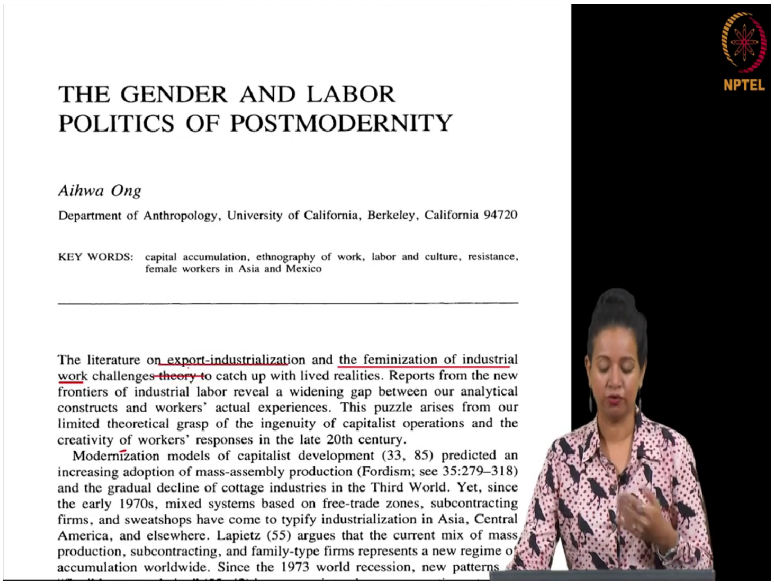
Feminism: Concepts and Theories
Dr. Mathangi Krishnamurthy
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

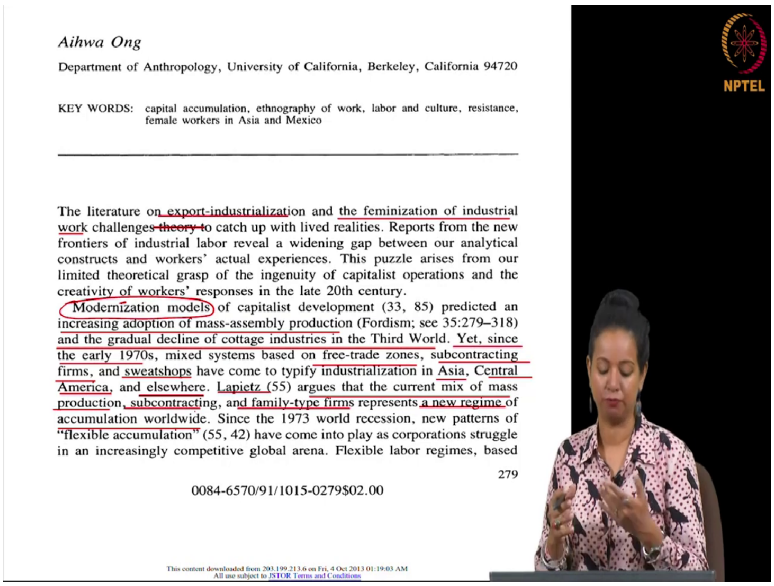
Feminism of Work and Labor - II

(Refer Slide Time: 0:13)



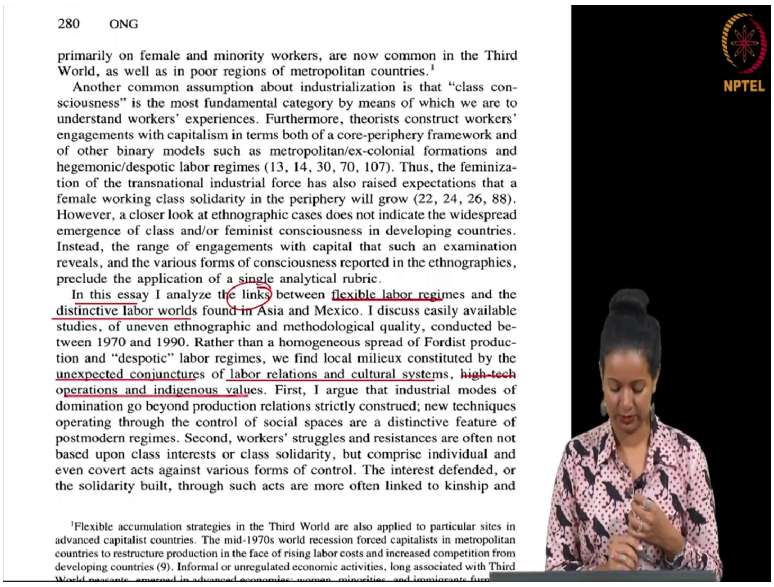
Here Ong is interested in speaking about the literature on export industrialization and the feminization of industrial work. She is making the contention that this literature challenges theory to live up to reality.

