

Country Briefing Paper

WOMEN IN SRI LANKA

Asian Development Bank
Programs Department West

May 1999

*The views and interpretations in this paper are those of the authors
and not necessarily those of the Asian Development Bank.*

ISBN No 971-561-216-4
Publication Stock No. 030499

FOREWORD

This study was prepared by Programs Department (West), Division 1 (PW1) as part of the 1999 Sri Lanka Country Operational Strategy Study. The purpose of this paper is to provide information on gender issues to assist Bank staff in country programming and project design and implementation.

The study was largely prepared by Professor Swarna Jayaweera of the Centre for Women's Research, Colombo. Mariam S. Pal, Economist (Social Sector), PW1 provided overall guidance and wrote the section on gender issues relevant to the Bank's operations. The manuscript was prepared for publication by Evelyn San Buenaventura and was proofread by Lily Bernal.

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ACRONYMS

AIDS	acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
CENWOR	Centre for Women's Research
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
COSS	Country Operational Strategy Study
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN)
GCE (AL)	General Certificate in Education, Senior Secondary
GTZ	German Agency for Technical Cooperation
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IRD	Integrated Rural Development Program
JVP	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front)
NGO	nongovernment organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WID	women in development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The situation of women in Sri Lanka has been influenced by patriarchal values embedded in traditional, colonial, and postindependence societies, by relatively liberal traditional laws and gender inequality reflected in the legal system, and by norms introduced during the British colonial administration. In the transition years following colonial rule, Sri Lankan policymakers introduced a social policy package of free health and education services and subsidized food, which dramatically improved women's quality of life. Compared to the rest of South Asia, Sri Lankan women are very well-off, enjoying high life expectancy (74 years), nearly universal literacy, and access to economic opportunities, which are nearly unmatched in the rest of the subcontinent.

Since 1981, Sri Lanka has been engaged in a protracted ethnic conflict in the north and east that resulted in substantial social dislocation and trauma. In addition, social sector expenditure, which had been reduced in the mid-1980s, was further cut back by the increasing financial cost of the war in the late 1980s and in the 1990s. As a result there has been a perceptible deterioration in the quality of health and education services and therefore in the quality of life of women and their families.

The social policies introduced on the eve of political independence in the 1940s promoted free health services that were made increasingly available to women in all economic strata. This island-wide network of health services, especially maternity and child health services established over four decades ago, has contributed significantly to the improvement in the health status of women. Since independence in 1948, to the 1990s, the crude death rate fell from 21.9/1,000 to 5.6/1,000, maternal mortality rate from 16.5/1,000 to 1.4/1,000, and the infant mortality rate from 140/1,000 to 17.2/1,000. Life expectancy has risen from 43.6 years and 41.6 years to 70.1 years and 74.8 years for men and women, respectively. Crude birth rate declined from 36.1/1,000 to 20.1/1,000, fertility rate has declined to 2.2, and contraceptive prevalence is around 60 percent. Female mortality rate was lower than male mortality rate and the male/female population ratio was 100:101 in 1992.

One of the weaknesses in the approach to women's health at the national level in Sri Lanka has been the almost exclusive focus on young children and pregnant and lactating mothers without adequate attention to the whole life cycle of women. Consequently, relatively less attention has been directed to the health needs of the adolescent girl, the occupational health hazards of women workers as for instance from noxious chemicals and heavy or unguarded machinery, and the need for facilities for geriatric care and other services for a growing aging population group. It has not been adequately recognized that domestic violence can be life-threatening for women and that women affected or displaced by the violence and conflict situation in the country need intensive counseling and access to basic health services.

The introduction of free primary, secondary, and tertiary education including university education in 1945 and the change in the medium of instruction from English to the local languages, Sinhala and Tamil, in primary education in 1945 and in secondary education in the 1950s led to

a rapid expansion of educational opportunities. Parents no longer had to choose whether to invest in the education of sons or daughters, and the popular perception that education is a major avenue of upward socioeconomic mobility accelerated the equal access of boys and girls, and of men and women, to general education. The pace of expansion slowed down from the mid-1960s with the increasing influence of “manpower” theories, and virtually stagnated in the 1980s due to reduced social sector expenditure and escalating costs of living under the structural adjustment program, despite the policy directive in the 1978 Constitution to eradicate illiteracy and provide universal access to education, and the provision of free textbooks. In the 1990s the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Jomtien UN Declaration on “Education for All” (1990), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Summits, the provision of further incentives such as school meals and uniforms, and the ongoing educational reforms on the basis of the proposals of the National Education Commission appointed in 1991 have created a more positive climate for educational expansion and change.

Educational participation rates rose rapidly in response to social demand and gender differences declined sharply by the 1960s. However, there has been only a marginal increase in educational participation in the 1980s—83.7 percent boys and 83.6 percent girls in 1981 and 88.3 percent and 87.4 percent, respectively, in 1997 in the 5–14 age groups, and around 40 percent of the 15–19 age group since the 1970s (Appendix 1). There have been more girls than boys in senior secondary grades for two decades—51 percent in Grades 9–11 and 58 percent in Grades 12–13 in 1993. Overall around 6–8 percent of an age cohort do not enter the school system, and around 25 percent reach Grades 12–13. “Dropout” rates are higher among boys than among girls except in the plantation sector and among rural Muslims. A high incidence of early school leaving is seen in low-income urban neighborhoods, settlements, and backward villages and plantations. It is apparent that socioeconomic background rather than gender affects the access of girls to general education.

