

“My dream has come true”: reconstructing cultural history through women’s narratives of their life histories

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Sri Lankan society has undergone profound structural changes in the past thirty years. While many studies have focused on the 1977 economic liberalization policies and their aftermath from a socio-economic perspective, fewer studies have focused on how they have affected the everyday lived reality of people’s lives from a socio-cultural perspective. This study analyzes how women understand and talk about deep structural changes in society as they affect lived reality. Written and oral life histories narrated by members of Women’s Bank, a successful micro-savings scheme of rural and urban poor women were used for the purpose. In this paper it is argued that these women’s life histories are important cultural expressions and that they can be used to create an epistemology that stems from the margins.

This study takes Raymond Williams’ definition of culture as “a way of life” encompassing all aspects of how social life is organized. As such, it treats culture as the entire lived reality of respondents, including the way they organize their socio-economic roles in the family, in society, and in the larger global reality in which they live. Members of the women’s bank have been chosen because in their stories they situate themselves both as victims and as empowered women. Their narratives occupy a complex position from which they see their own lives and the historical events that shape their lives. The narratives of fifteen women obtained through guided interviews and 10 written histories were examined. They were analyzed in terms of content, structure, and narrative forms, to see whether and how they function as cultural expressions. The theoretical backdrop of this study includes both World Systems theory and feminist standpoint theory. These two approaches were used to situate the life-histories of these women within the larger structural changes in the modern capitalist world system and to see culture from the perspective of marginalized groups.

Key words: Women’s history, Women’s narratives, Cultural studies, Cultural history, Economic liberalization

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