

Sri Lanka's first women's trade union close to registration

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After a near 2-year struggle, Sri Lanka's active female labour movement has succeeded in forming the country's first women's trade union with the Women's Solidarity Union (WSU) close to be registered by the authorities.

"We have applied for registration of the WSU with the labour authorities and the process is being finalised," said Padmini Weerasooriya – Executive Director Women's Centre, Ekala, a FTZ pioneer in the rights of female workers, and President of the WSU.

Initially the group is being championed by women's rights groups in the free trade zones (FTZs) and the tea plantations in Kandy to be expanded subsequently, most probably migrant workers.

Ms. Weerasooriya told the *Business Times* that this is the culmination of a long struggle for the rights of female workers and the need for an independent union to support their cause. "While we acknowledge the support given by our male comrades in trade unions to women workers, sometimes our issues don't get prominence," she said.

At a recent discussion last week in Colombo on labour issues in the FTZs, she said that even in trade union offices, the women are given low priority roles and not positions equal to their male colleagues. In another example, she said the National Labour Advisory Council, the main tripartite labour body, doesn't have a single female.

However she pointed out to the *Business Times* that the Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU) and Anton Marcus' Free Trade Zones & General Services Employees' Union have been very supportive in the formation of the WSU.

"We have also had long discussions with our colleagues in tea plantations in the Kandy region over the formation of a women's trade union," she said adding that the union has nearly 300 members at present and plans to open a branch in Kandy in addition to its Colombo office.

At the Colombo seminar titled "The changing nature of labour and women workers in the FTZs" organised by the Collective for Economic Democratisation, she joined fellow activists – Mayura Darmawardena- Coordinator, All Ceylon Federation of Free Trade & National Workers Congress and Chamila Thushari – Programme Coordinator, Dabindu Collective in highlighting the problems that still exist for women in these zones.

The newest issue is the growing dependence on manpower agencies to provide labour to the zones where cheap labour is employed sans the benefits provided to permanent workers including leave, holidays, and regular working hours.

Among other problems, boarding houses are like glorified shacks and get flooded during rain. Women are constantly sexually harassed but are fighting back as law enforcement is lackadaisical.

“Women are now fighting back more than before. When men (while going on a cycle, etc) try to touch their body parts, the victims hit back with an umbrella or hand bag,” Ms Weerasooriya noted.

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P.S.

*<http://www.sundaytimes.lk/150802/business-times/sri-lankas-first-womens-trade-union-close-to-registration-159044.html>