As economic producers women have been traditionally active in the labor force although labor force participation rates underestimate their participation, particularly in home-based activities in the informal sector. According to official statistics, the female labor force increased more rapidly than the male labor force since the 1960s and particularly in the 1980s, as a consequence of rising educational levels and economic constraints of families, but decreased temporarily in the early 1990s for reasons that are unclear. Slow economic growth and consequent decline in the absorptive capacity of the labor market created massive unemployment from the end of the 1960s, particularly of secondary school leavers and university graduates. Women are more vulnerable to unemployment as shown by their unemployment rates, which have been consistently at least double those of men (Tables 4 and 5).

The quality of employment available to women has also deteriorated since the end of the 1970s. Women have tended to be pushed out of stable employment in the formal sector to marginal economic activities, and to unviable self-employment, while the percentage of unpaid family workers that had declined to 6.5 percent in 1981 has risen to over 20 percent in the 1980s and 1990s. Gender-based occupational segregation in the labor market has not changed significantly. Despite the entry of a few women to new areas of employment, the majority of women are concentrated in domestic and plantation agriculture, traditional local industries, assembly-line industries in the modern sector, in the education and health subsectors, and in domestic service. The number of women working as paid employees declined during the 1980s

and then began to increase in the 1990s again. The reasons for this are not clear. More and more women are own-account and unpaid family laborers.

Women have access to employment opportunities and incomes but they are employed chiefly in semi-skilled labor-intensive industries irrespective of their educational level, without opportunities for upgrading skills. Long working hours, exposure to occupational health hazards, vulnerability to job insecurity, inequitable gender division of labor, and gender subordination in the labor market are characteristic features of women's work in Sri Lanka.

Around half the labor force in professional, semi-professional, and middle-level employment are women because the education and health services have been their traditional fields of employment. But few women have been able to advance beyond the "glass ceiling" and to reach high-level decision-making positions in the public and private sectors. There is at present one woman Secretary of a Ministry and a few women as chief administrators in the public sector and in a bank. The majority of women workers in the services sector are at the bottom of the employment structure in domestic service or manual labor and are outside the purview of labor legislation. However, despite this, the number of female managers has also increased although the number of women employed as professionals has declined.

The demand for domestic labor from oil-rich countries in West Asia and East Asia and even Europe drew women from low-income families who were attracted by the relatively high remuneration paid as compared with their local wages or income. By 1994 these domestic workers accounted for around two thirds of all migrant workers and 78.4 percent of unskilled migrant workers. Around 68 percent were between 21 and 35 years and several had young children. Unlike in earlier years, the Foreign Employment Bureau (established in 1985 in the Ministry of Labor) now attempts to check unscrupulous recruitment practices by agencies, assists migrant women workers with credit and insurance, and provides some pre-employment training. These women make a crucial contribution to foreign exchange revenue and to family income and maintenance. However, the absence of employment contracts and adequate support services result in the continued exploitation of many women by agents and employers, sexual abuse, family dislocation, and children in crisis. Women workers acquire no new skills to enable them to achieve upward occupational mobility on their return.

State policy also encourages self-employment as a response to women's unemployment. Women have been major participants in these programs but have generally enjoyed only minimal economic returns. Income-generating projects to integrate women in development have been marginalized by their isolation from mainstream development and have been under-resourced. Credit and savings projects patterned after the Grameen Bank model¹ by banks and organizations and social mobilization introduced initially by the Change Agents program have given women access to credit without collateral and have strengthened group solidarity and individual self-reliance. The Janashakthi Bank Societies—"banks" organized by women in low-income families in the Hambantota District since 1991—are an example of the credit culture or discipline developed by women operating in small groups. However, most self-employment programs lack critical inputs such as access to technology,

¹ This refers to NGOs in Bangladesh that run a successful savings and credit program for its members, who are mostly women.

vocational skills development, management training, and market information, which are necessary for optimal credit utilization. Consequently, loan repayment rates are high but there has been little significant increase in incomes and relatively few women have been able to move from low productivity, low-income self-employment to microenterprises. Successful women entrepreneurs have been largely those from families with economic resources such as members of the Women's Chamber of Industry and Commerce or some of those supported by nongovernment organizations (NGOs) assisting in entrepreneurial activities. Women are not a homogenous group, but program organizers tend to perceive them as secondary earners with capacity and aptitudes only for ad hoc elementary projects.

Gender ideologies that impact adversely on women are still predominant in Sri Lanka. Women continue to be seen by many policymakers and administrators as "dependent wives" or "supplementary earners" to be used as a labor reserve. The inequitable gender division of labor within households has changed very little and despite the extension of women's economic roles, household work is seen as "women's work"—a norm that some women tend to internalize. The preference for sons is limited, but child-rearing and socialization practices reflect gender role differentiation. Unequal power relations that have been most resistant to change are reflected in male control of female sexuality as in the incidence of rape, incest, and sexual harassment, and in domestic violence. The education process does not seem to have empowered women adequately to challenge existing sociocultural practices by promoting the equality of women and men or to respond adequately to changes in the external environment. Increasing awareness of women's rights can be expected to contribute to the erosion of negative sociocultural values about women.

