

# HRM as a “Web of Texts”: (Re)Articulating the Identity of HRM in Sri Lanka’s Localized Global Apparel Industry

Dhammika Jayawardena<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Business Administration, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka*

**This article examines human resource management (HRM) in Sri Lanka’s apparel industry vis-à-vis its role in the management of women shop-floor workers in the Global South. Informed by poststructuralist notions of language, it analyzes the rupture of HRM that appeared at the moment HRM emerged in the industry in the 1990s. The article suggests that this rupture led to the formation of two (apparently) antagonistic sets of labor management practices: “doing” and “undoing” HRM. Along with the language of HRM, the article examines these two practices, and shows that HRM in the apparel industry appears or unfolds a “web of texts.” It further shows that HRM in this context problematizes a rhetoric/reality distinction. This work concludes that the “antagonism” between “doing” and “undoing” HRM is the means by which HRM maintains its continued existence in Sri Lanka’s apparel industry. *Organization Management Journal*, 11: 289–298, 2014. doi: 10.1080/15416518.2014.973794**

**Keywords** apparel industry; female labor; HRM; language; Sri Lanka; supplementation

The phenomenon of human resource management (HRM) emerged in the West as part of the socioeconomic reality of the 1980s. This shift in employment management—from personnel management to HRM—occurred in Western corporations that were struggling with intensified market competition and slow growth in productivity (Guest, 1990; Keenoy, 2009; Kochan & Cappelli, 1999; Legge, 2005). As its popularity grew, HRM overcame geographical boundaries and entered non-Western socio-organizational spheres. By the 1990s, HRM was being used in Sri Lanka’s apparel industry, which was the country’s second largest foreign income generator and a key job provider—especially for rural young women (Kelegama, 2005; Wijetunaga, 1997).

The emergence of HRM was imperative to the survival of the apparel industry in the sociopolitical context of Sri Lanka in

the 1990s. During this period the industry was struggling with internal and external dynamics, including high labor turnover, intensified global competition, buyers’ demand for “ethical trade initiatives,” and trade union pressures (Devanarayana, 1997; Kelegama, 2005; Wijetunaga, 1997). However, the emergence of HRM in this context posed a threat to its “original” Euro-American character (Guest, 1990). In order to adapt it to local conditions, and to supplement the apparel industry’s long-established “personnel management tradition,” HRM had to be modified and, to some extent, its Euro-American character had to be abandoned. Interestingly, the role that the language of HRM played was crucial to this modification process. That is, the language of HRM modified, replaced, or adapted the established language of the personnel management tradition—through which the rural young women’s (non)existence in the apparel industry as shop-floor workers was portrayed and represented (Jayawardena, 2010).

Despite these developments, scholars have not yet studied what the phenomenon of HRM looks like on the factory floor of the Global South—such as we see in the case of Sri Lanka’s apparel industry. Similarly, there has been no work to date on the role of the language of HRM in the apparel industry here, although some scholars have shown the crucial role that HRM language has played in (Western) workplaces (Hamilton, 2001; Kamoche, 1995; Keenoy, 1999; Watson, 1995a, 1995b). Scholars—even those interested in HRM’s role in the non-Western workplace—have tended to focus on the policies, practices, and strategies of HRM in individual firms. Thus, although there have been a few studies in the area (e.g., Francis, Parkes, & Reddington, 2014), research has not yet taken into consideration the culturally specific and sociopolitically embedded nature of employment management on the factory floor in the Global South (Delbridge, Hauptmeier, & Sengupta, 2011; Janssens & Steyaert, 2012).

However, there are key questions to answer about the role and the nature of HRM and its language in the apparel industry in this region, particularly in relation to managing rural young women and their (non)existence in the industry as shop-floor workers: What sort of role has the language of HRM played in

Address correspondence to Dhammika Jayawardena, Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka. E-mail: [dhammika@sjp.ac.lk](mailto:dhammika@sjp.ac.lk)

the process of supplementing the personnel management tradition, and in this process has the identity of HRM changed? If so, what does the phenomenon of HRM look like in Sri Lanka's apparel industry?

In order to address these questions, this article examines the use of HRM in the apparel industry and so (re)articulates the identity of HRM in the industry. First, I develop a succinct account of the industry to establish the landscape of the research. Second, I explain the fieldwork carried out here. Third, based on this fieldwork research, I analyze the "rupture" of HRM that took place when it emerged in the industry in the 1990s. I show how this rupture led to the formation of two sets of labor management practices, which I term doing and undoing HRM. I use these classificatory constructs—doing and undoing HRM—to signify human resource policies and practices that are and are not officially endorsed and applied by the industry. Informed by poststructuralist notions about language (Barthes, 2000; Derrida, 1982, 1988, 1997), I then critically engage with textual forms of doing and undoing HRM. I show how certain textual forms intermingle in this process of labor management. I illustrate how the phenomenon of HRM appears, or unfolds, in the apparel industry as a "web of texts." During this discussion I examine a popular (mis)understanding of the language of HRM, and show how the textual form of doing HRM usurps the main role of the process of labor management in this context. In conclusion, I argue that while doing HRM and undoing HRM are entwined, the "antagonism" that results from their coexistence is, nevertheless, the means by which HRM maintains its continued existence in Sri Lanka's apparel industry.

### LANDSCAPE OF THE STUDY: THE APPAREL INDUSTRY, ITS SOCIAL ACTORS, AND THE FIELDWORK

Sri Lanka's apparel industry emerged as the main player in the liberal economic policy adopted by the government of the United National Party (UNP) in the late 1970s. Initially, the industry was mainly located in the newly established Free Trade Zone (FTZ) in Katunayake, which is 26 km from Colombo and close to Sri Lanka's only international airport (at that time). The FTZ, with the blessing of the IMF and the World Bank, was established under statute: the 1978 Greater Colombo Economic Commission Act No. 4, which was intended to attract foreign investors. Soon, the industry had become the second largest foreign income generator in the Sri Lankan economy. It provides jobs for more than 300,000 employees, over 80% of whom are rural young women who have been absorbed into the industry's labor-intensive workplace as shop-floor workers (Jayaweera, 2002; Kelegama, 2005; Wijetunaga, 1997).

