her own business (Respondent 3, Focus group A).

4.3 Barriers to join NGOs

The following data has been identified as barriers, constraining the female EPZ workers from participating in activities by the Women’s Centre organization. The data has been gathered throughout interviews with the respondents, the Women’s Centre, and through a literature analysis. During the collection of data five main barriers have been identified; time and distance; lack of interest or motivation; limited knowledge of the organization; opposing the choice, and fear of losing the employment.

4.3.1 Time and distance

In all the four focus groups of this study the respondents mentioned “lack of time” as a reason to non-participation in the activities by the Women’s Centre, which also was noted in Attanapola’s research (2014). The workshops, awareness-activities, and the trips that the Women’s Centre organize for the female EPZ workers usually takes place on Sundays or during weekday evenings since that is the only time during the week that the female EPZ workers are free from work (Interview with Women’s Centre). However, long working hours, overtime, and nights shifts are common among the female EPZ workers (Attanapola, 2014; Hancock, 2012; Discussions focus group A, B, C, D), making it less motivational to participate in the organizational activities. Furthermore, since Sundays is the only day free from work, the female EPZ workers have a lot of things to do e.g. shop for groceries, clothes, spend time with family and boyfriends, which make them less eager to participate in activities by the Women’s Centre (Discussions focus group A, B, C, D; Interview with the Women’s Centre). This results in more sporadic participation in the activities by the female EPZ workers (Interview with the Women’s Centre;
Discussion focus group A, D). The fact that many of the female EPZ workers only plan to stay and work in an EPZ for a couple of years makes it also less motivational to join an organization and become a permanent member (Interview with the Women’s Centre).

The distance to the activities from the female workers’ boardinghouse was also brought up by one of the younger participants as a reason for non-participation (Respondent 3, focus group B). Many of the younger workers emphasized the ongoing harassments they face at public spaces and public transports, making their environment less safe (Discussion, focus group B). Attanapola (2006) also highlights the surrounding areas of the EPZs as dangerous for the women to work and live in since robbery and rape is common. This corresponds with the details by the personnel of the Women’s Centre (Interview with the Women’s Centre). Violence against women such as abuse, harassment, domestic violence, and rape has been noted in other research among female participants as frequent in their environment (Hancock, 2006; Shaw, 2007). Among the respondents of Shaw’s study (2007) 80% believed that it was not safe to travel to work alone. Hancock (2006) argues that the female EPZ workers are more exposed to harassment in public spaces because they are frequently traveling alone and without male protection.

4.3.2 Lack of interest or motivation

Most of the young women working in the zones have migrated from rural areas with the purpose to earn money to support their families back home (Attanapola, 2004; Hancock, 2006; Interview with Women’s Centre). The women face a new environment different from the one they are used to in their home villages, which obligates them to adapt themselves to the new lifestyle (Attanapola, 2006). This implies both aspects of unsafe environments without male or the family’s protection (Hancock, 2006; Discussion, focus group B) as well as awareness of how they look and dress (Discussion, focus group B). The new environment the young female EPZ workers face do not motivate them to participate in activities by the Women’s Centre.

Hancock’s study (2012) indicates that female EPZ workers are not interested to devote time to political activities. This could derive from the perception that young girls are seen as obedient daughters who came to the urban areas to engage themselves with work to support their parents and siblings, not to take part in activities as the ones the Women’s Centre organize (Attanapola, 2004; 2008; Interview with the Women’s Centre). Although the modest fee of 5 Sri Lankan rupees a month the Women’s Centre collects for a membership can also act as discouraging to the female EPZ workers in accordance to the statement mentioned above, as goes for the fact that most of the women only stay to work for a couple
of years up to 5 years and therefore are less willing to become a permanent member (Interview with the Women’s Centre).

One respondent, who were not a member of the Women’s Centre organization, believed that the activities the organization held were ”ridiculous” and ”absurd” as she claimed they did not have to be meaningful but brought more problems to the participants than not joining, referring to trouble and problems the ones who join faced with their membership (Respondent 2, focus group C). She highlighted that people in the society believes that the activities are absurd and unnecessary and makes fun of the people who joins, which furthermore was the reason for her non-participation (Respondent 2, focus group C).

4.3.3 Limited knowledge of the organization

During two of the discussions (Focus group A and C) the participants emphasized that lack or limited knowledge of the organization and its work could be a reason for non-participation. This mean that the information concerning the work and the activities of the Women’s Centre might not reach out to all female EPZ workers. The Women’s Centre’s work, ideas and activities are spread through the organization’s newspaper that informs what is happening in the EPZs, work related matters, and current activities (Interview with the Women’s Centre). The information is also verbally spread through members to their work colleagues, neighbors in the boardinghouses, and through distribution of the newspaper to those who likes to read (Observations during discussion with focus group C). The regional personnel at the different EPZs also plays a significant role in recruiting members. Even though the information concerning the work of the organization is not always clear for the newly recruited members, referring to respondents in focus group B who had been members for a month and did not have a special reason to why they joined or the work of the organization (Discussion, focus group B).