While Sri Lankan women enjoy high status compared to the rest of South Asia, gender issues have yet to be mainstreamed into the national or local planning process and tend to receive scant attention in national plans as seen in the sporadic reference to women's issues in mainstream development planning in the annual Public Investment Program, which operates as a five-year rolling plan. Improvements in Sri Lanka's social indicators such as high literacy, increased life expectancy, and a low fertility rate were achieved through universal application of social policy that did not discriminate against women but, at the same time, did not seek to actively promote women's issues. As will be noted in the section on the review of education, girls' education was easy to promote because it was free and gender stereotyping in education, while diminished, still exists (Centre for Women's Research 1995). However, as the National Plan of Action for Women in Sri Lanka notes, "Despite these many achievements, one cannot feel complacent about the real situation of women, the majority of whom live under economically deprived conditions and circumstances" (NPAW 1995).

This NPAW was prepared by the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MWA), the National Committee for Women, and representatives of women's organizations but has not yet been incorporated in national or sectoral programs, although sectoral activity plans have been prepared. This NPAW identified eight areas of critical concern: (i) violence against women, women and human rights, and women and armed conflict; (ii) political participation and decision making; (iii) health; (iv) education and training; (v) economic activities and poverty; (vi) media and communication; (vii) environment; and (viii) institutional strengthening and support. In 1998, MWA prepared a three-year development plan for the Ministry and a project has been developed with support from the United Nation's Development Programme for strengthening MWA.

In Sri Lanka poor women, especially those who are household heads or old, face enormous hardships and must fight to ensure their family's economic survival. Macro data and micro studies indicate that their quality of life and employment conditions have deteriorated during the last two decades as a result of, among other factors, increased living costs, which pushed women into low-skilled, low-paid jobs. Indeed in the NPAW, the Government acknowledged that "Women have faced continuing unequal access to economic policies followed by the governments over the last two decades with an increase in the number of women in poverty with little state support for them to withstand the adverse impact of such development policies" (NPAW, page 59, 1995).

Two new vulnerable groups have emerged in recent years. A recent study found that due to changes in the demographic structure and the increasing aging population and rising female life expectancy (which is higher than male life expectancy at 74 years for female compared to 70 years for male), a higher proportion of widows and elderly poor women have become more impoverished. As a result, over half the inmates in the Elders' Home in the study were women, and majority of these women were there because there was no one to look after them at home. It was also found that the human and material resources of low-income families were insufficient to care adequately for aging women. Likewise, geriatric care and homes for the aged are totally inadequate to meet the needs of low-income families.

Another disadvantaged group of women emerged as an outcome of the ethnic conflict in the north and east since the mid-1980s and the social unrest in the south in the late 1980s. Women who have not been economically active have been rendered destitute by the loss of male breadwinners, and have had to seek avenues of income generation for family survival. Many have been displaced from their homes and faced psychological trauma. They have shown great courage in developing coping strategies, but they need assistance to acquire economic resources and to undergo counseling.

The Bank's gender strategy for Sri Lanka should highlight three areas:

- (i) **Focus on poor women.** In Sri Lanka, the poorest and most disadvantaged women are those living in low-income households. Strategies to help these women are linked to poverty reduction programs that have already been identified for the poor (e.g., Janasaviya or Samurdhi), however, special emphasis must be given to the needs of women. The increasing number of aging women will require specific attention. In concrete terms this will mean the following: (a) strengthening the Government's capacity to analyze the situation and needs of poor women. This can be done through the technical assistance mechanism, building on the results of the poverty assessment exercise; (b) conducting a background study on aging women in Sri Lanka to identify some of the main issues and how they can be incorporated into the Bank's future lending program; (c) supporting the Government's efforts to collect monitoring and evaluative data on the impact of poverty reduction programs on women; (d) documenting the impact of the civil conflict on Sri Lankan women, in particular the economic impact of the creation of thousands of female-headed households, the extent of poverty, and identification of the means through which Bank assistance can be utilized once the civil conflict has been resolved; and (e) assessing, through advisory technical assistance support, the needs of returning women migrant workers and how they could best be reintegrated into the economy.