The women's arrival in this industry was either unheeded or not welcomed by many influential actors both in the apparel industry and in wider Sri Lankan society, including factory owners, those living in the FTZ area, landlords providing lodgings to migrant women, trade unions, and left-wing political parties. As a result, women were often subject to adverse managerial

as well as sociocultural forces and processes, such as sexual harassment, unattainable production targets, and inhumane punishments at work; they also faced inadequate housing, health care, sanitary, and transport facilities (Devanarayana, 1997; Lynch, 2007; Samanmali, 2007). The impact of these conditions on workers and the industry was twofold. On the one hand, given the women's origins in villages, these conditions added to their marginalization; they were seen as *gode ganu lamai* (young rustic/village women)—as "backward" and "submissive." They were typically regarded as seeking dowries for their marriages (de Silva, 2002). Paradoxically, women's collective identity in the industry was soon established as *lamai*—a patronizing term, "little ones"—despite the significant role they play here (Devanarayana, 1997; Jayawardena, 2010; Perera, 2008). This collective identity surpasses the "innocent" meaning of the term *lamai* in wider Sri Lankan society: It is generally used to refer to young boys and girls. Here, however, it was employed alongside the derogatory nicknames used to refer to migrant women, such as *juki lamai* and *juki badu* (*juki* commodities), which suggest that the women have been "plugged" into Japanese electronic sewing machines—known as *Juki* (Lynch, 2007). Thus, the *lamai* identity as regards women shop-floor workers' (non)existence on this localized global factory floor, where global capital entwines with local women's bodies and labor, signifies that they have been objectified, if not "infantilized" (Jayawardena, 2010).

On the other hand, the adverse sociocultural and managerial forces and processes, outlined in the preceding, brought together managerial and nonmanagerial workers in the industry with other social actors in the FTZ area (landlords, feminist activists who were involved in labor matters and women's issues in the zone, and small-scale vendors) to determine the nature of women workers' (non)existence in the industry—as *lamai*, the little ones. For example, the shortage of lodgings was resolved with the cooperation of private landlords, and feminist activists formed nongovernmental organizations to support migrant workers on labor and women's issues (Devanarayana, 1997; Hewamanne, 2008). As a result, the various roles that these social actors play in the FTZ and in the industry are imperative to the industry's survival, as they are directly or indirectly involved with its everyday affairs and with its labor management practices.

### Fieldwork

Owing to the nature of the industry and its actors, my fieldwork took place in multiple research settings. They included two apparel companies—"Village Company" (VC), which is situated in a small village 30 km from Colombo, and "Zone Company" (ZC) in the Free Trade Zone. In addition, some shop-floor workers' lodgings, two feminist activists' offices, a "girls' hostel" operated by ZC, and a few small shops in the FTZ were also research settings. My intention was to gather and generate the "stories" or "texts" woven by these

actors in order to understand how they intermingled and interacted in labor management processes and practices (such as recruitment and selection), as well as in the formation of women shop-floor workers' collective identity as *lamai*.

During fieldwork, first in VC (from April to June 2007) and then in ZC and the Free Trade Zone (from July to August 2007), I conducted a series of semistructured and unstructured interviews and observation. Interview participants comprised the general manager (GM), the human resource manager (HR manager), and the operations or factory manager of both companies, and the floor manager, the assistant human resource manager (assistant HR manager), and the human resource executive in ZC. The counselor, one production assistant, two supervisors, and three shop-floor workers in VC, and two shop-floor workers in ZC also became participants. In addition, during the final phase of fieldwork, I conducted unstructured interviews in the FTZ with the matron of the girls' hostel, one landlord and his wife, who provide lodgings to women working at ZC, one small-scale vendor, and three feminist activists.

When I interviewed the company actors (with the exception of the shop-floor workers), my focus was on their role in managing shop-floor labor and their affect on women shop-floor workers' collective identity as *lamai*. I raised questions about the participants' involvement in different work processes (such as work studies and assembly-line balancing) and in the human resource department (as regards recruitment and selection, and counseling, for example). I asked them to articulate why and in what contexts the term *lamai* is used to describe and refer to the shop-floor workers. Some situational questions varied from one participant to another. For example, during the interview with the floor manager I asked about the strategies employed to manage workers and to achieve production targets, while my interview with the counselor was focused on how workers' collective identity as *lamai* is formed and established in the counseling process.

Interviews with shop-floor workers and with social actors in the FTZ were unstructured. I encouraged workers to reflect on their (non)existence in the industry as *lamai*—both as it had been under the personnel management tradition and as it was now under HRM. I thus facilitated workers in articulating their "stories" in relation to how they see, feel, and think about their collective identity as *lamai* both in the industry and in the FTZ more widely. Here, for example, I asked questions about workers' relationships with their colleagues, supervisors, landlords, and vendors. During the interviews I also used the term *lamai* to refer to workers. This was not only to adapt to the scenario as it emerged, but also to observe to what extent the participant(s) followed or repeated my term.

When I interviewed actors in the FTZ I encouraged them to articulate their stories vis-à-vis the *lamai* identity and in relation to the management of women's labor in the industry with respect to the role they played—as landlords, vendors, or activists. For example, during my interview with the landlord and his wife, I asked questions about their relationship with their

tenants/the workers, as well as about any perceived misconduct. Questions to feminist activists mainly referenced the ways in which they attempted to (un)do the *lamai* identity, in part by portraying workers as "proletarian women." I asked some follow-up questions about how they reflected on their role as "activists" vis-à-vis the shift in labor management practices in the industry from the personnel management tradition to HRM.

Thus, taking the view that knowledge and evidence are contextual, situational, and interactional (Mason, 2002, p. 64), during the interviews I facilitated the participants in what Mason (2002) calls reconstructing "situational," or "contextual," knowledge. Furthermore, the participants' level of involvement and the interviews' duration differed from one participant to another. For example, the interviews with managers and social actors varied from 30 minutes in length to 1 hour, whereas interviews with shop-floor workers lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. In fact, workers were generally reluctant to express their views freely. Other than with three workers, all the interviews were digitally recorded; the participants agreed to this. Further, during or at the end of the interviews, I gathered some written texts—secondary data (e.g., employee handbooks, performance appraisal forms, copies of the companies' monthly news magazine) that embodied the human resource policies and practices of the two companies. Some social texts that embodied workers' (non)existence in the industry—for example, leaflets and tabloid papers created by feminist activists and workers—also form part of this secondary data.

