

## Editorial Introduction

Globally, spas are recognised as a part of the wellness sector; however, the business focus and employment conditions of spas vary between and within countries based on social, economic, legal and cultural circumstances. Focusing on the distinctive nature of spas in the local context of Sri Lanka, this briefing paper explores the stigmatisation of masseuses' work at spas caused by the conflation of sex work with spa work. Drawing on empirical data collected as part of the first author's doctoral research, it centres on the experiences of female labour constituents of urban spas. Responding to calls to bring policy reforms to safeguard the labour rights of women in the Sri Lankan spa industry, it foregrounds the perspectives of these women who wish to construct a professional identity and recognition of the labour role performed in spas in a context where the industry is booming, but such work is socially condemned.

## Authors

**Risini Ilangasingha**, PhD candidate, QUT Centre for Decent Work & Industry and Senior Lecturer, Department of Business Administration, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

**Associate Professor Deanna Grant-Smith**, Technologies of Justice Lead, QUT Centre for Justice and Deputy Director, QUT Centre for Decent Work & Industry

**Professor Robyn Mayes**, Director, QUT Centre for Decent Work & Industry.

*This paper forms part of a collection released as part of Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Month 2023*

# Justice Claims of Sri Lankan Spa Workers Seeking a Professional Identity

Risini Ilangasingha, Deanna Grant-Smith and Robyn Mayes

## Spas in Sri Lanka

Despite the tourism-related effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the spa industry—concentrated in Global South countries—remains a major contributor to the global wellness economy. Indeed, the sector has experienced growth in revenue and employment opportunities (Global Wellness Institute, 2021). In parallel, spas are claimed as an integral part of the sex industry in many countries (Monk-Turner & Turner, 2017; Suttikun et al., 2018; Wiryawan & Bunga, 2018). In the context of Sri Lanka, spas have become an accessible workplace for young, rural and socio-economically vulnerable women. Due to the economically rewarding nature of this work, it may be preferred to other gendered employment opportunities in garment factories and foreign/local domestic work.

The expansion of the spa industry in Sri Lanka, recently identified by local policymakers as having a significant capacity to contribute to the growth of the country's economy (Ministry of Development Strategies and International Trade, 2018), cannot be read simply through the lens of economic success. Further, the proliferation of spas in the urban milieu suggests that they offer services in high demand by local clients. Sri Lankan society widely recognises that the spas proliferating in urban areas are connected with the sex industry in providing a range of sexual services under the guise of massage. Although this may not be the case in every spa, as a result of such social identification, the masseuses who work at spas are subject to culturally instigated social condemnation as morally deviant characters. Such social stigma is reinforced by socioculturally and religiously intelligible gender norms in Sri Lanka (Herath, 2015; Kiribamune & Samarasinghe, 1990). Ideologies that define 'respectability' mainly through female (sexual) behaviour (Skeggs, 2002) have assigned supreme value to the moral purity of women, in particular, the sexual morality of women (Lynch, 2004).

Women are expected to adhere to *lajja-baya*—the fear of, and shame in, engaging in socially disapproved or ridiculed behaviours (Hewamanne, 2008; Jayawardena, 2015). Simultaneously, sex work is legally prohibited in Sri Lanka under the Vagrants Ordinance of 1841. Thus, masseuses are exposed to police raids and humiliating treatment during these incidents (see, e.g., Prime Vision, 2020).

This briefing paper focuses on the experiences of masseuses employed in the Sri Lankan spa industry by drawing on 25 qualitative interviews with female masseuses (pseudonyms have been used to ensure the protection of interviewees' privacy) working in registered spas operating in (semi)urban areas, including Colombo and its close suburbs. In doing so, the paper gives voice to these marginalised workers and sheds light on the complex tensions constituting this employment, including their strong desire to positively reconstruct their identity as a socially worthy category of labour. Their resistance to pejorative characterisation as morally deviant characters challenges public discourse regarding their work (Newsfirst Sri Lanka, 2021).

### Economic Survival and My Right to My Body

The interviewed masseuses emphasise that they earn a reasonable living. They argue that their earnings are far better than the typical jobs available to women who belong to disadvantaged socio-economic conditions similar to them, namely garment industry work or foreign/local domestic work, and are even better than 'socially recognised' and 'prestigious jobs' such as school teaching. Masseuses are adamant in their belief that working at spas is the best choice available to them in overcoming economic hardship, as their earnings play a significant economic role in improving the standard of living of their families who live in poverty. Remarkably, they bring this argument to a context in which their work is not remunerated by the spa owners, who only provide a space to engage in the job and charge the customers for the basic massage service provided. The masseuses are not entitled to receive the massage service fee charged at the reception, and the earnings which masseuses refer to are mainly derived from the tips provided by 'satisfied' customers of their services, which typically extend beyond massage.