- (ii) **Mainstream gender issues.** In terms of direct policy work, the opportunities for Bank assistance to the Government are limited. The most practical approach for the Bank, therefore, is to give special attention to gender considerations in each of its loans. Specific areas requiring attention are most likely to be in women's employment, professional and vocational training, and the estate sector. In general terms, however, project designs need to give closer attention to the constraints that limit the full participation of women. This factor becomes of critical importance in the case of impoverished women whose multiple roles frequently debar their involvement in the very programs intended to benefit them. The Bank can play a role in mainstreaming gender issues by (a) ensuring that the impact of each Bank loan on women is determined and that women's participation is sought in project design; (b) including gender issues in all Bank economic and sector work for Sri Lanka; (c) encouraging the Government to establish a special internship program for women to facilitate their employment in nontraditional areas such as in the higher ranks of the civil service and in vocational, scientific, and information technology; (d) providing assistance to the Government to strengthen its institutional mechanisms for promoting gender equity, for integrating gender issues into policies, plans, and activities, to realize its goals from the 1995 Beijing Conference,² and for collecting gender-disaggregated data; and (e) providing support to the Government's skill training programs that emphasize the need to eliminate gender-stereotyping in the Sri Lankan education system, especially in scientific and vocational education.
- (iii) **Provide access to microfinance/self-employment.** The programs of the National Development Trust Fund and NGOs have consistently shown that women have a strong interest in microcredit and that this interest appears to be closely related to the level of poverty.³ At present, no sustainable microfinance service for women exists despite this considerable demand. Access to microcredit is of special importance to the estimated 20 percent female-headed households since the latter are confined to the informal sector and have limited resources or bargaining power. The promotion of the development of small-scale self-employment schemes for women, especially rural women already working in agriculture or women living in urban poor areas, may be a good approach to improving their income. Such activities could serve as a "springboard" to larger microenterprises. All Bank-financed microfinance initiatives should make credit for poor women a high priority. Special emphasis should be placed on access to credit for women victims of the civil conflict, plantation workers, returning migrant workers, and poor women. Vocational training, especially in nontraditional areas, should be given to women pursuing self-employment to be financed by credit.

² Refers to the World Conference on Women held in Beijing on 4–15 September 1995 where "the Region's governments unanimously endorsed and adopted the Beijing Platform for Action to accelerate the achievement of the agenda for women"... to improve "the social and economic status of women"

³ Evidence of this potential can be seen from the success of the Janashakti Bank in Hambantota District. Janashakti, a women's program modeled on the Grameen Bank principle, has established several hundred women's societies and a flourishing savings and credit program.

CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW

The Asian Development Bank has had a women in development (WID)¹ policy since 1985. This policy has helped ensure that Bank projects focus on women and their needs in a variety of ways. In 1998, the policy was revised and reformulated into a gender and development (GAD) policy,² which recognizes the evolution of the analysis of gender issues into one where they are addressed at both the micro and macro levels.

This Country Briefing Paper provides an overview of the situation of women in Sri Lanka, and identifies current issues that concern them such as poverty, the impact of the civil conflict, and the plight of migrant women workers. The gender dimensions of policies and programs in Sri Lanka are also presented and assessed. Lastly, gender issues are analyzed within the context of the Bank's operations and the Bank's gender strategy for Sri Lanka is outlined.

This paper has been prepared in the context of the *1998–2001 Country Operational Strategy Study for Sri Lanka*. A shorter version of the Bank's gender strategy for Sri Lanka, which was described in the study, is included here. Two other studies, the Social Sector Profile of Sri Lanka (*Sri Lanka: Responding to New Social Challenges, 1997*) and the Social Sector Strategy of Sri Lanka (*Social Sector Development in Sri Lanka—Issues and Options, 1998*) also provide an overview of the country's social sector and of poverty and gender, and offer additional insights into the human development strategies of the Bank.

¹ R56-85: *Role of Women in Development*, Rev. 1, Final. 16 July 1985.

² R74-98: *The Bank's Policy on Gender and Development*, Rev. 1, Final. May 1998.

WOMEN IN SRI LANKA – DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

The Setting

Introduction

The situation of women in Sri Lanka has been influenced by patriarchal values embedded in traditional, colonial, and postindependence societies, by relatively liberal traditional laws and gender inequality reflected in the legal system, and by norms introduced during the British colonial administration. In the transition years following colonial rule, Sri Lankan policymakers introduced a social policy package of free health and education services and subsidized food, which dramatically improved women's quality of life. Compared to the rest of South Asia, Sri Lankan women are very well off, enjoying high life expectancy (74 years), nearly universal literacy, and access to economic opportunities, which are nearly unmatched in the rest of the subcontinent.

Since 1981 the south has been engaged in a protracted ethnic conflict in the north and east, which has resulted in substantial social dislocation and trauma. In addition, social sector expenditure, which had been reduced in the mid-1980s as a result of the implementation of the structural adjustment programs, was further cut back by the increasing financial cost of the war in the late 1980s and in the 1990s. As a result there has been a perceptible deterioration in the quality of health and education services and therefore in the quality of life of women and their families.

Demographic Background

According to Census data, in 1994, 50.7 percent of the population were women and 41.5 percent of these women were never married.¹ The average age for marriage is 25 years for women and 27 years for men. Recent statistics of female-headed households—18 percent in 1994—would

¹ This is the term utilized by the Census and includes unmarried women.

be an underestimation as the conflict situation has increased substantially the number of widows who are household heads. Official divorce rates are low—2.6 percent in 1994.

Legal Rights and Political Participation

The Constitution of Sri Lanka [Art.12(1) and 12(2), 1978] seeks to guarantee gender equality as a fundamental right and nondiscriminatory new legislation. It is not possible, however, to challenge earlier legislation that violates women's rights, and the provisions relating to employment are not binding on the private sector, thus a substantial proportion of women are not protected as workers.