4.3.4 Opposing the choice

During discussions with the different focus groups, some of the older respondents highlighted that boyfriends and husbands could oppose the women’s participation in organizational activities (Discussion with focus group A and D). Since Sundays is the only day of the week that the female EPZ workers are free it is a day that they want to spend with boyfriends and if the female workers want to join the organizational activities it thereby reduces the time the boyfriends can spend with them (Interview with the Women’s Centre). Therefore there are boyfriends who oppose participation in the activities (Interview with the Women’s Centre). Older respondents argued that boyfriends and husbands
did not want their partners to engage themselves in the activities and denied their participation, as they believed the organization worked to empower the women (Respondent 2, Focus group A). The Women’s Centre explained that many boyfriends and husbands feel intimidated to the potential change the awareness activities can have on their girlfriends. Since the activities could result in girlfriends taking more control and thus limiting the role of the male, which leaves him in a non favorable position as he looses his masculinity and makes him neither a macho nor a good man (Interview with the Women’s Centre). Because of the current constructed roles and norms in the society regarding males and females, leave the boyfriends and husbands with the last say concerning participation in activities (Interview with the Women’s Centre). A respondent highlights this as the husbands limiting the wives’ freedom (Respondent 1, Focus group D). Families also oppose their daughters’ participation because they argue that the daughters went to the EPZ to work and not to participate in such activities (Interview with the Women’s Centre). The latter argument can have its roots in cultural traditions that discourage rural women to draw attention to themselves (Shaw, 2007).

The personnel in charge of the boardinghouses, where many of the female EPZ workers live, are also against the female workers’ participation in awareness activities and involvement in the organization because that can lead to the women demanding for better conditions inside the boardinghouses (Interview with the Women’s Centre).

4.3.5 Fear of loosing the employment

The employment and the wages of the female workers is of great importance for the women themselves but also for their families since a large part of the women’s salaries contribute to their families income (Attanapola, 2008; 2014). This also correspond to this study with the majority of the respondents highlighted that they applied for a job in an EPZ because of economical difficulties in their families (Discussions with focus group A, B, C and D), and that many of them support their families and their younger siblings’ education (Discussion, focus group B). In Shaw’s study (2007) almost all respondents valued the opportunity to contribute to their families’ income as well as the families also value their contribution in return. The female workers’ remittances have increased its importance as it have become a household livelihood, contributing to the household’s income (Shaw, 2007), but also to the development of the rural areas, reducing the rural poverty (Hewage et al. 2010). Through the employment and the contribution to the family the female EPZ workers have become a significant part of a modern economy and society, resulting in changes of gender roles (ibid.).
Keeping the female EPZ workers’ contribution to wealth in mind increases the value of their work, resulting in women being eager to keep their jobs. Older respondents of this study, who had been active in the organization for a couple of years and been working in the EPZ for a number of years, argued that the female workers’ fear of loosing their employment could be a reason not to join the activities of the organization (Discussion, focus group A).

Employments at most of the factories within the EPZs are built upon insecure working arrangement, making the work precarious (Arunatilake, 2012). Many female EPZ workers are scared of employers being harsh to them (Hancock et al. 2012), thereby avoiding complications and accepting their tough work (Attanapola, 2014). Respondents in Attanapola’s research (2014) expressed that they were willing to work despite poor working conditions, verbal harassments from supervisors and managers, long working hours and non-paid overtime work to protect the salary even though they felt it was not just.

Studies show examples of women being dismissed as a result of insisting to a higher salary or promotion due to supervisors and managers dislike workers confronting them about wages and working conditions (Attanapola, 2014). Most factory owners do not like their workers to participate in awareness programs (Hancock et al. 2012), as respondents of this study claim that the companies and managers are suspicious towards those kinds of activities since they do not know the purpose of it and are afraid that it will affect the production (Discussion, focus group A). Other reasons the respondents expressed for the factories’ disagreement to organizational participation could be that the managers perceived the organizations as a union and therefore had a negative perception of its work (Discussion, focus group A). This, the respondents of this study highlighted, had an impact on the ones trying to sell the organizational newspaper in the boardinghouses and at the workplace with female workers denying them access to the building and feared if the managers would find out (Discussion, focus group A). A dismiss due to reasons mentioned above could lead to devastating consequences to the person involved with the manager not providing the worker with a certificate proof of their employment, resulting in the worker having to get a new trainee job at another factory, starting with a low wage again (Attanapola, 2014).

The personnel of the Women’s Centre highlights this fear the workers have towards their managers but notes that it has decreased in comparison with the women the organization met in its initial years (Interview with the Women’s Centre). Observations by a field officer of the organization show that the girls are much more independent and free than before (Personnel of the Women’s Centre, focus group B). Female workers are now much more interested to collect and gain knowledge concerning what is
happening within the zones, and wants to learn more than before (Interview with the Women’s Centre). Women also perceive themselves as exposed at work, which increases their motivation to participate in demonstrations concerning rights. This makes her a worker who is satisfied with her work to become aware and realizes that it does not have to be this way and raise her voice (Interview with the Women’s Centre). Many participants who have been members of the organization for a number of years are also actively engaged with the organizational activities such as drama groups, recruiting new members and distributing the organization’s newspaper (Discussion, Focus group A, Interview with the Women’s Centre). The more experienced members did also express a feeling of satisfaction with their work and life since they felt the work at EPZs had increased their freedom as they could live closer to their families (Discussion, Focus group A and D). Furthermore, many of them knew how to use the organization’s knowledge and personnel to improve their situation at work and thus felt satisfied with their future (Discussion, Focus group A and D). In comparison to the more experienced workers did the younger members express dissatisfaction with their employment and life at the boardinghouse and were therefore longing home (Discussion, Focus group B).