(Refer Slide Time: 0:33)



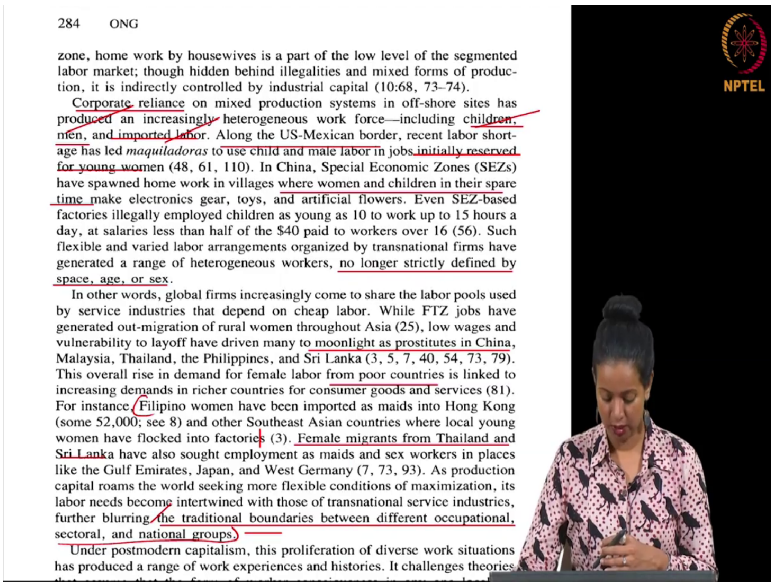
She is interested in the ways in which modernization models predicted an increasing adoption of mass assembly production and the gradual decline of cottage industries in the third world. Yet, and this is the basis of her argument, since the early 1970s, mixed systems based on free-trade zones, subcontracting firms and sweatshops have come to typify industrialization in Asia, Central America and elsewhere. So, Ong has landed us squarely in the geography of free-trade zones, the geography of feminization of labor, the geography of flexible capital. And she is using Lapietz to argue that the current mix of mass production, subcontracting and family type firms represents, a new regime of accumulation worldwide. Here we are using accumulation in the Marxist sense, the idea of how is it that capitalism forms its project.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:37)



Look to the second page of the article where she argues that in this essay, I analyzed the links between flexible labor regimes and the distinctive labor worlds found in Asia and Mexico. Now, Ong's argument is important and interesting, because she does not produce a unidimensional theory that focuses either only on the idea of globalization as homogenous and collapsing all differences into one, or the idea that localities are stubbornly local and resist globalization. Instead, she is looking at the links. "I discuss easily available studies of uneven ethnographic and methodological quality conducted between 1970 and 1990. Rather than a homogenous spread of fordist production and despotic labor regimes, we find that local milieux are constituted by the unexpected conjunctures of labor relations, cultural systems, high-tech operations and indigenous values."

(Refer Slide Time: 2:46)



She then uses these studies to speak about the ways in which different local, in the ways in which different localities display different and distinct labor worlds. So, turn to page 284, where she says "corporate reliance on mixed production systems in offshore sites has produced an increasingly heterogeneous workforce, including children, men, and imported labor." Now, this is very important to remember that the feminization of labor is not solely about women. It is about vulnerability and the ways in which certain populations are reduced to non-negotiating populations. So children, men, imported labor that do not have the capacity for local community relations, and hence cannot rebel, do not have any fallback options. The corporation becomes their only source of sustenance.