Sri Lanka ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981 and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. A committee of representatives from state agencies and women's organizations formulated a Women's Charter for Sri Lanka, using CEDAW as a model. The Charter was accepted as a state policy in 1993, and women's nongovernment organizations (NGOs) were successful in lobbying to place it on the political agenda at the 1994 elections in the manifestos of the two major parties. The provisions of the UN Convention and the Charter, however, lack legal validity as steps have not yet been taken to incorporate these rights in the national legal system.

Laws that violate the rights of women are still on the statute books. The Land Development Ordinance (1935), which introduced the British principle of primogeniture in succession in settlements, has yet to be amended to be consonant with the equal inheritance rights in the general law. Women who marry foreigners are disadvantaged because under the present citizenship law, their spouses and children do not automatically become Sri Lankan citizens, unlike the families of men in the same position. The Government's National Plan of Action for Women (NPAW) has recommended that this discrimination be eliminated.

An aspect of the legal system that tends to conflict with the Constitution and international conventions is the personal law that governs family relations and women's rights within the family in each community—the Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims (where daughters have the right to only half the share of sons), for example in "matrimonial fault" conditions for divorce under the general law. Uniformity in personal laws appears to be unattainable in the current context of strong ethnic and religious identity.

The hundred-year-old Penal Code that treated sexual crimes such as rape as minor offenses was amended by Act No. 22 of 1995 after strong lobbying by women's organizations. Stringent punishment is now being imposed for rape and new sections have been introduced in the Penal Code making, for the first time, incest, grave sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and trafficking in women criminal offences. Legislation pertaining to domestic violence has yet to be formulated.²

² In February 1997, police in Colombo introduced a 24-hour helpline for reporting domestic violence. The helpline met with an unexpected and overwhelming response. All calls are investigated and only 10 percent were false alarms (B. Sarwar 1998).

Labor legislation conforms to a great extent to international norms established by International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions. In recent years, equal remuneration (1984), and extension of maternity leave from six weeks to 84 days for the first two pregnancies (1987 and 1988) have been progressive steps. However, Sri Lanka withdrew in 1984 from the ILO Convention prohibiting night work and has not ratified the Convention regarding Discrimination in respect of Employment and Occupations. The minimum age of employment is recognized to be 12 years, but young girls below this age are regularly seen to be employed in agricultural labor, family labor, and domestic service. Regulations regarding the provision of child care services for women workers have never been in operation. The informal sector and domestic service, both areas in which large numbers of women are involved, are outside the ambit of labor legislation. The enforcement of laws has shortcomings especially in the export processing zones (EPZs), where regulations regarding working hours appear to be violated with impunity. Vulnerability to occupational health hazards and job insecurity are also consequences of weak law enforcement.

Legal literacy, counseling, and legal aid programs are available but are very limited in number and in impact. Special women's and children's desks have been opened in 39 police stations but resource constraints have prevented several desks from functioning effectively. Advocacy and monitoring are critical needs in law reform and enforcement.

Although universal franchise was introduced almost six decades ago in 1931 and Sri Lanka had the world's first woman Prime Minister in 1960, and has currently a woman Executive President and a woman Prime Minister, the number of women in Parliament and in local councils is abysmally low. Women have been observed to be politically conscious and to participate extensively in elections, but the percentage of women in Parliament has never exceeded 5 percent as it is now and the percentage is even lower—around 2 percent—in Provincial Councils and Divisional Councils. There have been few women Cabinet Ministers and it was only in the 1994 Parliament that the percentage of Ministers and Deputy Ministers was 16 percent. There has been only one woman Chief Minister in a Provincial Council, two Mayors of Municipal Councils, and three Chairpersons in over 200 Divisional Councils. Currently, proposals to enforce a quota of 25 percent for women in Parliament and local assemblies in the new Constitution are discussed.

Political parties do not appear to be very sensitive to gender issues or to the need for nominating more women candidates, and women's units in political parties tend to perform a servicing role in consonance with the norm of male leadership. The NPAW recommends wider female participation in politics and the provision of opportunities and training to girls to develop leadership. Even in revolutionary movements such as the "Eelam Tigers" and the "Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna" (People's Liberation Front) in the south, women play a subservient and self-sacrificing role.

Health and Nutritional Status

The social policies introduced on the eve of political independence in the 1940s promoted free health services that were made increasingly available to women in all economic strata. This island-wide network of health services, especially maternity and child health services established over four decades ago, has contributed significantly to the improvement in the health status of women. Since independence in 1948, to the 1990s, the crude death rate fell from 21.9/1,000

to 5.6/1,000, maternal mortality rate from 16.5/1,000 to 1.4/1,000, and the infant mortality rate from 140/1,000 to 17.2/1,000. Life expectancy has risen from 43.6 years and 41.6 years to 70.1 years and 74.8 years for men and women, respectively. Crude birth rate declined from 36.1/1,000 to 20.1/1,000, fertility rate has declined to 2.2, and contraceptive prevalence is around 60 percent. Female mortality rate was lower than male mortality rate and the male/female population ratio was 100:101 in 1992.