4.5 Summarizing the data

The EPZs and the gender roles in Sri Lanka have created an environment in which women are included. The current environment has formed opportunities as well as limitations for the women in the Sri Lankan society. Five factors were identified as barriers, constraining female workers to join the organizational activities. These are: time and distance; lack of interest or motivation; limited knowledge of the organization; opposing the choice; and fear of loosing the employment.
5 Analysis

In this section the three ideas described under the theoretical framework will be applied on the findings of this study together with the concept of empowerment. Sen’s as well as Koggel’s theories are used to describe the environment of the female EPZ worker together with her agency whilst O’Neill’s is used to understand the individual’s choices as a result of the environment she is part of. The idea of empowerment will be used throughout the analysis.

5.1 The female workers’ role in the development process

The female EPZ workers have been called the backbone of the Sri Lankan manufacturing industry (Hancock, 2006), acknowledging their vital role in the development of the country. Even though the majority of the work force of the EPZs constitute of young women, the decision of applying for a job is usually not of free will but a result of poverty that pushes the women out from the household to combat the family’s difficulties (Shaw, 2007). Analyzing this development from Sen’s perspective shows the result of removal of unfreedoms, which in turn increases the freedom for women to pursue their agencies.

By looking at gender roles in Sri Lanka (section 4.3) one can argue that this development of employment for women is a recent phenomenon, which was not common or possible to the same extent before. Since women traditionally have been associated with reproductive work, taking care of the family and being seen as a helper (Attanapola, 2004), to becoming an active contributor to the family’s income (Shaw, 2007) implies a change in the environment for women. This development indicates an increased empowerment for the women. By applying for a job outside the household the women make an action that previously not was possible since it goes against the traditional gender roles. Thereby the women challenge the structures in the society that subordinate them.

By accepting Sen’s view on agents actively participating in the society as a result of increased freedom, one can argue that the poverty generated a removal of an unfreedom that was blocking the women from pursuing their agency. Poverty pushed the women to an employment as an only solution to combat the economical difficulties. This increased the women’s freedom so they could apply for a job outside the household and become more independent as well as avoid being a burden for their families. The salary the women received could contribute to the families’ income, resulting in important remittances that not only combatted the families’ economical hardship but also became important for the rural development
(Attanapola, 2004; Shaw, 2007). Thus recognizing her significant role as supporter of the family, which also follows with more responsibilities (Attanapola, 2004; Shaw, 2007). Although the choice of applying for a job was in many cases not a choice of the women themselves, the difficulties the families faced triggered an increased mobility for the women with their employment, which could be the starting point of the process of empowerment. Being a woman who both plays an important role in the country’s economical development with her job in the manufacturing industry at the same time as she plays a vital role contributing to the welfare of the family and the home village, one cannot deny her role as an agent. This corresponds to Sen’s theory with the woman as an agent possessing the freedom to actively participate in the development process. The employments have both increased the women’s physical mobility and independence, which benefits not only herself by avoid being an economic burden for her family, but also to her family’s well-being and not to forget the economic development benefiting the country.

5.2 Well-being and the female EPZ worker

Sen describes an agent as a free person who through pursuing her agency not only contributes to the development but also has the possibility to improve her own well-being (Sen, 1999). According to Sen, a job outside the household is an example of increased freedom as it removes a suppressing hinder, which result in that a woman can pursue her agency and contribute to her well-being (Sen, 1999). However, by looking at the data one cannot say that the employment in the EPZs have improved the women’s well-being, contradicting Sen’s statement but coinciding with Koggel’s criticism. Similarly to Sen, Koggel (2003) also emphasizes unfreedoms constraining women from pursuing her agency. However, in contrast to Sen, Koggel argues that the local context, including societal and power structures, can work as unfreedoms constraining the women from pursuing her agency to improve her well-being and from an enhanced empowerment. This means that although the woman is employed, she is not free enough to pursue her agency to improve her well-being. This coincides with the data since the female EPZ workers are not encouraged to bargain or negotiate for work related improvements or because the women have the responsibility from home to contribute to the family’s income. These examples show that the women are not encouraged to pursue their agency to improve their own situation because they are subordinated to certain social power structures.

Even though the majority of the respondents highlighted that the employment had increased their independence, the work has also brought new challenges or unfreedoms, preventing the women from improving their well-being. Factors such as poor working conditions, long working hours and sexual
harassments are all examples of every-day life of the female EPZ workers, adversely affecting their well-being. These factors limit the freedom of the female EPZ worker since they prevent her potentials in the society to fully pursue her agency and improve her situation, thus questioning her agency. This is what Koggel refers to when emphasizing the impacts the social context can have on a woman’s agency, making her a patient despite her employment.

However, by looking at the data from the following perspective, one could reject both Sen’s and Koggel’s ideas concerning whether the female EPZ worker is an agent or a patient in her current environment and instead interpret her actions as indications of empowerment. By keeping her increased supportive role within the family in mind, both the women and their families are dependent on her wage meaning that she gains a bigger responsibility to keep her job at all costs. Since bargaining for work-related improvements are not welcomed by the employers, it could result in the woman loosing her employment, which would not affect just her but also her whole family. Carrying this burden she makes the choice of accepting unfair conditions to support her family’s well-being, implying that she still is an agent, but not a free one. Analyzing her actions from the concept of empowerment indicates that she makes a strategic choice by accepting her harsh working conditions in order to keep her job so that she can continue to support her family since their well-being depends on it. Her action thereby indicate that she is capable of taking control over matters that are important for her, even though it might affect her own well-being. Although her action might keep the well-being of her family, it does not have the same effect on her life quality. This indicates that there still are barriers within the society preventing her empowerment.