To further examine how different actors play their role and interact in the process of managing shop-floor labor and in respect of (un)doing the *lamai* identity, I conducted observation in selected "socio-spatial arrangements." These included time spent on the factory floor, in Joint Consultative Committee meetings—an "alternative" industrial relations encounter proposed under the Greater Colombo Economic Commission Act—and in company cafeterias. Apart from simply "being there" and interacting with the actors, during my observations I took some photographs of posters and notices. Also, I recorded poems, free verse, and feature articles posted by workers as "news" items displayed on the cafeteria walls. I did not attempt to use observation schedules to record specific patterns of behavior relating to different actors. Thus, my observation emerged as an ongoing situational approach, which was shaped by the nature of the research settings and what I wanted to observe in the selected socio-spatial arrangements (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Mason, 2002).

In addition, during fieldwork I participated in the regular visits carried out by ZC's HR staff to the lodgings of absent shop-floor workers. The purpose of this kind of "tour"—which is unique to the FTZ, although it is common practice in the zone—was to encourage absentees to report to work. During the tour I observed that the company staff and social actors in the FTZ area intermingle in the process of managing shop-floor labor and in relation to doing and undoing the *lamai* identity outlined in the preceding. I recorded my experiences as an

observer in a field notebook in the form of detailed summaries (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Mason, 2002). Thus, my exposure to the multiple research settings in general, and to both the oral and written texts I gathered and generated in these settings in particular, have provided me with a means by which I have been able to discern “what HRM looks like in Sri Lanka’s apparel industry.” To make this world accessible to the reader, I next describe the “shift” that has occurred in labor management practices in Sri Lanka’s apparel industry.

## THE SHIFT IN LABOR MANAGEMENT

The role that the personnel management tradition played in the apparel industry in Sri Lanka was not one of “welfare” and “care” as found in personnel management in the West, where it had replaced the arbitrary power of the foreman (Kochan & Cappelli, 1999; Legge, 2005). In the apparel industry the personnel management tradition was linked with inhumane labor practices and physical punishments—such as making shop-floor workers stand in the sun, and hitting them on the head—and used arbitrary rules and regulations (e.g., as regards compulsory overtime work) to manage shop-floor workers (Devanarayana, 1997; Samanmali, 2007).

However, in the latter part of the 1980s emerging trends in the wider society as well as in the apparel industry itself compelled the industry to change its working practices, particularly with regard to labor management. During this period the apparel industry experienced slow growth in productivity and high labor turnover; it was under mounting pressure from global competition and buyers’ demands for ethical trade initiatives. By the early 1990s, the industry was also being shaped by developments in Sri Lankan society, such as the fall of the UNP government, which had been in office for 17 years. It was also affected by the aftermath of the 1987–1989 youth insurrection, which cost nearly 60,000 lives, including those of some apparel workers (Devanarayana, 1997). The change of government, coupled with the aftermath of the insurrection, brought back into politics the heretofore subjugated voices of working-class people, students, and unemployed young people, which led to a record number of trade union actions.

In this context the apparel industry embraced a new labor management apparatus. This was intended to supplement the personnel management tradition, which had been identified as the main cause of the high labor turnover. VC’s general manager reminisced about this period as follows:

And from there was another change [in labor management] where we were talking more loudly about people recognizing their skills. And then in 1992 we completely stopped checking people [at the security gate]. And his [newly appointed GM] story was that, you know, [if] you can trust the person for eight hours to get your work done, then how the hell can’t you trust [her/him] when the person goes out and comes in. Right, it was at that time, about 45 minutes, a long queue, where every [shop-floor] employee [is] body checked and then [they] went out. And you know, many of those would have come from long distances, they got to go back home.

And then maybe they cooked for their children, because most of them are women. And then still you keep them for about 45 minutes at the gate. . . . After you stop, after stopping checking . . . So what happened—these are the, you know, the basic turning points. There we saw real change in [managing] people.

This “real” change in managing people, as the GM observed, took place through new labor management practices, such as stopping body checks and recognizing workers’ skills. These new practices were promoted under the banner of HRM, and were more generally seen as being a way forward in terms of labor management in the industry over this period.

## The HRM Rupture

However, the shift from the personnel management tradition to HRM did not mean that the industry embraced HRM enthusiastically, as articulated in market managerialism (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010). Nor did it end the dominance of the norms of the factory floor over labor management practices (e.g., as regards “scientifically” driven targets and compulsory overtime). Rather, the factory floor norms remained, as VC’s HR manager explains:

We [the HR department] provide the requirements of the factory floor. That is, now we have the number of units that should be generated in a month. It is up to those units that the *lamaya* [female shop-floor worker] might be able to produce. It is according to those units that our profits increase. Increasing the number of units means the company profit increasing. Increasing the number of units is a goal of the HR department. We link directly with production.

In this context—in which the goals of the HR department were driven by factory floor objectives—the changes that took place in labor management practices were largely symbolic. However, as a feminist activist recounts of the early 1990s, this period established a new mode of controlling the workforce:

What happens in most factories, personnel managers merely become human resource managers. Not any change of attitudes. But when taking [a company] like Max Garments [pseudonym], they use advanced methods, sports [sports activities], their [workers’] other requirements. By doing all that [the old] method [was replaced], [and] a new way of control is begun.

Thus, “change” here meant the replacement of “personnel management” with a new title—HRM—alongside heralded changes that were actually only cosmetic in practice. As such, the personnel management department was retitled the department of human resource management; the personnel manager/officer was replaced by the HR manager/executive; the welfare officer was replaced by the counselor; in most cases such replacements simply changed the job titles. In fact, in VC, this is how the position of counselor was created from the job of the factory nurse, as the GM recounts:

She was [the] nurse. She was the person who brings me the complaints; you know, the grievances of the normal people. . . . Because [female shop-floor workers] go to the medical room and then have [a] chat with the nurse. Then I realized that I should establish [a counseling position] and then took [her] away from the nurse

role and gave her *sarees* [the traditional dress of Sri Lankan women]. So that she will have a mature look. You know—[a] motherly kind of attitude.