There has been very little decline in morbidity. The incidence of diarrhea, dysentery, respiratory diseases, and malaria is relatively high, and new threats to health and life have increased—hypertension, breast and cervical cancers, suicide, and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV-AIDS³.

A continuing problem in recent decades is the incidence of undernutrition and malnutrition. The shift in 1979 in the food subsidy to food stamps that were not indexed to cost of living led to an erosion in their value with inflation and to reduced calorie intake below acceptable levels in low-income families. Acute undernutrition or wasting increased among the under-5 population due to (i) protein energy malnutrition, (ii) iron deficiency, (iii) iodine deficiency, and (iv) vitamin A deficiency, to a lesser extent. Maternal undernutrition has resulted in a high incidence of 20 percent low birthweight babies, ranging district-wise from 16.1 percent to 28.3 percent. While no blatant preference for the son is practiced in food allocation within families, food taboos and the still common practice of women eating after other family members could contribute to undernutrition.

One of the weaknesses in the approach to women's health at the national levels in Sri Lanka has been the almost exclusive focus on young children and pregnant and lactating mothers without adequate attention to the whole life cycle of women. Consequently, relatively less attention has been directed to the health needs of the adolescent girl, the occupational health hazards of women workers as for instance from noxious chemicals and heavy or unguarded machinery, and the need for facilities for geriatric care and other services for a growing aging population group. It has not been adequately recognized that domestic violence can be life-threatening for women and that women affected or displaced by the violence and conflict situation in the country need intensive counseling and access to basic health services.

Education and Training

The introduction of free primary, secondary, and tertiary education including university education in 1945 and the change in the medium of instruction from English to the local languages, Sinhala and Tamil, in primary education in 1945 and in secondary education in the 1950s, led to a rapid expansion of educational opportunities. Parents no longer had to choose whether to invest in the education of sons or daughters, and the popular perception that education is a major avenue of upward socioeconomic mobility accelerated the equal access of boys and girls, and of men and women to general education. The pace of expansion slowed down from the mid-1960s with the

³ Human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

increasing influence of “manpower” theories, and virtually stagnated in the 1980s due to reduced social sector expenditure and escalating costs of living under the structural adjustment program, despite the policy directive in the 1978 Constitution to eradicate illiteracy and provide universal access to education, and the provision of free textbooks. In the 1990s the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Jomtien UN Declaration on “Education for All” (1990), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Summits, the provision of further incentives such as school meals and uniforms, and the ongoing educational reforms on the basis of the proposals of the National Education Commission appointed in 1991 have created a more positive climate for educational expansion and change.

Expenditure on education as a percentage of the gross domestic product (GDP), which had declined from 4–5 percent in the 1960s to 2.3 percent in 1985, has gradually increased nearly 3 percent. The distribution of schools reflect the ethnic composition in the country—73 percent Sinhala, 20 percent Tamil, and 7 percent Muslim schools. Around 98 percent of the school-going population are in state schools and 96.6 percent of around 10,000 schools, are coeducational. An island-wide network of schools is available but 22 percent of schools, and more in some districts, are small impoverished schools. The quality of infrastructure and the learning-teaching environment in many schools has declined over the years due to resource constraints. Only 5 percent of schools offer science courses at senior secondary level. In 1991, 23.3 percent of urban schools and only 3.1 percent of rural schools provided such facilities and 22.9 percent of urban schools and 45.9 percent of rural schools were primary or elementary schools. The low priority given to reducing regional disparities in education facilities in the last two decades has resulted in this inequitable distribution of educational opportunities. About 67.3 percent teachers are women but few hold positions of responsibility as principals except in a minuscule number of girls’ schools.

Educational participation rates rose rapidly in response to social demand and gender differences declined sharply by the 1960s. However, there has been only a marginal increase in educational participation in the 1980s—83.7 percent boys and 83.6 percent girls in 1981 and 88.3 percent and 87.4 percent, respectively, in 1997 in the 5–14 age groups, and around 40 percent of the 15–19 age group since the 1970s (Appendix 1). There have been more girls than boys in senior secondary grades for two decades—51 percent in Grades 9–11 and 58 percent in Grades 12–13 in 1993 (Table 1). Overall around 6–8 percent of an age cohort do not enter the school system, and around 25 percent reach Grades 12–13. Dropout rates are higher among boys than among girls except in the plantation sector and among rural Muslims. A high incidence of early school leaving is seen in low-income urban neighborhoods, settlements, and backward villages and plantations. It is apparent that socioeconomic background rather than gender affects the access of girls to general education.

There is congruence too of the socioeconomic background of parents, school facilities, and performance in education. Studies have found no evidence of gender differences in abilities at any age level, but district-wise disparities are wide in attainment levels of girls and boys in basic skills such as language and number in the primary school and in secondary school examinations, ranging from a relatively high average in the Colombo district to a very low average in, for instance, Moneragala district in the southeastern hinterland.