As also highlighted by Koggel as being important to take into account, the new social environment has created unfreedoms acting as barriers for the female EPZ worker to pursue her agency since the worker has a responsibility to take care of her family. This however makes her incapable to improve her own situation as that would risk the whole family’s well-being. In a sense this makes her an agent, but an agent unable to improve her own life. This could in other words be interpreted as she still is a patient in the society as she is participating in the development process with her employment but incapable to improve her situation. Looking at this from Sen’s angle, he argues that the unfreedoms prevent women from participating in the development, but in this specific case the female workers play an active role in the development through their job but still one cannot say that they are fully agents due to their limited possibility to improve their well-being.
5.3 Preventing the female EPZ worker’s well-being

Although the active participation and thereof the increased importance nationally as well as locally, the female EPZ workers are incapable of improving their personal well-being and their empowerment, contradicting Sen’s arguments. However, by using Koggel’s ideas on the findings of this study shows the impact the local context have on the female workers’ agency. Koggel (2003) argues that the social context, including norms and gender roles can work as barriers or unfreedoms, since these are preventing women from pursuing their agency and improve their personal well-being.

5.3.1 The obedient daughter, creating the obedient worker

The social context, in which the female EPZ workers are part of, have a significant impact on their capabilities and possibilities in pursuing their agency. Societal structures such as social norms internalized in the society can work suppressive towards female EPZ workers in improving their well-being since the structure shapes, maintains and influences a woman’s possibilities in the society. The women’s motivation to work and accept poor working conditions can be a result of the role of a woman making reproductive work. Even though the social context in which the women lives has changed with employment opportunities, the fact that the majority of the female EPZ workers wanting to contribute to their families’ and siblings’ well-being and education indicates that the female EPZ workers are subordinated to the social norm of reproductive work.

Furthermore, the females’ role in combination with the current norm that young women have to be obedient daughters increases their willingness to do what they came to do in the EPZ; to work and support their families. One can argue that these social norms and roles make them accept the situation without complaint. As Koggel notes, the norms and roles are part of structures within the society acting suppressive towards women by limiting their freedom and furthermore prevent them from pursuing their agency, which in this case prevent them from improving their well-being, thus hindering them from enhanced empowerment. Moreover, as Koggel also highlights, since the female EPZ workers themselves are a part of the society, the social norms and power structures might have become an internalized part in their lives and choices, which in turn results in the norms and roles being reproduced with their own actions. Hence, one cannot deny the difficulty for a woman to oppose the common norms and pursue her agency in order to improve her well-being when such structures dominates and influences her choices and possibilities in the society.
Due to the internalized social role among the female EPZ workers of the obedient daughter, one could argue that the norms also influence the women at work since the women work despite harsh working conditions. One could therefore argue that the obedient daughter creates the obedient worker. The EPZs benefit from norms such as the obedient daughter because it implies fewer complaints towards the poor working conditions at the same time as the awareness of rights is low among the women. This in combination with the low motivation to organizational activities results in the women becoming obedient workers. Furthermore, common norms such as women traditionally not being associated as the breadwinner of the family result in lower wages than their male co-workers. The fact that many labor unions are not recognized among the factories in the zones affects the female workers’ situation negatively. Organizations such as the Women’s Centre could work to enhance the women’s well-being by improving their working environments but are denied contact with them, resulting in severe lack of rights within the zones. Therefore one can argue that the EPZs themselves are examples of unfreedoms, opposing a potential enhancement of the women’s empowerment to pursue their agency and improve their well-being in the Sri Lankan society.

5.4 The impact of the social context

Applying the two theories above on matters concerning the female EPZ workers describe their current social environment and how it further creates the conditions in which the female worker makes her choices. The idea of O’Neill (1995) is linked to Koggel’s theory since it emphasizes how the local context creates the preferences of a person, which later contributes to a person’s actions. Concerning the female workers’ actions, they are a result of their preferences, which have been given to them from the reality they live in. The female EPZ worker’s preferences are shaped and influenced by the reality she lives in as well as the social norms and gender roles of the society in which she is subordinated to. This also include the new environment she faces with her employment in the EPZ.

By analyzing the different barriers highlighted by the female workers as restricting them from participating in the organizational activities, they all show a connection to the deep-rooted social norms and roles in which the women are subordinated to and has become an integrated part in the women’s lives. For instance the norm of the obedient daughter, which implicates that a woman is not encouraged to draw attention to herself by complaints, create the basis for the women’s preferences resulting in some women choosing not to join the organizational activities as they perceive them as absurd and ridiculous. One could argue that this statement has its origin in their social environment, which is a mixture of norms from their home villages as well as a reproduction of the social norms to the reality
they face today as workers in the zones. The female workers have received a certain responsibility and obligation to work to take care of their families. Her role as a reproductive worker is still very present and takes a big part of her life and choices even though she is now earning money and has become more of a productive worker. The increased responsibility contributes to her unwillingness to join the organizational activities as she does not believe it is something for her. This coincides with the idea of O’Neill since the woman’s actions are a consequence of her preferences, which is the result of the reality she lives. The reality she now is part of has increased her responsibilities since her family is dependent on her wage. This results in her fear of losing her job increase as it could result in severe consequences for the well-being of her family. Furthermore, a woman’s non-motivation to join and thoughts of the activities as being absurd could be rooted in the norm that a woman is not supposed to draw attention to herself or complain about matters, which results in her finding the organizational activities absurd and unnecessary. This can also be explained by O’Neill’s idea of a revealed person. A revealed person’s preferences are not real but are assigned to the person as a consequence of who she is and what she does. Regarding the female EPZ worker, she has been born in a society with specific gender roles and norms, which constitute her reality. One can therefore argue that her preferences have been given to her. Her statement that the organizational activities are absurd and unnecessary could be the result of this since she has adapted her preferences to the environment she is part of, despite it might be unjust. Having the reality of the female EPZ workers in mind, one could argue that their situation is unjust, which moreover creates the basis for their preferences and actions.