Against this background, depoliticized individual counseling gradually crept into the domain of labor relations as an alternative to what had been the emerging collective bargaining endeavors of the 1990s. Similarly, on the factory floor, direct surveillance and negative reinforcement—in relation to virtually unattainable production targets—were replaced by competitive incentive schemes and motivational packages. In VC, for example, in each month the most productive line was selected out of the 19 lines at work. Workers in the selected line were awarded financial incentives for the following month. In addition, as they disclosed during fieldwork, some line supervisors covertly organized informal motivational packages to encourage workers in their lines to beat the competition.

In this context, in which workers were required to be extremely competitive, a woman who worked at ZC, with more than 10 years' experience in the industry, recalls her experiences, then and now:

[The number of garments] we sewed in a week, before [in the past], now we sew [the same number] within a day. When the workload increases, *lamai's* target also increases.

Furthermore, policies aimed at labor management were now aligned with foreign buyers' demand for ethical trade initiatives. Thus, the impression that the worker was “the most important asset” was encouraged through internal and external communications and media channels (e.g., through mission statements and job advertisements). The mission statements of both companies explored here glorify the women workers as “Our most valuable asset”—a management mantra described as follows by VC's HR manager vis-à-vis his department's annual plan:

Human resource is the most valuable resource we have. We can't do anything without *lamai*. Machines don't work by themselves. So we are flexible about those [plans].

Thus, the HR department was positioned as the workers' savior: Despite the fact that the norms of the factory floor put significant pressure on the women, they were HRM's “target group.” The department was supposed to look after the workers' emotional well-being, while production executives and supervisors were trying to persuade workers to achieve targets. ZC's HR manager describes this challenge as follows:

Most of the time we have “one to one,” an “eye to eye” relationship with *lamai*. Like checking absenteeism; every day we go [to the factory floor] and check who has come, who has not come, what are the problems? . . . In the guise of checking absenteeism what we actually do is we practically go there and meet each other.

Thus, this new set of labor management practices—HRM—was set against the collective consciousness of women shop-floor workers as being “estranged labor” (Marx, 1959) in this localized global industry in which workers' collective identity was (and continues to be) established as *lamai*, the little ones.

However, when HRM emerged in this context it had to encompass the contradictory expectations both of the industry and of an influential group of social actors (HR professionals, managers, business consultants, professional institutions, textbook writers, and researchers) who produce and reproduce “knowledge,” or the “episteme,” of HRM. In fact, the industry embraced HRM as a way of assimilating the external and contextual trends of the 1990s. However, the desire of this group of social actors (whom I term here the “epistemic community” of HRM) was to *transform* the existing episteme of internal labor/employment management practices in such a way as to inculcate *commitment* among workers. Thus, since its emergence, the role that HRM is supposed to play has been, on the one hand, *political*—a means of assimilating prevailing socioeconomic trends—and, on the other, *epistemic*—a means of transforming the way in which the objects of knowledge as regards labor management were produced and reproduced (Spivak, 2001, p. 58).

These “dualistic” aims and roles were inseparable: Production and reproduction of the knowledge/episteme of labor management often maintained the prevailing (political) structures and processes of managing labor (Foucault, 1988). Nevertheless, in their attempt to adapt to the industry, these dualistic roles compelled the modification of HRM, and so, to some extent, it lost its original Euro-American character. This created a “rupture” in HRM itself, which caused a split in labor management into two distinct sets of practices, which I conceptualize here as “doing” and “undoing” HRM.

### Doing HRM

“Doing HRM” is the officially endorsed way of managing labor in the apparel industry. It represents a set of generic policies (such as equal job opportunities) and processes (such as recruitment and selection) that are re-produced by the epistemic community. As a result, the textual form of doing HRM, in which these policies and processes are embodied, is mainly comprised of the industry's official written HRM texts (e.g., employee handbooks, training manuals/videos, and job advertisements). However, doing HRM is also embodied in oral texts: for example, in spoken texts created at selection interviews. Therefore, the textual form of doing HRM remains the official and explicit means of communicating and inculcating key HRM goals (commitment being the main one of these) among the shop-floor workers. I term this “textual HRM.”

However, textual HRM is not always successful in communicating and inculcating the key goals of HRM, as it does not embody—and may even hide—some facets of labor management. For example, the “motivational packages” implemented by some VC line supervisors were not embodied in any HRM text in the company. On the other hand, doing HRM, which is embedded and embodied in textual HRM, does not take into account the wider sociopolitical realities involved in labor management. Rather, it embraces an apolitical stance that such

issues are primarily internal—that is, they are institutional or industry-bound, and are due to mismanagement. For example, in both companies studied here, managers in general and HR managers in particular either believe or are keen to accept that problematic issues of labor management, such as high labor turnover, are outcomes of mismanagement. As a result of this apolitical stance, coupled with HRM's Euro-American character, it has not always been possible to adapt doing HRM to the prevailing socioeconomic context within which the apparel industry operates. Therefore, doing HRM per se does not produce a self-reliant managerial process but rather one that intermingles with “native” social discourses and with the everyday procedures and practices of managing labor, such as visiting the lodgings of absent employees. Such practices I term “undoing HRM.”

### Undoing HRM

Unlike doing HRM, “undoing HRM” is neither driven nor openly sponsored by the epistemic community. Thus, its episteme is not completely based on market managerialist discourses of labor management. Instead, undoing HRM is embedded and embodied in native social discourses and narratives of various themes—such as gender, love, children, marriage, and working-class emancipation. In the wider society, these discourses and narratives tend to appear in written form—in newspaper reports, soap operas, and free verse, for example. In the context of the apparel industry, however, they appear primarily in “untraceable” oral forms—in dialogues, stories, and jokes told both in the industry and in the FTZ more widely (Jayawardena, 2010). Thus, I term oral and written texts that comprise the textual form of undoing HRM “local texts.”

