

Exploration of Discursive Norms of Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Employees in Katunayake Free Trade Zone

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ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the discursive norms of gay, lesbian, and transgender employees in Katunayake Free Trade Zone (KFTZ). KFTZ is the country's first Free-trade zone located approximately 29 km (18 miles) northeast of Colombo and is the largest of the country's eight FTZs. When emphasizing the study area of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) individuals, global north has started research on the field but there is a lack of empirical findings related to Sri Lanka, which became the inspiration to conduct our study on the particular area. However, data relating to such people is extremely difficult to obtain due to socio-cultural and religious reasons. Talking about different sexual orientations is minimal as it is considered taboo in Sri Lankan society. Against this backdrop, we attempt to listen to people with different sexual orientations and to study the discursive norms in the KFTZ. This study sheds light on how discursive norms are reproduced in the apparel sector which has not yet been captured by scholars. The main research question of our study is, 'How the discursive norms are reproduced in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone with regards to gay, lesbian, and transgender factory floor workers in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone?' We occupied Queer theory by Judith Butler (1990) to theorize discursive norms and how discursive norms are reproduced in KFTZ in terms of gay, lesbian, and transgender employees in KFTZ.

We have selected a qualitative approach to conduct the study and have conducted 11 semi-structured interviews (gay (3), lesbian (2), and transgender (6) workers at KFTZ) and observations to gather data. We conducted a thematic analysis to analyze data. We have derived separate themes (6) as institutional contributions to reproducing heteronormativity, roots that fuel the reproduction of norms, public opinions backed by gendered stereotypes, changing 'self' and dual experience, gendered jobs, and religious dogmatism. Under each theme, we have discussed how norms are being reproduced in KFTZ. As theoretical contributions of the study, we bring how discursive norms are being produced in KFTZ and how they are paving the path toward inequalities in KFTZ in terms of sexuality. Further, the participants have socially deviant behaviors in terms of gender performance, which supports the fluidity of gender by dismantling the dichotomy of gender. We strictly adhered to ethical practices while conducting this study.

Keywords: Gay, lesbian and transgender workers, Discursive norms, Apparel sector, Queer theory, Inequalities at work, Sri Lanka