The employment at the EPZs has resulted in increased freedom, but also with new unfreedoms and reproductions of unfreedoms. For example the fact that the increased freedom and independence for the women have resulted in the women getting the opportunity to have boyfriends. But social norms from home make the boyfriend the head in the relationship, which results in him having the last say regarding matters such as the woman joining the organizational activities. The men also act under social norms as they get intimidated with the thought of them getting a weakened role, since the empowerment of a woman could put the current norms and roles out of balance. Furthermore, the employment in the city has resulted in increased freedom with independence and decreased male protection for the women. However, sexual harassments in streets and public areas have resulted in decreased mobility for the women since they do not feel safe in the streets and therefore discourage them from participating in the NGO activities. Thus limiting their possible empowerment.
5.5 Discussing the concept of empowerment

O’Neill states that preferences can change over time, which can be exemplified through comparing the perceptions of the older and more experienced workers and members of the organization to the younger female workers who have just arrived to the zones and recently become a member of the organization. The older women who had been working in zones for several years or had other work experiences before that, and who had been participating in the organizational activities for a number of years had a larger understanding of their rights as workers and were more aware of themselves as women in the society. As a result, these women had different preferences from the younger workers, which one could argue is a result from their increased knowledge and experiences through life. This experience has lead to their participation in the organization shaping their preferences and their actions to actively improve their lives. The women are all part of the same social environment but the older one’s experiences and exposure to the social context have resulted in their preferences being developed and is different from the younger ones. Since the older women (From Focus group A and D) used the tools of the organization to improve their working conditions in comparison to the younger ones who neither had any reason to motivate their participation nor knowledge of the organization. Hence, O’Neill’s idea of changing preferences over time can be observed in the example above. Even though one cannot say for certain that the younger workers’ preferences will change over time, one can see a difference between the ones who have been working and living in the zones for a longer time with the ones who have just arrived.

By applying the concept of empowerment on this matter one can argue that the older women make strategic choices in e.g. becoming active members of the organization, to improve their own situation in an environment where this previously was not possible. These women aim to overcome barriers through their involvement in trade-unions, establishing their own companies, questioning their managers concerning work-related matters and sharing a deeper understanding of the purpose of the organization. The mentioned examples imply that the women have embraced the knowledge and are now working to spread its core to other spheres of the society. Their actions indicate that they are in another process of empowerment. Moving from individual consciousness to actively improving their own situation to creating a greater empowerment collectively on a larger scale. Even though these women get a low salary at work they know what tools to use to improve their situation at the same time as they feel satisfied with their life and work.
The observations the Women’s Centre has done during the last 32 years of work indicates a change among the female workers. From the organization’s initial years when the women were afraid of taking contact with the organization until today the staff notice that the workers are more curious in what is happening within the zones and that many also take part in demonstrations on e.g. labor’s day. This development indicates a change in the society with Sri Lankan female workers acknowledging that work does not have to be this way to raise their voices. Applying O’Neill’s reasoning on this development one can see a change in the social environment on the nation wide scale, which brings a change among women’s preferences. From a male-dominated society that is subordinating women to a change where women take a bigger part in the modern society that has increased her freedom and independence and resulted in a changing environment that in turn changes women’s preferences of today. This coincides with the fact that some of the respondents of this study emphasized that they came to work at the zones because they wanted to learn sewing and embroidery. Even though this change cannot be identified through this particular study, one can argue that this change is happening by considering the organization’s observations.

Much of the previous research concerning Sri Lankan female EPZ workers have revolved around the question whether an employment at an EPZ works empowering or disempowering for female workers. Applying the theoretical framework on the findings of this study one can argue that both perspectives can be found.

The employment at the EPZs challenged the structures and gender roles since the employment previously was not common or possible to the same extent before for the women. The employment increased the women’s sphere and created new opportunities that previously was not possible, thus indicating an increased empowerment. In addition to the increased freedom through the employment, the employment has resulted in an enhanced decision-making due to the female worker’s valuable contribution to her family’s income that improve the family’s well-being. This has resulted in the female worker being part of a modern economy, through her employment, and a social development, with her contribution to her family’s improved wellbeing and increased decision-making.

The general idea of empowerment is that an empowered woman enhances her well-being in a context where this previously was denied. Keeping the poor working conditions, lack of rights and poor health status one cannot say that the female EPZ workers have enhanced their well-being with their work. However, seeing it from another perspective one can argue that they take control over matters that are important for them since the female workers try to keep their jobs to earn money to support their
families despite harassments and complications. Because the female EPZ worker knows that her family benefit, she accept the conditions at work. This in turn might contribute to the female worker’s well-being. Seeing it from the perspective of empowerment, supporting her family contributes to her well-being. This implies that her employment is used to make strategic choices to enhance her well-being. This corresponds to Sen since the job increases her freedom and well-being. However, since the female workers are incapable to improve their own situation without risking their families’ well-being implies that there still are unfreedoms to overcome. For instance the role of a young woman as an obedient daughter that creates the obedient worker.