"Along the U.S. Mexican border, recent labor shortage has led *maquiladoras* to use child and male labor in jobs initially reserved for young women." Remember our discussion where we were speaking about affirmative action. Often affirmative action can be superseded by these kinds of contingencies. "In China, Special Economic Zones have spawned home work in villages, where women and children in their spare time make electronics gear, toys, and artificial flowers." This will recall to you our discussion on EP Thompson, where we spoke about how there seems to be no longer a boundary between work and leisure. "Even SEZ-based factories illegally employed children as young as 10 to work up to 15 hours a day at salaries less than half of the $40 paid to workers over 16. Such flexible and varied labor arrangements, organized by

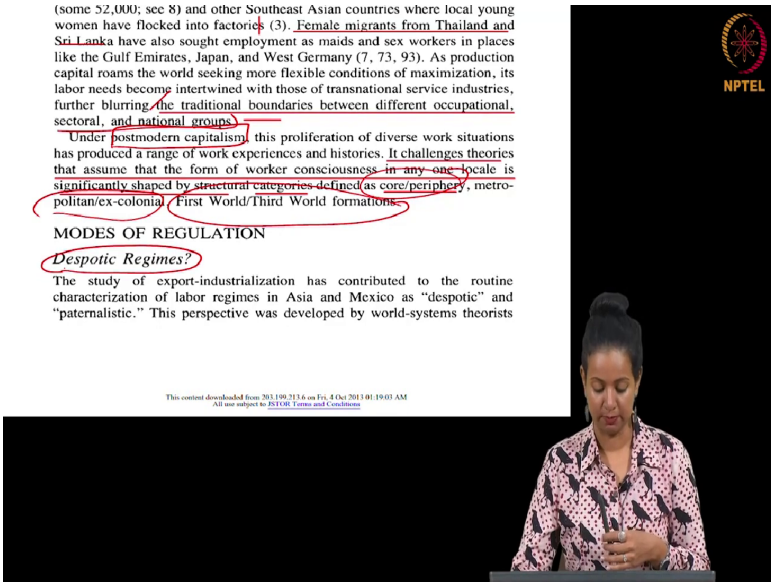
transnational firms have generated a space and a range of heterogeneous workers no longer strictly defined by space, age, or sex." In other words, exploitation has gone global.

"Global firms increasingly come to share the labor pools used by service industries that depend on cheap labor." So you also see a collusion of capital itself in figuring out how is it that we can jointly exploit. "While FTZ jobs have generated out migration of rural women throughout Asia, low wages and vulnerability to lay off have driven many to moonlight as prostitutes in China, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Sri Lanka." And you will see in the article that I will read to you after this, where Sandya Hewamanne, an anthropologist looks at the ways in which FTZ female workers in Sri Lanka are often characterized as whores or prostitutes.

"This overall rise in demand for female labor from poor countries is linked to increasing demands in richer countries for consumer goods and services. For instance, Filipino women have been imported as maids into Hong Kong and other Southeast Asian countries where local young women have flocked into factories." This is so very interesting. And in our next lecture for this week, we will speak about this phenomena of care work provided by women migrating outwards from their home countries.

Filipino women have been imported as maids into Hong Kong, as domestic service workers, because young local women who would otherwise have performed these roles have now flocked to factories. Female migrants from Thailand and Sri Lanka have also sought employment as maids and sex workers in places like the Gulf Emirates, Japan, and West Germany. "As production capital roams the world seeking more flexible conditions of maximization, its labor needs become intertwined with those of transnational service industries, further blurring the traditional boundaries between different occupational, sectoral, and national groups." Pause a second over here, and think about the consequences of such blurring. Are we seeing increasing possibility or increasing exploitation? Or is it an admixture of the two?