Local texts are primarily formed in Sinhala, the language of shop-floor and nonmanagerial workers; this is the apparel industry's “subaltern” language. English remains the dominant managerial language; shop-floor workers are not comfortable with its use (Jayawardena, 2010; Perera, 2008). On the other hand, the authorship of local texts comprises a wide array of people and institutions that are interested in the industry and its happenings, directly or indirectly, to some extent. They include industry actors (managers, factory supervisors, canteen workers, shop-floor workers, and, more surprisingly perhaps, HR personnel disregarding their role as agents of the epistemic community), and other social actors in the FTZ and beyond (landlords, feminist activists, small-scale vendors, journalists, politicians, and film directors). As a result, local texts interconnect subversive and subordinated aspects and voices of the industry with its explicit aspects and voices. They manifest a fuller picture of labor management in Sri Lanka's apparel industry. For example, when ZC wishes to recruit or promote factory supervisors, the female assistant HR manager states that priority is given to male over female applicants, as there is a belief that women are not capable of performing a “tough job” such as that of a factory supervisor. She says:

Who reaches to supervisory level in this trade [industry] are men-folks. . . . That's . . . hmm . . . now sometimes women are more sensitive. Now in this work environment, [the supervisor] has to work under high pressure. To a certain extent, womenfolk might be less able to cope with that pressure.

That “women are not tough” or that “they cannot do tough jobs” are the assumptions driven not by ZC's textual HRM but by the dominant gender discourses in Sri Lankan society (see Hewamanne, 2008). Thus, local texts implicitly and explicitly violate and undo the core norms of doing HRM—textual HRM (e.g., as regards “equal employment opportunities,” as seen in ZC's employee handbook). Indeed, local texts—undoing HRM—are seen as lacking in sophistication and as relating to and derived from “ordinary” people; thus, doing HRM plays what is regarded as being a more official and “honorable” role.

However, this does not mean that the epistemic community—HR staff members—are not involved in or are reluctant to undo HRM. Because of the inherent ineffectualness of doing HRM they often undo HRM, as, for example, when visiting absent employees' lodgings, or in such “unsophisticated” processes as recruiting shop-floor workers from rural areas. Yet none of the means of undoing HRM are recorded in the form of textual HRM—like the recruitment process, for example, in which HR representatives go to rural areas and conduct interviews with the support of community leaders such as regional politicians, who have significant influence over the interview process. It is not the case that HR staff discloses and endorses this as an ideal means of labor management. However, undoing HRM resolves certain labor management needs: recruiting from rural areas to settle labor shortages, for example, or minimizing absenteeism by visiting absent employees' lodgings. In such cases, doing HRM would be ineffectual, and the HR staff is eager to accomplish the ends required. Therefore, undoing HRM takes place as part of doing HRM: The former buttresses the latter, although the method is not officially recognized by the industry. Consequently, doing and undoing HRM are inseparable from each other while at the same time they are in some respects mutually antagonistic. This intermingling suggests not only that textual HRM and local texts are substituted for each other in the process of labor management here; it also suggests that the phenomenon of HRM unfolds in Sri Lanka's apparel industry in the form of a “web of texts.”

### HRM: A “WEB OF TEXTS”

However, this aspect of HRM does not mean that all referents are enclosed in textual HRM or in local texts (Derrida, 1988). Nor does it imply that the possible meanings of the linguistic categories/signifiers embedded and embodied in this textual web (e.g., human resource, or *lamai*) are interminable or indeterminable. Instead, understanding HRM as a web of texts shows that the possible meanings remain neither fully present nor fixed (Keenoy, 1999), but postponed (Derrida, 1978, 1982).

For example, the signifier/term human resource is always in a position to signify *lamai*, the deferred meaning of the signifier (or vice versa). This is possible because the signifier oscillates from one context to another—for example, from the boardroom to the VC factory, or when a piece/text of textual HRM (or a local text) is woven, as in the case of VC’s annual HR department plan, outlined here by the HR manager:

It’s okay to change plans a little. Because human resource is the most valuable resource we have. We can’t do anything without *lamai*. Machines don’t work by themselves.

Thus, in this industry context, understanding HRM as a web of texts shows that the meanings of the signifiers of textual HRM (human resource) and local texts (*lamai*) are substituted for each other in the process of labor management.

### The Supplementation

In this process of substitution, or *supplement*, one linguistic category/signifier—of textual HRM and local texts—appears on behalf of another linguistic category/signifier, and one linguistic category/signifier interdicts its own meaning as well as the meaning of another linguistic category/signifier: For example, *lamai* appears instead of human resource, or vice versa. Consequently, the sign—the associative total of the signifier (*lamai*) and the signified (female wage labor)—supplements the “thing” itself—the reality, the materiality, or whatever we might choose to label it (Barthes, 2000; Derrida, 1982). Indeed, in this supplement process the signified—“female wage labor”—forms a new sign—“infantilized women’s labor”—as a result of its fusion with the signifier *lamai* (Walkerline, 1989). Consequently, the signifier *lamai* becomes the signification of women shop-floor workers’ existence as “little ones”; in fact, it also denotes their nonexistence as “women.” In this process, the sign, according to Derrida (1982, p. 9), is “put in the place of the thing itself. . . . The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present.” So the sign, or the sum of signs, not only plays a vital role between the signifier(s) and the signified(s)—of textual HRM and local texts—but also supplements the “materiality” of workers’ (non)existence as *lamai*.

Thus, busy young women are plugged into systematically engineered production lines, which is the materiality of women shop-floor workers, the *lamai*, in Sri Lanka’s apparel industry. However, this materiality is “erased” or substituted in textual HRM, since workers here are called “sewing-machine operators,” “human resource,” or “team members” in written texts of textual HRM, as in the ZC employee handbook, for example. Yet the supplement does not end here: The same sewing-machine operators are referred to and represented as *lamai* on the ZC factory floor, as their factory manager observes:

They [operators] have separate lines. There are operators who are allocated for those lines. Now, that *lamaya* [a little one] is permanently in that line.