Therefore, one might say that whilst the employment is empowering in some ways it is disempowering in other ways. The theoretical framework used indicates that a further empowerment for the female EPZ workers is opposed to in the Sri Lankan society. By including the idea of Koggel in taking the local context into account reveals that the current social norms, gender roles and EPZs make it difficult for an enhanced empowerment. These structures build up the current environment and influence as well as affect the female workers’ choices and actions in life. The factors the female workers highlighted as barriers, constraining them from participating in the awareness raising activities, are results of the current social environment that influence their preferences and choices.

5.6 Summarizing the analysis

To summarize the analysis, the three theoretical ideas are useful in explaining the female EPZ workers’ barriers to participate in awareness raising activities. Sen’s theory (1999) views individuals who pursue their possibilities as agents, capable of increasing their well-being, as the key to development. By applying his idea on the female EPZ workers in Sri Lanka one can argue that they contribute to the economic and social development, nationally as well as locally. In a sense, one could say that the female EPZ worker’s wellbeing has improved with her increased responsibility, but one can also argue that the well-being has decreased due to the poor working conditions. Sen argues that women can be active in a society and contribute to the development but can be blocked due to unfreedoms. Since the EPZs are built upon unjust working conditions, one could say that the zones themselves act as unfreedoms towards the women, making them as patients in the society instead of agents.

Koggel’s idea is a critique towards Sen’s argument that an employment outside the household for women increases their well-being. Her approach has clearly shown the impact the social context can have on the female EPZ workers’ possibility to improve their lives and their well-being in Sri Lanka.
The social context of the female EPZ workers sheds light on structures in the society that influence women’s possibilities and well-being. Including Koggel’s perspective of the social context explains why it is difficult for the female EPZ workers to improve their lives.

O’Neill’s idea is different from the two theories above but relate to them both since it help to understand women’s choices in their everyday life. The social context, including the increased freedom due to work as well as the social norms and the EPZs, are all part of the female worker’s environment, which influences her preferences and actions in life. The female EPZ workers are a part of the society, which is constituted of social norms, gender roles and associations. All these factors together with their employment build up the female EPZ worker’s environment and further affect her preferences and choices in for example participating in the awareness raising activities.
6 Discussion

This section contains a discussion about themes that were left out in the analysis. It problematizes the female EPZ workers’ situation in a larger context by looking at the role of the Sri Lankan State, international investors and the long chain of production by including the consumers.

6.1 Women carrying the burden of development

One cannot deny the great benefits the women’s participation in the work force has lead to, both for their families as well as for the country. In the absence of a strong welfare state, the increased participation of women in the work force has become an important livelihood as an income security for families. Since the family members depend on the women’s salaries it has resulted in an increased responsibility for the women to keep their jobs at any cost. This has resulted in the women being afraid to lose their jobs since that would lead to a decreased well-being of their families.

Despite the increased participation of women, contributing to both the economic development of the nation as well as the development of their households, the women’s chance to improve their own situation is opposed to in the society. Social norms and gender roles are on the one hand preventing women from improving their lives in the society since they are deeply internalized and reproduced through actions in the female workers themselves, their families and in the society. On the other hand one can argue that the EPZs themselves prevent improvements for the female EPZ workers.

In the present situation of today regarding the regulations the zones constitute of, one could argue that the EPZs gain on the society’s suppression of women. The fact that women receive a lower wage than men could be traced back to the association of women not traditionally being the breadwinner of the family. Therefore one could argue that the EPZs are reproducing and gaining on Sri Lankan social norms and gender roles. Women’s acceptance to work under insecure working arrangements and as part-time workers as well as their non motivation to draw attention to themselves are other examples of the role of the obedient daughter created by gender roles and norms. These norms and roles benefit the zones in increased profits and thereby act as incentives for new investors. At the same time, since labor unions are either restricted or not recognized within the zones make it difficult for the employees to increase their awareness of rights and improve their situation, which results in little organization and mobilization. Keeping these factors in mind one could argue that the state in establishing the zones, as a tool for development, hinders a potential improvement for female workers and instead benefit on their
subordination. Therefore, one could argue that social norms are internalized as well as reproduced within the zones, resulting in a top-down reproduction of social norms. One can therefore say that, due to the working arrangements and conditions the state has established within the zones, the norms are not only reproduced locally but also nationally.

Even though female workers are capable of improving their situation, as the older members of the organization have proved, the majority do not use the tools for improvement. This, because they do not perceive their work as unjust and therefore do not question the employment’s conditions. This one could argue leads to women rejecting and calling awareness raising activities as absurd. Moreover, if the female workers were to join it could result in dismissals since factory owners are afraid the participation will affect the production. This clearly exemplifies how women are not encouraged to pursue her own interests since such actions are handled in a way that her whole family would suffer. Instead of giving women the right to participate, which could in the long run result in her negotiating for improvements at work, these interests are denied and handled in an unjust way, making one question the human- and labor rights.