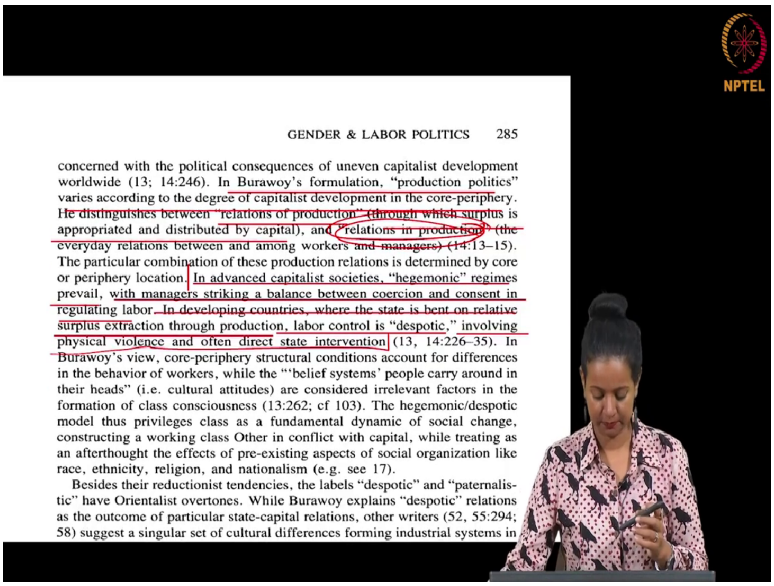
(Refer Slide Time: 7:38)



"Under postmodern capitalism, this proliferation of diverse work situations have produced a range of work experiences and histories. This challenges theories that assume that the form of worker consciousness in any one locale is significantly shaped by structural categories, defined as core/periphery, metropolitan/ex-colonial, First World/Third World formations." This is also important to remember that in the process of figuring out of tracking these forms of exploitation and labor formations, there is no singular binary that can define or help us understand how this is ordered.

So Ong is challenging this idea that capital flows from the core into the periphery that the exploiter is global north, the exploited is global south; instead, she is looking at what these links tell you about changes on these locales. Also, remember, when she says postmodern capitalism, she is speaking about what we discussed a few slides ago, which is Post-Fordist, or flexible capital. The article takes you through all of these arguments. But I would just want to spend a few minutes speaking about the primary ways in which these populations are disciplined into worker populations, which is our primary interest for understanding how feminization of labor is related to gendering questions.

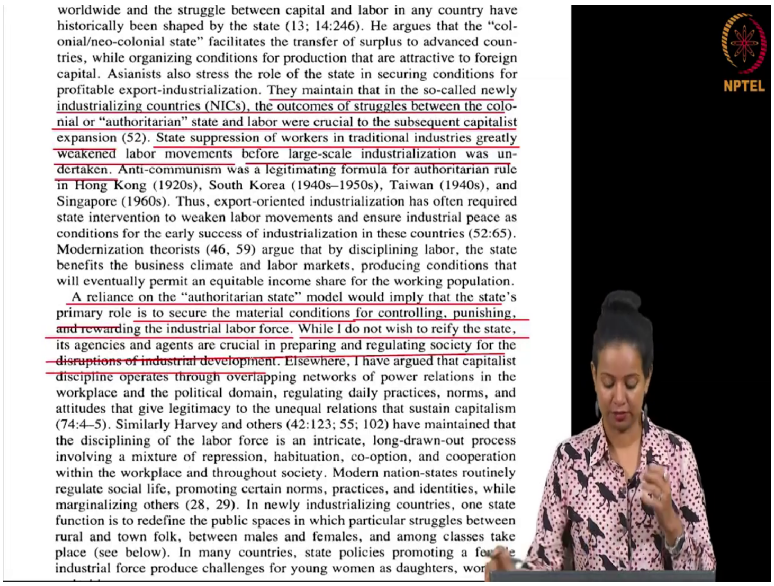
(Refer Slide Time: 9:12)



In Ong's, understanding, of course, you have despotic regimes, where you see a particular way in which paternalistic, you see a particular interest for paternalistic economies in directing workers towards certain kinds of industries and certain forms of work, the ways in which nation states celebrate FTZs as the new possibilities for poor worker populations. And Ong reads Michael Burawoy to say production politics vary according to the degree of capitalist development in the core/periphery. So, there are relations of production through which surpluses appropriated and distributed by capital, and very important, for our analysis, relations in production. The everyday relations between an among workers and managers.