Literacy levels rose with educational expansion but have virtually stagnated in the 1980s—90.5 percent male literacy and 82.8 percent female literacy in 1981 and 92.5 percent and

Table 1: Enrollment in Schools by Level and Sex
(number)

School Year	1985			1993 ^a		
	Total Enrollment	Female Enrollment	% Female	Total Enrollment	Female Enrollment	% Female
1-5	1,898,434	914,209	48.2	1,979,968	954,766	48.2
6-8	850,421	421,354	49.5	1,094,051	540,868	49.4
9-11	758,440	397,719	52.4	906,494	470,494	51.9
6-11	1,608,856	819,073	50.9	2,000,452	1,011,362	50.5
12-13 Science	49,144	22,682	46.2	46,551	21,176	45.5
12-13 Arts	49,924	35,186	70.5	89,031	61,183	68.7
12-13 Commerce	33,722	18,836	55.9	55,563	28,278	50.9
12-13 Total	32,790	76,704	57.8	191,144	110,647	57.9
1-13	3,640,080	1,809,986	49.7	4,172,897	2,077,282	49.8

a Most recent data available.

Source: Annual School Census, Ministry of Education.

87.9 percent in 1994 (Table 2). Gender disparities hardly exist in the population under 45 years of age—the post-free education generations. More women (11.3 percent) had never been to school than men (6.1 percent) in 1991, but more women have GCE OL (secondary) and GCE AL (senior secondary) educational attainment (13.2 percent and 4.7 percent) than men (12.6 percent and 3.0 percent). Literacy and education have facilitated the utilization by women of health services and have contributed to improved health indicators and declining family size and population growth rates.

A competitive examination-dominated education system with a narrow apex has promoted rote learning to the detriment of the development of initiative and other important personal attributes as well as value orientation. Women have an additional disadvantage in that gender-based differentiation in practical subjects, gender role stereotypes in textbooks and other educational materials, and differential behavioral expectations of assertiveness among boys and passivity among girls tend to determine vocational aspirations, limit options and affect self-perception of many girls. The Government's NPAW recommends that gender role stereotyping in educational materials be eliminated.

Higher education is almost synonymous with education in the 11 conventional universities and Open University as alternate opportunities are limited chiefly to the law, accountancy, management, and computer courses, teacher education, and social work. Around 30,000 students are enrolled in universities and an almost equal number in external degrees, and nonuniversity tertiary level institutions including the few new institutions affiliated to overseas institutions—in all, only 3–4 percent of the relevant age group. The social composition of the university student population ceased to be elitist by the end of the 1960s and since then around 70 percent have been

Table 2: Literacy Rate by Sector and Gender
(percent)

	1946 Census	1953 Census	1963 Census	1971 Census	1981/82 CF & SE Survey	1981 Census	1985/86 LF & SE Survey	1991 House- hold Survey	1994 ^a Demo- graphic Survey
All Island									
Total	62.8	69.0	76.8	78.5	85.4	86.5	84.2	86.9	90.1
Male	76.5	80.7	85.6	85.6	89.9	90.5	88.6	90.0	92.5
Female	46.2	55.5	67.1	70.9	81.1	82.8	80.0	83.8	87.9
Urban									
Total	76.2	82.6	87.7	86.2	89.7	93.3	89.1	92.3	93.2
Male	84.5	88.5	91.8	90.3	92.9	95.3	92.4	94.0	94.8
Female	65.7	74.1	82.5	81.5	89.8	91.0	86.1	84.3	81.8
Rural									
Total	60.1	66.4	70.1	76.2	86.0	84.5	84.6	87.1	89.5
Male	74.7	79.0	83.9	84.1	90.1	89.0	88.5	89.9	92.1
Female	43.0	52.4	63.6	67.9	82.1	79.9	80.7	84.3	87.1
Estate									
Total	na	na	na	na	64.8	na	59.4	66.1	na
Male	na	na	na	na	78.0	na	74.5	79.0	na
Female	na	na	na	na	52.6	na	45.9	52.8	na

a Most recent data available.

na = Data not available.

Note: 1. Population 5+ years.

2. Estate Sector included in Rural Sector in Census.

CF & SE Survey – Consumer Finance and Socioeconomic Survey, Central Bank of Ceylon

LF & CE Survey – Labor Force and Socioeconomic Survey, Department of Census and Statistics

Household Survey – Household Income and Expenditure Survey, excluding north and east

Demographic Survey – Excludes north and east

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Central Bank of Ceylon.

from the rural sector and less than 35 percent are from upper- and middle-class families. The number of female students has been between 40 and 45 percent of the total since the end of the 1960s. Faculty-wise distribution indicates that women are well represented in all courses except in engineering where their proportion has stagnated from 12 to 14 percent since the mid-1970s, in consonance with gender perceptions of “male excellence” in technology (Table 3).

The weakest sector in the educational system is vocational-technical education. Not only are existing facilities inadequate to meet the needs of school leavers, and are uncoordinated and uneven in quality despite the establishment of the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission in 1991, but there are also very wide gender imbalances in participation in the available opportunities, largely as a consequence of the socialization process and the gender role assumption of administrators and employers. The Government has recognized this in the NPAW and has proposed advocacy programs and equal access to women in training programs.