Even though the last three decades of employment opportunities for women in the zones have resulted in an economic development of the nation, one can argue whether it has done so on behalf of the well-being of the female workers. On the one hand one could say that the women have increased their well-being since they now feel that they are actively supporting their families. On the other hand, the poor working conditions, the health issues and the increased responsibility, in combination with limited awareness of rights and chance to improve their situation one could argue that the female EPZ workers are bearing the development of the family as well as the nation. Since the EPZs are established in such a way that it gain the development by attracting investors and employs a huge number of citizens, it has reached its goals but which can be argued have been done on the expense of the female workers’ wellbeing.

However, if the zones were constructed in another way by improving the conditions for the workers, one might wonder if that would risk a loss of investors and the economic development of the nation. After all, a state is influenced by different interests, which affect its aims and work. If one would want to trace this further one could see many external actors influencing the development and perhaps even the choices of the Sri Lankan government. After all the EPZs were established as a part of a development strategy in the era of the Structural Adjustment Program pushed by the World Bank and the IMF. Furthermore, investors have interests in the zones due to the beneficial agreements and the cheap labors
offered in Sri Lanka and thereby choose to establish their factories within the zones. Agreeing on these terms, the investors maintain the poor working conditions that are experienced by the female workers. Since the government is dependent on the foreign investments, the investors have a significant bargaining power to negotiate with the government. Hence, the investors could use this advantage to demand for but also contribute to an improvement of the workers’ conditions. By perhaps simplifying the chain of production to highlight the role of the producers and the consumers, one could argue that the consumers showing their dissatisfaction have the possibility to influence the investors’ production, making it more ethical. Even though one can argue what reasons lie behind the investors’ decisions to establish their factories in these specific zones, one might conclude it is because the production is cheap and results in increased profits. By having their operation in an EPZ they create poor working conditions. However it has to be noted that even though the poor working condition is reality for many it might not mean that the investors are aware of them due to the chain of production.

Throughout both the analysis and the discussion, the EPZs have been highlighted as empowering as well as disempowering the female workers. What seems to prevent a further enhanced and deeper empowerment is societal structures, such as social norms and the EPZs themselves. The factors the female EPZ workers perceived as barriers towards their participation in the organization can all be traced back to social norms, which one could say get an adverse effect on the empowerment due to external factors such as the conditions the EPZs are made of. Acknowledging this, one understand the complexity of the opposed empowerment with many factors’ and actors’ (such as families, the state and investors) contribution.

This case study of female EPZ workers in Sri Lanka have shown how an increase of women in the work force have resulted in beneficial development outcomes both locally as well as nationally. However, despite their valuable contribution to the development the women face severe difficulties at work with poor working conditions, lack of rights and harsh from managers. The majority of the female workers are incapable of improving their situation due to the social environment in which they are part of. Female workers are discouraged to improve their situation since such manners have resulted in dismissals. As the employment is of great importance for themselves as well as for their families, they are afraid of loosing their income and therefore accept the poor working conditions. Since a vital aspect of an empowered person is whether he or she is capable to make strategic choices to improve his or her situation in order to increase the well-being. One could argue against the female EPZ workers’ empowerment. It needs to be noted that female EPZ workers who have been participating in
organizational activities use the tools of the organization (such as lawyers etc.) to improve work related matters, which indicates on an enhanced empowerment.

This study has focused on analyzing what factors constrain female EPZ workers from participating in awareness raising activities that can lead to an enhanced empowerment and found five factors acting as barriers. The majority of the factors could be traced back to social norms as barriers constraining the women from participating in the activities. Therefore, one could argue that the social environment of the female EPZ workers, including social norms and gender roles, act as barriers to an enhanced empowerment. Thus, one can question whether an employment for women can result in increased empowerment since the social context influences women’s possibilities and affects a potential enhanced empowerment. However, one have to say that the empowerment of women is a socio political process that takes time. Regarding to the observations by the Women’s Centre organization in Sri Lanka one can argue that the social environment for women is changing, which can influence women’s situation in the future.

6.2 Summarizing the discussion

This discussion has included ideas about how the suppressive social norms have been beneficial to the investors and the state by providing cheap, obedient workers. These are discouraged to improve their working conditions since this can result in dismissals or harsh from their managers, which make one question the labor- and human rights. One can argue that social norms are internalized and reproduced locally within their families as well as within the zones, which affect a potential enhanced empowerment. One might wonder what would happen if the working conditions within the zones were to become more socially sustainable and whether such a development would result in loss of investors that would in turn affect the industry and the economic development to a reduction of job opportunities.
7 Conclusion and further recommendations

Empowering women and including them in the work force is of great importance as it has shown to have a positive impact on both the economical as well as the social development of a country. This coincides with Sri Lankan female EPZ workers who during the last three decades have participated in the factory work force. This has resulted in them playing a vital part in the manufacturing industry with their contribution to the domestic economic development as well as locally with combating their families’ economical hardship and increasing the families’ wellbeing. However, this development does not necessarily mean that the women get empowered. The research questions of this study will be answered below.

What do female EPZ workers perceive as barriers to participate in NGO activities?

This study has mapped and identified five factors that the female EPZ workers highlighted as barriers as they constrain them from participating in organizational activities. These are: time and distance; lack of interest or motivation; limited knowledge of the organization; someone opposing the choice; and fear of loosing the employment.

