

Asia/ Sri Lanka

We like it here

A visit to a prawn processing plant in Puttalam district, Sri Lanka, provides a brief glimpse into the lives of those who work there

By Cornelie Quist, a member of ICSF

Sumeethra and Mala are both workers in a prawn processing plant of a company that exports to Japan and Europe. I was invited inside the plant after having introduced myself as a researcher working in the prawn industry of the Netherlands. With Sumeethra I spoke in the presence of the plant manager and with Mala, only briefly during her ten minutes lunch break. Both women have enjoyed higher education, are ambitious and are not married. Here are their stories.

The company where the two women work is situated in the centre of the prawn cultivation (aquaculture) area of Sri Lanka, in the Puttalam district on the west coast. It started operations in 1999, when the prices for processed prawn were at their peak in the world market. The company is a partner in the Hock Bee Group, which has its head office in Singapore and is one of the six export companies in Sri Lanka qualified to export to the European Union (EU). The company falls under the Free Trade Zone regulations, which means that it not only enjoys privileges such as duty-free import of equipment and raw materials, but also that the national labour laws are not applicable to workers here. The company has 250 employees (230 women and 20 men), most of whom are casual workers.

Sumeethra is a microbiologist and, as production controller, she is responsible for ensuring that the quality of processed prawn meets standards such as the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) required for exporting to Europe and some other countries. She tells me that she is very happy with her job, because she finds it very interesting. She also likes to work in a modern company and she finds it a real challenge to ensure that the product qualifies for export to the EU.

The prawn that they process are cultured and supplied by prawn farmers in the area, but they also obtain wild prawn from fishermen of northern Sri Lanka (Jaffna). They process two to four tonnes per day.

Unfortunately, the supply of local prawn has declined in the last few years, one reason being the white spot disease that has destroyed practically all prawn farms in Sri Lanka. The other reason is the difficulty in transporting the wild prawn catch from the north because of the conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers (LTTE). Sumeethra says that her company is now thinking of importing prawn from India and Bangladesh for reprocessing into higher value-added products, and further research on this is being undertaken.



She agrees that it could be better if the company would process Sri Lankan prawn and, in particular, prawn obtained from the same district, one of the poorest in the country. However, it is unfortunate that the Sri Lankan government has no policy to regulate aquaculture. In a poor district like Puttalam this led to a gold rush mentality and a boom in prawn cultivation, most of it by untrained and inexperienced cultivators. These were primarily poor folk attracted by the high prices in the world market for prawn, hoping to strike it rich in a short time. Unplanned and unregulated prawn farming not only resulted in disasters like the white spot disease, but also led to environmental problems

arising from the destruction of mangrove forests, pollution of the lagoon and salinity of the soil. Sumeethra said she feels very concerned about this, but she also feels that her company cannot do anything about it because it operates in a free market.

Challenging my critical questions, Sumeethra says that the EU standards are not very realistic for countries like Sri Lanka. The investments are too high, particularly now that the prices for processed prawn in the world market are declining rapidly. She was of the opinion that the Japanese were less demanding in this respect. I show her a promotion film on CD of a Dutch prawn processing and exporting firm in the Netherlands. While seeing the super-modern production and marketing technology she heaves a deep sigh that makes me feel guilty.

Sumeethra then gets the permission of the manager to show me the production room of her processing plant. For reasons of hygiene, I can only watch the workers from behind a glass wall. The majority of workers are young women who, clad in white uniform and boots, work standing in a long row. Some are separating prawn by size and quality; others are packing the separated prawn. The few young men workers only carry boxes between the refrigerated production room and the cold store. All work is done manually.

While leaving the plant, we pass a small room near the entrance where some workers are having their lunchbreak. Through the window, I greet them and they invite me inside. They are excited to talk to me and offer me some of their lunch. I take a piece of mango and ask if they like to work in this company. Yes, they do, they say.

They tell me that all workers are from the area. One of the workers, her name is Mala, says that she has been working here for three years. She is one of the 80 permanent workers. The other 170 are all casual workers. Mala, a high school graduate, says that she is happy with her job because there is lot of unemployment in this area. I ask her what type of career she can expect in this company. She answers that good workers have the chance of becoming permanent after they finish a six-month contract, and, thereafter, a few of them can become supervisors. Is that it, I ask?

The usual working hours are from 8 am to 5 pm, she continues, but most workers hope to do overtime and work over the weekends as well. The basic salary is Rs3,000 per month (about Euro 30), but this can go up to Rs5,000 or more, because of overtime. She says that some workers even do a 100-hour working week! However, this is an exception now because of inadequate supply of unprocessed prawn. I ask her if the type of work she does is not heavy, in particular the long hours of standing in the cold temperature. She says that women like this type of work and she makes a move to go back to the production room. Her ten-minute lunch break is over.

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