And this is very interesting because in some ways the standard narrative of exploitation suggests that there are gullible workers, and there are canny managers, or those who are lording it over the poor are able to manipulate them for their own benefits. Without realizing that these are also everyday negotiations, people make history but not in conditions of their own making. But these relations tell you something about how is it that these are always contested, always conflictual and therefore, gendering itself has the possibility of providing openings. "In advanced capitalist societies, a hegemonic regimes prevail with managers striking a balance between coercion and consent in regulating labor. In developing countries where the state is bent on relative surplus extraction through production, labor control is despotic involving physical violence and often direct state intervention." So, this is mode one in Ong's analysis.

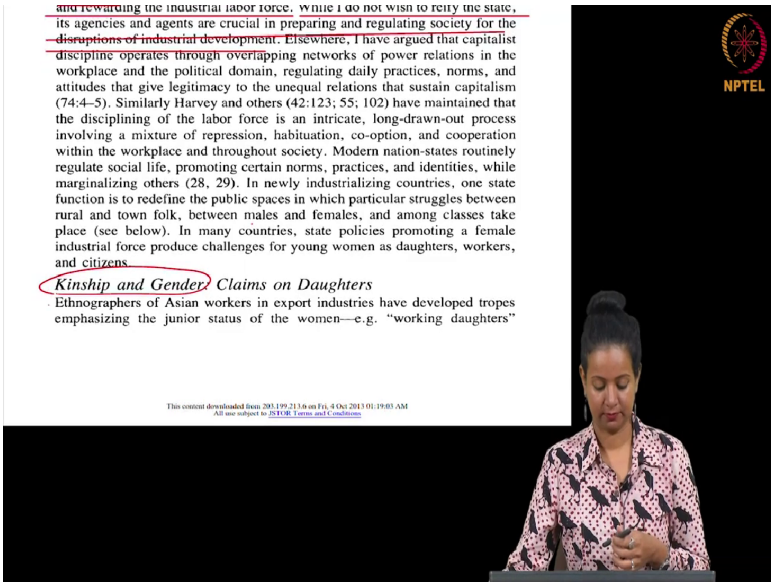
(Refer Slide Time: 11:07)



She also elaborates on state intervention within this understanding. "They maintain that in the so called newly industrializing countries, the outcomes of struggles between the colonial or authoritarian state and labor were crucial to the subsequent…, subsequent capitalist expansion. States suppression of workers in traditional industries greatly weakened labor movements, before large scale industrialization was undertaken." Now, this is very much the history of postcoloniality writ large.

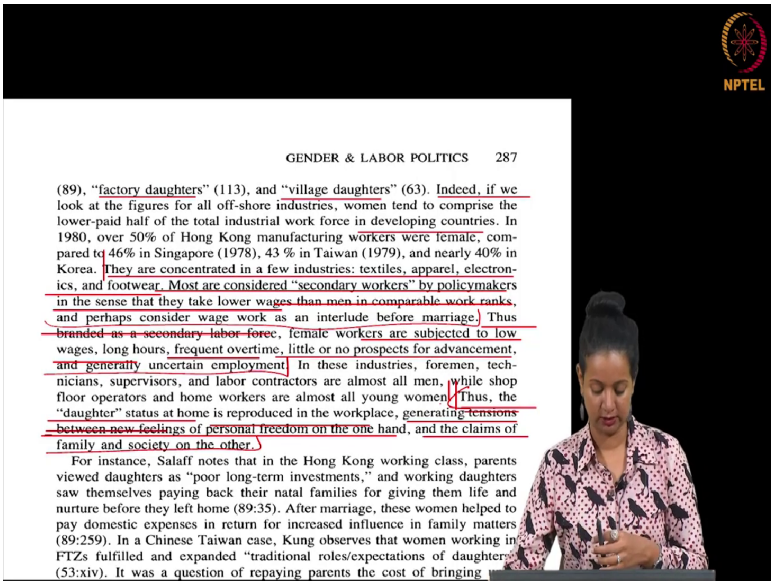
So, we are looking at how state intervention seeks for particular kinds of economic development in which workers are necessary. "A reliance on the authoritarian state model would imply that the state's primary role is to secure the material conditions for controlling, punishing and rewarding the industrial labor force. While I do not wish to reify the state, its agencies and agents are crucial in preparing and regulating society for the disruptions of industrial development."