The employment in the zone imply long working hours for the majority of the female workers, leaving less time for other activities such as the NGO activities. Sexual harassments in public areas create an unsafe environment for the female workers, which result in the distance to the activities becoming a problem. The salary the women get for their jobs have a high value as it contributes to their whole families, which results in their increased role as a provider to the families’ increased wellbeing. This leaves less interest or motivation to join the NGO activities since the women came to the zones to work-not to join such activities. This also results in women highlighting the activities as ridiculous and unnecessary. Information concerning the organizational activities might not reach all female workers, and thereby results in limited knowledge of the organization. Some male partners and family members oppose the women’s choice to join the activities because they fear that the activities might change the women by empowering them. This would further result in changed gender roles, making the male less macho and thereby a bad man. The employment at the EPZs is build upon insecure agreements, making the work precarious. Since their family is dependent on the remittances, the women are afraid of loosing the employment as they feel an increased responsibility. This results in the women accepting the poor working conditions at work to avoid complications as the participation in the NGO activities could be.
What factors restrain women from participating in organizational activities?

The five identified barriers can be traced back to social norms and the changed environment in which has become the reality of the women. The factors are outcomes of the current social environment of the female EPZ workers, which affect the women’s choices and actions. Social norms, gender roles and how the EPZs are constituted (to not encourage labor unions or improvements of working conditions) prevent the women from participating in organizational awareness raising activities. Participation could otherwise result in enhanced empowerment as the women increase their awareness of rights and can apply them at work. Even though women increase their freedom and independence does not necessarily mean that the women are free from gender roles or social norms, which instead are reproduced in their new social environment by them, their families and through the EPZs. Traditional social norms discourage Sri Lankan women from drawing attention to themselves by complaints at the same time as gender roles encourage young women to be obedient daughters. This results in the norms getting reproduced in their new social context within the zones with the women becoming obedient workers. These are important issues to keep in mind as they affect the female EPZ workers’ choices in everyday life, including her choice to join or not to join the organizational activities.

The idea of empowerment has been used throughout this study as it relates to this case. The Sri Lankan female EPZ workers are part of the development but due to internalized social norms, gender roles and because of how the EPZs are constituted they are incapable to improve their own situation. Participation in NGO awareness activities has shown having a positive impact on the women’s empowerment since the women are given the tools through the organization to take strategic actions at work to improve their working conditions, which result in enhanced well-being. The Women’s Centre organization in Sri Lanka notes that female EPZ workers are more curious and participate more frequently in demonstrations today in comparison to three decades ago, which indicate a change in the Sri Lankan society for the female workers. Empowerment is a time consuming socio political process that starts with individual consciousness but one could argue that the awareness raising activities hasten the process. This is important since the identified barriers still hinder the women from increasing their awareness of their rights.

Since the conclusion of this study is made on behalf of few respondents from two of Sri Lanka’s EPZs together with literature on the field, further research is recommended to include a larger sample of workers from different zones all over the country. Furthermore, since EPZs are used all over the world it would be interesting to see if the result of this study coincides with female workers in other zones.
References

Published references


**Unpublished references**

Below is a list of respondents from the interviews, which were conducted in Sri Lanka. All the 16 respondents were women of different age, occupation, marital status and years of working in the zones. The majority of the respondents were members of the Women’s Centre organization.

Focus group A-Mixed age
1. Garment worker, 52 years old, married, 17 years in a EPZ, 6 years as a member of the Women’s Centre organization.
2. Former migrant domestic worker now manufacturing worker, 46 years old, divorced, 16 years in a EPZ, active member of the Women’s Centre organization.
3. Former embroidery worker now co-owner of a business, 42 years old, unmarried, 3 years as a member of the Women’s Centre organization.
4. Day Care personnel, 25 years old, married, employed by the Women’s Centre organization.
5. Sewing worker, 29 years old, married, 4 years in a EPZ, member of the Women’s Centre organization.

Focus group B-Young, newly arrived to the zone
1. Garment worker, 20 years old, unmarried, 1 month in a EPZ, not an active member of the Women’s Centre organization but occasionally participates in the activities.
2. Factory worker, 20 years old, unmarried, 1 month in a EPZ, not an active member of the Women’s Centre organization but occasionally participates in the activities.
3. Sewing worker, 24 years old, married, 4 years in a EPZ, member of the Women’s Centre organization.
4. Sewing worker, 20 years old, unmarried, 5 years in a EPZ, 2 months as a member of the Women’s Centre Organization.
5. Personnel of the Women’s Centre also attended this interview.

Focus group C-In their 20s
1. Embroidering worker, 21 years old, married, 3 years in a EPZ, 1 month as a member of the Women’s Centre organization.
2. Machine operator, 23 years old, married, 3 years in a EPZ, not a member of the Women’s Centre organization.
3. Cutter in a garment factory, 27 years old, engaged, 4 years in a EPZ, 3 months as a member of the Women’s Centre organization.
4. Shoe factory worker, 23 years old, unmarried, 4-5 years in a EPZ, 3 months as a member of the Women’s Centre organization.
5. Sample operator, 27 years old, married, 8 years in a EPZ, not a member of the Women’s Centre organization.

Focus group D-Middle-aged
1. Former migrant worker now corrector of defects in a garment factory, 40 years old, divorced, 6 years in a EPZ, 6 months as a member of the Women’s Centre organization.
2. Cutter in a garment factory, 37 years old, unmarried, 13 years in a EPZ, 7 years as a member of the Women’s Centre organization.

Group interview Women’s Centre organization
Group interview with four of the personnel of the Women’s Centre organization, including the executive director, and reflections from one additional employee of the organization who attended in the interview with focus group B.