Thus, the supplementation is an integral part of the processes of managing the workers. As a result, these same *lamai* (or pictures of a selected few) can be seen as a human resource on VC and ZC hoardings; they are exhibited under such themes as “Our difference is our human resource,” and the same human resource reemerges as *lamai* when VC’s HR manager explains his department’s annual plan, as outlined earlier. The “scientifically” articulated policies and processes in textual HRM in the apparel industry are also subject to substitution by “unsophisticated” practices—undoing HRM—in the industry, practices that include recruiting workers from rural villages. Similarly, the abstract constructs/signifieds—“loyalty” in written texts of textual HRM such as the ZC employee handbook, for example—are substituted by a “different loyalty” that is articulated by workers in the news items exhibited on the walls of the company cafeteria.

Thus, this substitution, or supplement, process is not as innocent as it might seem. It is neither a mere change in connotation nor a change in the metaphorical meanings of the signifier: In different contexts the signifier appears, is uttered, or disappears (e.g., the term loyalty as it appears in the employee handbook, compared to the connotations of the term in the news items on the cafeteria wall). Nor is it a simple substitution of one name/signifier for another, as in human resource for *lamai*, or vice versa. Indeed, this supplement process does not repeat itself or utter the same thing. On the contrary, it adds to and accumulates what it represents in different contexts of labor management (Derrida, 1997). This is because, like any other signifier, the signifiers of textual HRM (human resource, or sewing machine operator) are “empty”: They do not carry fixed meaning. There is also a “lack” of a signified in both textual HRM and local texts (Barthes, 2000; Derrida, 1978). As a result, the meanings of such abstract constructs as “commitment” or “flexibility” in textual HRM are both allusive and elusive (Dickens, 1998; Keenoy, 1999; Legge, 2005). Likewise, the meanings of such notions as “exploitation” in local texts, such as the pamphlets created by feminist activists, are neither full nor fixed. Thus, this lack or emptiness of the signifiers (and signifieds) is subject to addition, filling, and substitution, as the signifiers oscillate from one context to another, or as a text, which is part of textual HRM (or a local text), is woven in the process of labor management.

Thus, the meanings/messages conveyed by the signifiers of both textual HRM (expressed by the epistemic community) and local texts (expressed by the various social actors outlined earlier) are always subject to substitution; they are always awaiting the next supplement, which is the nature of their deferred presence in Sri Lanka’s apparel industry. As such, a signifier of textual HRM (e.g., human resource) is not meaningful in and of itself. Nor is it “fixed, no[r] free, with respect to the linguistic [epistemic] community that uses it,” as Saussure (1970, p. 47) argues. Rather the signifier—human resource—gains its meaning or conveys its message relative to other signifiers in HRM’s textual web. The other signifiers, on which the term

human resource relies, are not necessarily other signifiers of textual HRM, because doing HRM per se has been at least partially ineffectual in adapting to this localized global industry. Thus, the signifiers of textual HRM, as they oscillate from one context to another, rely on the meanings embedded and embodied in local texts—in undoing HRM. This has been exemplified in the preceding in the case of VC's annual plan for the HR department, where human resource is substituted by *lamai*, which comes from local texts.

The term human resource in the context of the annual HR plan does not necessarily signify the concept of female wage labor generally, or of women shop-floor workers in this particular industry. Similarly, in written textual HRM (e.g., in the employee handbook) the term does not denote "shop-floor workers" or "female wage labor" in the industry as such. Rather, the term human resource, which is mainly embodied in textual HRM, carries a subtle or postponed meaning—as does *lamai*, which is mainly embodied in local texts such as free verse. Furthermore, the deferred presence of the term *lamai*, which is a substitute for human resource—and which embodies workers' (non)existence in the industry—does not signify the concept of "children" in wider society. Rather, it supplements human resource in this particular context of developing the annual HR plan, and signifies "infantilized female labor." Therefore, there is no guarantee that the signifiers of textual HRM or of local texts denote "original" meanings when they appear in different contexts, or that they will carry the same meaning when they move from one context to another; as Derrida (1988) observes, the conditions of context are never absolutely determinable.

Thus, the meaning or truth of textual HRM, or of a local text, is not an isolated utterance or truth unique to that text. The meanings of the ZC employee handbook—an example of textual HRM—are connected with the meanings found in a free verse, or in another local text published by feminist activists, and vice versa. Thus, a single text that appears explicitly as textual HRM (or a local text) always marks its own rupture; it erases what it has already traced—as the truth of managing shop-floor labor. This is because textual HRM—doing HRM—is also always in a position to signify the possibility of undoing HRM, as in the case of VC's annual plan for the HR department, in which human resource becomes *lamai*, the little ones. Therefore, in the process of labor management, the meanings of textual HRM (or of local texts) exist in relation to other texts in a textual web. Yet the "singularity" of textual HRM (or of a local text) remains unaltered (Derrida, 1978).

### THE LANGUAGE OF HRM: IN BETWEEN THE RHETORIC/REALITY DISTINCTION

The idea of HRM as a web of texts poses some theoretico-analytical challenges, particularly in relation to the nature and role of the language of HRM in this localized global industry. HRM language takes two forms here: textual HRM and

local texts, which intermingle and substitute each other, as we have seen. And in this supplement process, similar to Derrida's claim (1997, p. 7) that "writing *comprehends* language," textual HRM—its *written* form—comprehends the language of HRM, although it appears to be an inherently weak form of this language.

On the one hand, the textual form of undoing HRM—local texts—is not endorsed by either the epistemic community or the industry. That is, this form is "untraceable"; its appearance and disappearance are both ephemeral and instantaneous, because local texts are primarily oral and so appear as texts-in-time. On the other hand, textual HRM comprises officially endorsed texts, which occur mainly in written form. Thus, textual HRM remains not only the "legitimate," if not legitimated, form but also the traceable form of labor management in Sri Lanka's apparel industry. For example, in the process of managing labor, the utterance of the term *lamai*, as embodied mainly in local (oral) texts, is bound to textual HRM—its written and hence traceable forms, such as human resource and sewing-machine operator—in order to endorse the "legitimacy" or even the "innocence" of the usage of the term in this context. This is similar to what Saussure (1995, p. 25) states, when he observes, "The written word is so intimately connected with the spoken word it represents that it manages to usurp the principal role."