This economic survival argument is brought in parallel to the contention that masseuses use their own bodies, like other labourers, to earn their living (Chowdhury, 2006). Thus, although Sri Lankan society roundly criticises masseuses for not abiding by socially constructed gender norms, they stress that they have a right to use their bodies for economic survival.

*Achini* elaborated her view on her work and others engaged in the spa industry as follows:

*These girls, somehow, it's their own bodies. So, they can do whatever they want with their bodies. But people never think like that. They are unable to go to other jobs. Maybe they don't have [the necessary] educational qualifications. Even if they did have, they believe that the earnings made using their qualifications are not sufficient to solve their problems. A girl who earns 30,000 rupees [AUD142 per month] by going to a garment [factory] earns two to three lakhs [AUD944 to AUD1415 per month] from this job [at a spa]. In fact, they don't have any problems. They don't need to show their palms to anybody [seeking handouts or begging]. What they do is done at their discretion.*

This insistence that spa work means that masseuses do not need to seek handouts emphasises that although engagement in such work is an outcome of the structural conditions that constrain their ability to position themselves in a socially respectable job, it also offers the possibility of financial freedom and associated dignity. This is an important outcome for masseuses, most of whom experience intersectional labour market disadvantages arising from their socio-economic class, rurality, education level and gender. As many of the interviewed masseuses insist, it is unfair to socially denigrate them due to being spa workers, as they do not create a burden to society though they belong to an underprivileged social group produced by the power inequalities in society (Ilangasingha, 2023).

### Distinct Professionalism for Spa Work Compared to Sex Work

The masseuses in this study, while acknowledging the sexual dimension of their work, revealed a continuum of sexual services occurring in spas, ranging from providing a sensual massage that ends with manual masturbation to sexual intercourse. The less corporeal end of this service continuum is essential to the services provided at spas in Sri Lanka. Some degree of sexual touch is an expectation of the (male) clientele, and because masseuses are not paid a salary by the spa owners, they would not receive a tip if sexual touch is not provided.

Masseuses who position themselves at what they consider the lower end of sexual services refuse the description of their services as sex work and themselves as sex workers. This category of masseuses claims moral and social superiority over workers who engage in sexual intercourse with their customers and seek a differentiated identity based on the degree of bodily interaction they have with clients.

Tisha expressed her view as follows:

*When we say a prostitute [the literal meaning of the local term used to refer to sex workers by the interviewee], we mean that a person directly has sex [with clients]. [But], within a spa, though a massage is done, it's something that we do with our hands. There is no bodily interaction between the two parties ... Yet, people do not accept it. They have put both into one [category]. People never say 'that a certain spa is a good spa'. Those who work in spas and brothels are measured using the same measure. Some people say 'that [she] is a commodity'.*

This group of masseuses emphasise their desire to change the negative societal perception of all spas as being places of sex work, or else all women who work at spas as being sex workers and their desire to achieve social legitimacy and professional recognition of their work that is not sex work per se.

### The Need for Labour Reforms for Spa Workers

The lack of a legitimising professionalism in spa work contributes to creating an insecure work environment. Although spas are legally recognised as business entities by the Department of the Registrar of Companies, women working in spas are not recognised as employees of those organisations. They are not provided with an employment contract, are not entitled to a salary and, consequently, are not protected by labour laws.

This insecurity, combined with their low social status and stigmatisation of the work, increases the vulnerability of spa workers to exploitative and harassing conditions. They have no recourse to the law in the face of harassment or abuse at spas. *Shenuki* highlighted the effects of this insecurity on their living and working conditions and appealed for a change in perceptions about them and their work to address this:

*We are not doing something wrong. The workers inside know that we are not doing anything wrong. But [people] who view us from [the] outside do not think in that way. I think they should visit this place and society should change the way they think. We are not doing a bad thing. It is not like we are having fun by doing this. Those who are engaged in this work have a lot of problems. There are children; leaving the little ones and coming to work is a very hard thing. If we suddenly get caught in a raid, the little ones are at home alone. [We are] working with a lot of such issues. People should consider our situation and should think of us in a better way. [We] need relief.*

In short, masseuses seek solidarity and recognition of their dignity as workers and as multidimensional and complex individuals who are more than the work they perform.