(Refer Slide Time: 12:15)



So here Ong is giving a sort of minor nod to the role of the state and saying, of course, the state is crucial to these developments in relation to feminization of labor, because it has to discipline populations with an iron hand; it is used to doing so. However, it is only one mode of discipline. The second she develops, which again is particularly interesting for our analysis, is on Kinship and Gender.

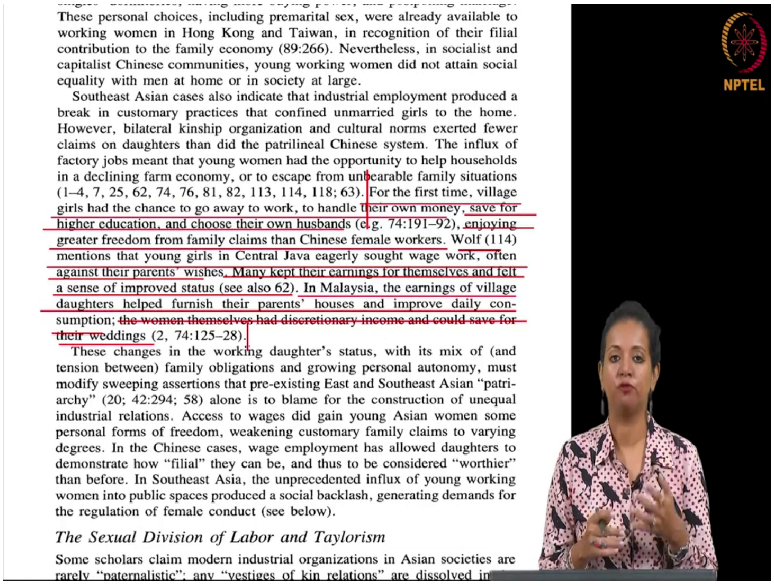
(Refer Slide Time: 12:49)



Here she speaks about the trope of factory daughters and village daughters. “Indeed, if we look at the figures for all offshore industries, women tend to comprise the lower paid, half of the total industrial workforce in developing countries. They are concentrated in a few industries, textiles, apparel, electronics and footwear. Most are also considered secondary workers by policy makers in the sense that they take lower wages than men in comparable work ranks, perhaps consider wage work as an interlude before marriage.”

So many of the things that we have already discussed show up in just this one sentence. We are looking at vertical segregation, we are looking at horizontal segregation, we are looking at wage gap, and we are looking at comparable status in relation to the ways in which women are accorded prestige in relation to wage work. “Thus, branded as a secondary labor force, female workers are subjected to low wages, long hours, frequent overtime, little or no prospects for advancement and generally uncertain employment. Thus, the daughter status at home is reproduced in the workplace, generating tensions between new feelings of personal freedom on the one hand and the claims of family and society on the other.” Paradox, again, shows up in this idea of the working woman who is it that she bears a primary responsibility towards.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:25)



At the same time, Ong also speaks about the fact that such forms of work did allow women a little bit of freedom and some feeling of escape, some feeling of freedom. “For the first time, village girls had a chance to go away to work and to handle their own money, save for higher