However, the precedent HRM literature neither explains the (dual/constitutive) nature of the language of HRM in this context nor dissects the supplement process in which textual HRM and local texts attempt to overcome their "ineffectualness." Instead, the literature, informed by a rhetoric/reality distinction, treats the language of HRM, inter alia, as rhetoric, or vice versa (Dickens, 1998; Keenoy, 1997; Legge, 1995, 2005). At the same time, it emphasizes the crucial role played by the language of HRM in the work milieu. For example, the literature shows how HRM language either conceals the "hidden agendas" of HRM, such as labor exploitation, or legitimizes the commodification of labor, which is "the reality" of HRM in capitalist organizations (Keenoy & Anthony, 1992; Legge, 2001, 2005). This would also suggest that the language of HRM is central to the representational crisis of the "realities" of HRM in the workplace (Keenoy, 1997, p. 835). In fact, in early critical as well as mainstream HRM literature, the rhetoric/reality distinction was central to understanding HRM in general, and the language of HRM in particular (Janssens & Steyaert, 2009).

Despite this tendency to (mis)understand the role of HRM language, some scholars are critical of treating the language as sheer rhetoric, or vice versa. For example, Kamoche argues, "The reality of HRM is seen to exist in the first instance in the minds of organizational actors, who subsequently *objectify* their subjective experience through language and ritual" (1995, p. 369). For Kamoche, the language of HRM creates the meaning of HRM and, consequently, constructs the "social reality" of the organization's actors. Similarly, Watson (1995a, 1995b) shows the dual or interconnected nature of the rhetoric of HRM and its reality, arguing, "Those in search of HRM must

be prepared to study words as well as to study practices. They are the two sides of the same coin” (1995a, p. 15). Similar arguments can be found among scholars who adhere to the rhetoric/reality distinction in their early writings, as well as in the work of some others (e.g., see Hamilton, 2001). For example, Keenoy in his later work (1999, 2009) recognizes the limitations of the modernist dualism of rhetoric/reality in relation to the nature and the language of HRM. He explains that HRM language or rhetoric produces social reality in organizations. Legge (2005) also shows that the importance of HRM lies in what she calls the phenomenological reality of its rhetoric. Indeed, as Janssens and Steyaert (2009, pp. 149–150) claim, “Studying HR practices as social practices, one would no longer distinguish between rhetorical utterances, as merely representational, and practices, as objective realities.”

In relation to the nature of HRM language in the present industry context, to understand its role on the factory floor of the Global South, we need to go beyond this rhetoric/reality distinction. This is because the rhetoric/reality distinction tends to privilege one form over another, but textual HRM and local texts do not suppress each other by creating a “preeminent center” that is always the former but not the latter (Derrida, 1997). In fact, in the process of managing shop-floor labor in the apparel industry, textual HRM is entwined with local texts, overcoming the “ineffectualness” of doing HRM, which it represents. Local texts, on the other hand, intermingle with textual HRM and gain legitimacy for the “unsophisticated” (from the perspective of the epistemic community) processes and practices that constitute undoing HRM—such as visiting absent employees’ lodgings. Thus, this interminglement, or “antagonism,” between doing and undoing HRM shows that local texts are always part of the language of HRM.

Indeed, similar arguments can be found in critical writings on HRM. Here, in an attempt to reconfigure the language of HRM, some scholars go beyond the official written texts as being *the* language of HRM (Harley & Hardy, 2004; Kamoche, 1995; Keenoy, 1999). For example, informed by Keenoy (1999), Harley and Hardy (2004, p. 380) recognize “speeches, training videos, books, company and union reports, academic articles, collective agreements, government legislation, etc.” as HRM texts. Nevertheless, the texts that comprise HRM language in this industry, as outlined in the preceding, exceed even these, as local texts (free verse, leaflets, soap operas, and tabloid papers) are also part of the language of HRM, although they are not yet recognized as texts of HRM. Interconnecting both the subversive and subordinated aspects and voices of the industry, local texts manifest a broader picture of labor management, which the use of textual HRM attempts to hide. Thus, I would suggest that textual HRM, or the official written texts alone, cannot be treated as *the* language of HRM in the industry, although what is commonly recognized as such are the official written texts (e.g., see Francis et al., 2014). Rather, HRM language here comprises both textual HRM and local texts.

## CONCLUSION

Textual HRM—doing HRM—concerns not only the rhetoric of HRM. Nor does undoing HRM encompass “the reality” of managing shop-floor labor in this localized global industry, which is hidden under the various layers of doing HRM—textual HRM. Indeed, what we confront or reproduce as the language of HRM in this industry cannot be restricted either to textual HRM or to rhetoric alone, although rhetoric is always part of the language (Kamoche, 1995). Yet, at the same time, this article has shown that textual HRM, although it might appear to be an “inherently weak form,” takes the central role in the process of managing shop-floor labor in this industry context.

Given this reconfiguration of the language of HRM on the factory floor of the Global South, the article challenges our popular (mis)understanding of HRM language—treating the language as rhetoric, or vice versa. It shows the constitutive nature of this language and emphasizes the importance of including local texts to fully capture the role and the nature of HRM and its language in the Global South. Indeed, the article suggests that despite its original Euro-American character, the phenomenon of HRM can always be shaped and aligned to adapt to the context in which it appears; it can be changed to match its current environs. However, HRM as a web of texts occurs neither because of our inability to coin words that control the phenomenon’s identity, nor because of the absence of linguistic categories that are sufficiently robust to fix HRM (Keenoy, 1999, p. 7). Nor is this due to differences in our theoretical positions—the way we look at the phenomenon of HRM—although theory and theoretical differences are imperative to any understanding the phenomenon (Keenoy, 1999; Legge, 2001). Rather, HRM as a web of texts came about primarily because of a material and epistemic shift in labor management in the sociopolitical context of the apparel industry in the 1990s. Indeed, HRM in this localized global industry is formed of a web of texts that experience flux—the appearance, disappearance, and reappearance of meanings; there is an entwining and disentangling of the possibility of meanings of textual HRM and local texts. Thus, while doing HRM and undoing HRM are entwined, the “antagonism” that results from their coexistence is the key determinant, if not the means, by which the phenomenon of HRM has maintained its continued existence in Sri Lanka’s apparel industry, and in which this Euro-American signification of labor management appears or unfolds as a “web of texts.”

