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**Employee Awareness of Female Labour Rights and  
Female Participation in Trade Unions in Sri Lanka: A  
Study on Tea Plantation and Garment Industry**



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**ABSTRACT****Employee Awareness of Female Labour Rights and Female Participation in Trade Unions in Sri Lanka:  
A Study on Tea Plantation and Garment Industry**

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Females -- due to gender inequality in many societies -- are subjected to discrimination and at disadvantage -- not only at home and workplace but in politics, social welfare work etc as well. To overcome the status quo, liberal feminists have put forward many recommendations. Among them is a proposal; to change the attitude and perspectives on sex distinction especially concerning the workplace, where females are treated with the status of second class citizens.

As liberal feminists point out, women could become independent by being given equal rights with men, freedom and opportunity. They thus promote the idea that engagement in paid employment outside home will help them achieve this end.

The present dissertation aims at studying the females in employment, their rights, activities and participation in trade unions. Hence it deals with the following aspects; Do females enjoy the employees' legal rights equally with men? When implementing, are the principles

of equal rights strictly adhered to? Further, as rights are concerned, do the employees' knowledge, the gender and the field engaged in, change accordingly? Whether the trade unions that are supposed to represent employees, act against gender differences? What are the roles and functions of women within the trade union?

The study was carried out mainly in the investment promotion zones and the plantations sector. It was based on questionnaire surveys, interviews, group discussions and information gathered from official reports of the trade unions as primary sources, apart from the information through related research reports and publications as secondary sources. The field survey was conducted during August- September 2004 on the Galaha Estate and at the Koggala, Biyagama and Katunayake investment promotion zones. The information gathered were analysed using comparative methods.

Although the liberal feminists believe that females can have freedom having legal rights, opportunities and freedom equal to men, it does not happen in the context of Sri Lanka. In law, equal right to study, engage in employment, join and work in trade union, bargain, involve in social welfare are assured, the existing gender difference in Sri Lankan society, the opportunities available to females belonging to different social strata, are not equal to men and thus less significant.

The two sectors in the study confirm; that when it comes to promotions at workplace, females receive lesser status than men, and that the equal status with men is yet to come into

being due to social attitudes which are still conventional, however there are laws and rights to establish equal opportunity with men.

The division of labour created in the workplace due to gender; females do not practically get equal opportunity and the work or the job they get -- receive less importance and are influenced by the traditional male-female role. In the triple role of domestic, productive and reproductive, a female in paid job continues to be oppressed.

The level of awareness among employees irrespective of sex distinction in the plantations sector is relatively lower than that of the employees in the investment promotion zones. The female employees are better aware of employee rights than the male employees in the investment promotion zones.

Both male and female employees in the plantations sector are members of trade unions, whereas in the investment promotion zones, the membership of the trade union is at a low level. But, among the membership, the female number is greater than that of the male. At the level of decision making and holding position in trade unions, active participation, and the female membership is significantly greater compared to the plantations sector. There is a tendency that the trade union membership prefers to work with the female leadership in the plantations sector, but the established traditional attitudes in the male-dominated society, the female leadership is seldom.