### Conclusion

Masseuses in spas occupy a space of tension in Sri Lankan society. They provide a form of labour, sex labour, which is both taboo and illegal, within an industry that is legally endorsed and recognised as a strong contributor to the local economy. Simultaneously, masseuses are subjugated because they are women in a patriarchal society that particularly places respectability demands on women (Skeggs, 2002) and requires them to conform to societal expectations of purity and chastity (Lynch, 2004). Further, they are socially disciplined and excluded through society's condemnation and stigmatisation of their work. Finally, they are exposed to legal discipline through prosecution. These intersecting experiences compound the vulnerability they already experience due to their rurality and socio-economic disadvantage.

The justice claims made by masseuses call for the re-examination of the culturally preserved laws that put them at risk and for policymakers to support them in constructing a distinct professional identity and establishing social worth and legitimacy over their work. This would involve introducing labour reforms to protect their labour rights. Social justice for Sri Lankan masseuses requires both decriminalisation of sex work and policy-level initiatives to address the socio-economic conditions that locate underprivileged working-class women in sex labour roles at spas. More broadly, an attitudinal shift in the mindsets of Sri Lankan society and policymakers is essential: listening to the voices of masseuses is a critical first step.

## About the Study

This briefing paper is based on Ilangasingha, R. (2023). *The social construction of spaces of spas and the identity of the masseuse in Sri Lanka* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Queensland University of Technology.

## References

- Chowdhury, R. (2006). 'Outsiders' and identity reconstruction in the sex workers' movement in Bangladesh. *Sociological Spectrum*, 26(3), 335–357. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02732170500545738>
- Global Wellness Institute. (2021). *The global wellness economy: Looking beyond COVID*. <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/industry-research/the-global-wellness-economy-looking-beyond-covid/>
- Herath, H. M. A. (2015). Place of women in Sri Lankan society: Measures for their empowerment for development and good governance. *Vidyodaya Journal of Management*, 1(1), 1–14. <https://vjm.sljol.info/articles/abstract/1/>
- Hewamanne, S. (2008). *Stitching identities in a free trade zone: Gender and politics in Sri Lanka*. University of Pennsylvania Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhnp8>
- Ilangasingha, R. (2023). *The social construction of spaces of spas and the identity of the masseuse in Sri Lanka* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Queensland University of Technology.
- Jayawardena, D. (2015). On the burden of being-qua-non-being: In-between the lines of (working-class) writings. In A. Pullen & C. Rhodes (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to ethics, politics and organizations* (pp. 150–161). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203566848>
- Kiribamune, S. & Samarasinghe, V. (Eds.). (1990). *Women at the crossroads: A Sri Lankan perspective*. International Centre for Ethnic Studies, NORAD and Vikas Publishing House.
- Lynch, C. (2004). Economic liberalization, nationalism, and women's morality in Sri Lanka. In D. Winslow & M. D. Woost (Eds.), *Economy, culture, and civil war in Sri Lanka* (pp. 168–191). Indiana University Press.
- Ministry of Development Strategies and International Trade. (2018). *National export strategy of Sri Lanka 2018–2022: Wellness tourism strategy*. Government of Sri Lanka. <https://www.srilankabusiness.com/national-export-strategy/nes-wellness-tourism.html>
- Monk-Turner, E. & Turner, C. G. (2017). Thai massage and commercial sex work: A phenomenological study. *International Journal of Criminal Justice Science*, 12(1), 57–68. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.345707>
- Newsfirst Sri Lanka. (2021, February 6). රටේ නම්බුකාර ලිංගික කර්මාන්ත ශාලා ඇතුළේ දුක් විඳින ගැනු දරුවන් ගැන කතා කරන්න කවුරුත් නෑ [There is no one to talk about the girls who suffer inside the reputable sex factories in the country] [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lm-xqffZuWg>
- Prime Vision. (2020, October 23). ස්වා මුවාවෙන් සිදු කළ ගණිකා ජාවාරමක් කොටු කර ගත් කොම්පස්සේ විදිය පොලිසිය—Sri Lanka spa girls [Slave Island police busted a prostitution ring under the guise of a spa] [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4qexRxM45w>
- Skeggs, B. (2002). *Formations of class and gender: Becoming respectable*. SAGE Publications.
- Sri Lanka. (1841). Vagrants Ordinance No 4. Retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p\\_lang=en&p\\_n=110647](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_n=110647)
- Suttikun, C., Chang, H. C. & Bicksler, H. (2018). A qualitative exploration of day spa therapists' work motivations and job satisfaction. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 34, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2017.10.013>
- Wiryawan, I. W. G. & Bunga, D. (2018). Sex massage therapy at spa: A new form of prostitution. *SHS Web of Conferences*, 54, Article 07008. <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20185407008>