## REFERENCES

- Barthes, R. (2000). *Mythologies*. London, UK: Vintage.
- Bryman, A., & Bell, E. (2011). *Business research methods*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Delbridge, R., Hauptmeier, M., & Sengupta, S. (2011). Beyond the enterprise: Broadening the horizons of International HRM. *Human Relations*, 64(4), 483–505.

- Delbridge, R., & Keenoy, T. (2010). Beyond managerialism? *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 21(6), 799–817.
- De Silva, W. (2002). The family: Continuity and change. In S. Jayaweera (Ed.), *Women in Post-Independence Sri Lanka* (pp. 211–244). Colombo, Sri Lanka: CENWOR.
- Derrida, J. (1978). *Writing and difference*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, J. (1982). *Margins of philosophy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, J. (1988). *Limited inc.* Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1997). *Of grammatology*. Baltimore, MD: Jones Hopkins University Press.
- Devanarayana, C. (1997). *A review of Sri Lanka's free trade zone*. Ja-Ella, Sri Lanka: Dabindu Collective.
- Dickens, L. (1998). What HRM means for gender equality. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 8(1), 23–40.
- Foucault, M. (1988). *Politics, philosophy, culture: Interviews and other writings, 1977–1984*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Francis, H., Parkes, C., & Reddington, M. (2014). E-HR and international HRM: A critical perspective on the discursive framing of e-HR. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25(10), 1327–1350.
- Guest, D. E. (1990). Human resource management and the American dream. *Journal of Management Studies*, 27(4), 377–397.
- Hamilton, P. M. (2001). Rhetoric and employment relations. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 39(3), 433–449.
- Harley, B., & Hardy, C. (2004). Firing blanks? An analysis of discursive struggle in HRM. *Journal of Management Studies*, 41(3), 377–400.
- Hewamanne, S. (2008). *Stitching identities in a free trade zone: Gender and politics in Sri Lanka*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Janssens, M., & Steyaert, C. (2009). HRM and performance: A plea for reflexivity in HRM studies. *Journal of Management Studies*, 46(1), 143–155.
- Janssens, M., & Steyaert, C. (2012). Towards an ethical research agenda for international HRM: The possibilities of a plural cosmopolitan framework. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 111(1), 61–72.
- Jayawardena, D. (2010). *Narratives, lamai and female labour: (Re)narrating the untold story of HRM in Sri Lanka's apparel industry*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Leicester.
- Jayaweera, S. (2002). Women in education and employment. In S. Jayaweera (Ed.), *Women in post-independence Sri Lanka* (pp. 99–142). Colombo, Sri Lanka: CENWOR.
- Kamoche, K. (1995). Rhetoric, ritualism, and totemism in human resource management. *Human Relations*, 48(4), 367–385.
- Keenoy, T., & Anthony, P. (1992). HRM: Metaphor, meaning and morality. In P. Blyton & P. Turnbull (Eds.), *Reassessing human resource management* (pp. 233–255). London, UK: Sage.
- Keenoy, T. (1997). HRMism and the languages of re-presentation. *Journal of Management Studies*, 34(5), 825–841.
- Keenoy, T. (1999). HRM as hologram: A polemic. *Journal of Management Studies*, 36(1), 1–23.
- Keenoy, T. (2009). Human resource management. In M. Alvesson, T. Bridgman, & H. Willmott (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of critical management studies* (pp. 454–472). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Kelegama, S. (2005). Ready-made garment industry in Sri Lanka: Preparing to face the global challenges. *Asia-Pacific Trade and Investment Review*, 1(1), 51–67.
- Kochan, T. A., & Cappelli, P. (1999). The transformation of industrial relations and personnel function. In M. Poole (Ed.), *Human resource management: Critical perspectives on business and management* (Vol. I, pp. 70–93). London, UK: Routledge.
- Legge, K. (1995). HRM: Rhetoric, reality and hidden agendas. In J. Storey (Ed.), *Human resource management: A critical text* (pp. 33–59). London, UK: Routledge.
- Legge, K. (2001). Silver bullet or spent round? Assessing the meaning of the high commitment management/performance relationship. In J. Storey (Ed.), *Human resource management: A critical text* (pp. 21–36). London, UK: Thomson Learning.
- Legge, K. (2005). *Human resource management: Rhetorics and realities* (anniversary ed.). Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lynch, C. (2007). *Juki girls, good girls: Gender and cultural politics in Sri Lanka's global garment industry*. London, UK: Cornell University Press.
- Marx, K. (1959). *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*. Moscow, USSR: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
- Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative researching*. London, UK: Sage.
- Perera, S. (2008). Rethinking working-class literature: Feminism, globalization, and socialist ethics. *Differences*, 19(1), 1–31.
- Samanmali, H. I. (2007). *Wetup wediwenawita target ekada wediwe* [When salaries go up, the target also goes up]. *Dabindu*, 23, 9.
- Saussure, F. (1970). On the nature of language. In M. Lane (Ed.), *Introduction to structuralism* (pp. 43–56). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Saussure, F. (1995). *Course in general linguistics*. London, UK: Duckworth.
- Spivak, G. C. (2001). The burden of English. In G. Castle (Ed.), *Postcolonial discourses: An anthology* (pp. 53–72). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Walkerdine, V. (1989). Femininity as Performance. *Oxford Review of Education*, 15(3), 267–279.
- Watson, T. J. (1995a). In search of HRM: Beyond the rhetoric and reality distinction or the case of the dog that didn't bark. *Personnel Review*, 24(4), 6–16.
- Watson, T. J. (1995b). Rhetoric, discourse and argument in organizational sense making: A reflexive tale. *Organizational Studies*, 16(5), 805–821.
- Wijetunaga, L. (1997). Industrial relations in export processing zones: The experience of Sri Lanka. In F. Adewumi (Ed.), *Labour relations in export processing zone: Challenges for organized labour* (pp. 27–46). Lagos, Nigeria: Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dhammika Jayawardena** is a senior lecturer in management and organizational behavior at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka. He received his PhD from the University of Leicester, UK, in 2010. His current research interests focus on critical HRM, language and ethics, and the formation of gender identities in the Global South. He can be reached at [dhammika@sjp.ac.lk](mailto:dhammika@sjp.ac.lk).