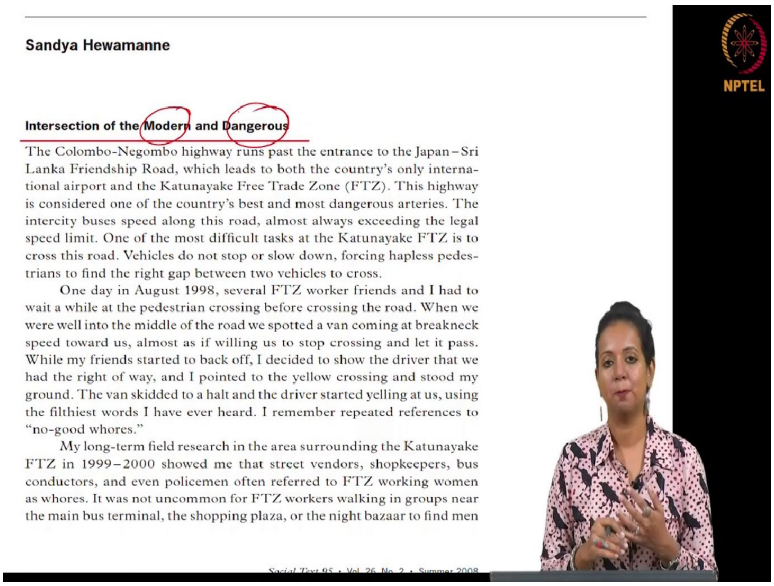
education, and choose their own husbands, enjoying greater freedom from family claims than Chinese female workers." And here she is talking about, female workers in Southeast Asia. "Wolf mentions that young girls in Central Java eagerly sought wage work, often against their parents' wishes. Many kept their earnings for themselves and felt a sense of improved status. In Malaysia, the earnings of village daughters helped furnish their parents houses and improve daily consumption. The women themselves had discretionary income and could save for their weddings." I know a number of ironies abound in this, but it does give you a sense of the ways in which workers themselves are complex humans who are able to make sense of the ways in which these opportunities are available for them. So a uniform kind of disciplinary apparatus is not at play. I just wanted to go over a couple of these to give you a sense of the complex terrain that is the feminization of labor.

Let me also briefly read to you from Sandya Hewamanne's, article on FTZ workers in Sri Lanka before we wrap up this session.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:00)

The beginning of the article, "City of Whores, Nationalism, Development and Global Government Workers in Sri Lanka" is very telling.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:06)



So let us read a little bit from the article. "Intersection of the modern and dangerous. The Colombo-Negombo highway runs past the entrance to the Japan-Sri Lanka friendship road, which leads to both the country's only International Airport and the Katunayake Free Trade Zone. This highway is considered one of the country's best and most dangerous arteries. The intercity buses speed along this road, almost always exceeding the legal speed limit. One of the most difficult tasks at the Katunayake FTZ is to cross this road. Vehicles do not stop or slow down forcing hapless pedestrians to find the right gap between two vehicles to cross.

One day in August 1998, several FTZ worker friends and I had to wait a while at the pedestrian crossing, before crossing the road. When we were well into the middle of the road, we spotted a van coming at breakneck speed towards us, almost as if willing to stop crossing and let it pass. While my friend started to back off, I decided to show the driver that we had the right of way and I pointed to the yellow crossing and stood my ground. The van skidded to a halt, and the driver started yelling at us, using the filthiest words I have ever heard. I remember repeated references to no good whores.

My long-term field research in the area surrounding the Katunayake FTZ in 1999 - 2000 showed me that street vendors, shopkeepers, bus conductors, and even policemen, often referred to FTZ working women as whores."

The article is positioned in order to show us the ways in which such young women who are taking advantage of the opportunities available in these FTZs were running risks for themselves, while at the same time signifying to the nation state, what happens when women occupy this dangerous intersection of the modern and the dangerous and cease to be good national women. How forms of disciplining often always give out mixed signals and mixed messages, along with the fact of course, that women themselves had minds of their own. And Hewamanne, details for us beautifully, what were the ways in which these women led their lives, despite being called whores and the ways in which they enjoyed these forms of freedom and wage possibilities.

So, again, to repeat myself, we are looking at feminization of labor not as a uniform narrative, even as we understand the ways in which it is gendered, vertically and horizontally, and often limits possibilities for women. That is a lot of material for you to look at for this week. So we will stop here. Please do go over the notes and send questions our way if you have any. For the second lecture of this week, we will continue the theme and take you to forms of emotional or affective labor. Until then...