Table 3: Faculty-wise Distribution of University Students

Faculty	1966		1975		1992	
	Total (no.)	Female (%)	Total (no.)	Female (%)	Total (no.)	Female (%)
Medicine	1,551	28.8	1,239	47.1	3,869	42.9
Dentistry	95	37.9	193	55.9	407	52.1
Veterinary						
Science	70	14.3	108	49.9	261	44.1
Agriculture	83	13.3	390	25.6	1,517	44.6
Engineering	571	1.9	1,210	10.4	3,082	12.2
Architecture	25	–	73	28.8	211	47.4
Science	802	24.6	1,797	30.7	5,604	41.6
Management						
Studies	–	–	889	29.6	5,555	44.1
Law	72	26.4	144	42.4	924	56.9
Social Science/ Humanities/ Education	10,902	41.7	6,425	49.4	9,207	55.9
Total	14,171	37.3	12,648	40.7	30,637	44.4

Source: University Reports and University Grants Commission.

In the 31 technical colleges, around 40 percent of students are women but over 70 percent of them are enrolled in nontechnical courses. Around 90 percent of women trainees in the programs of the Vocational Training Authority of the Ministry of Labor, the nontechnical units of the Ministry of Education, the apprenticeship programs of the National Apprenticeship and Industrial Training Authority, and the centers of the National Youth Services Council are enrolled in culturally perceived “feminine” courses such as sewing, dressmaking, home science, and secretarial courses. Training-cum-production centers in rural or local industries have always been gender-differentiated and women are underrepresented in courses in agriculture, fisheries, and construction trades. The private sector is engaged in on-the-job training courses chiefly in semi-skilled tasks and in fee-levying courses for the affluent. International and local NGOs have pioneered nontraditional courses but have limited resources for extensive programs. Women, therefore, have access to a narrow range of skills and tend to be excluded from technology related courses in a country that is seeking more rapid industrialization and development in information technology.

Educational reforms proposed by the National Education Commission have been initiated and compulsory education legislation for the 5–14 age group has been introduced from January 1998. Other programs envisaged are (i) provision of at least one or two well-equipped senior secondary schools in each administrative division; (ii) improving the quality of education and promoting more creativity in education in schools, teacher education institutions, and universities; (iii) increasing access to English courses, to technology, and to educational and vocational counseling; and

(iv) producing adequate vocational education facilities for school leavers and establishing links between universities and training institutions and employers. Women will benefit from reforms pertaining to vocational education.

Economic Activities

As economic producers women have been traditionally active in the labor force, although labor force participation rates underestimate their participation, particularly in home-based activities in the informal sector. According to official statistics, the female labor force increased more rapidly than the male labor force since the 1960s and particularly in the 1980s, as a consequence of rising educational levels and economic constraints of families, but decreased temporarily in the early 1990s for reasons that are unclear. Slow economic growth and consequent decline in the absorptive capacity of the labor market created massive unemployment from the end of the 1960s, particularly of secondary school leavers and university graduates. Women are more vulnerable to unemployment as shown by their unemployment rates, which have been consistently at least double those of men (Tables 4 and 5). By the end of 1997 women's unemployment rates were still twice those of men's although the overall level of unemployment had in fact declined.

Table 4: **Unemployment Rates**
(percent)

Year	Total	Male	Female
1963	7.3	8.9	7.6
1971	18.7	14.3	31.1
1980/81	15.8	12.4	23.0
1985/86	14.1	0.8	20.8
1990, 1st Quarter	14.0	9.1	23.4
1990, 2nd–3rd Quarters	–	11.8	23.4
1997, 4th Quarter ^a	10.3	7.7	15.5

a Latest data available.

Sources: Census of Ceylon 1963.

Census of Ceylon 1971.

Labor Force and Socio-Economic Survey 1980/81.

Labor Force and Socio-Economic Survey 1985/86.

Labor Force Survey 1990 1st Quarter—all island.

Labor Force Survey 1990 2nd–4th Quarters—excluding Northern and Eastern Provinces.

Labor Force Survey 1994 1st Quarter, excluding Northern and Eastern Provinces, Department of Census and Statistics, Colombo.

The quality of employment available to women has also deteriorated since the end of the 1970s. Women have tended to be pushed out of stable employment in the formal sector to marginal economic activities, and to unviable self-employment, while the percentage of unpaid family workers that had declined to 6.5 percent in 1981 has risen to over 20 percent in the 1980s and 1990s (Table 6). Gender-based occupational segregation in the labor market has not changed significantly. Despite

Table 5: Unemployment Rates by Educational Level and Gender^a
(percent)

Level	1985/86			1997 ^b		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
No schooling	6.1	7.7	4.8	1.0	0.9	1.1
School years 1-5	7.7	7.0	9.4	5.5	6.6	4.4
School years 6-8	11.2	9.5	16.5	45.1	56.5	34.0
School years 9-10	20.8	15.4	34.9			
GCE OL	22.3	14.4	35.6	30.0	22.9	13.2
GCE AL	32.0	18.7	44.9	18.4	36.9	23.5
Degree	6.3	3.3	10.2			
Postgraduate Degree	3.9	4.2	3.2			
All Levels	14.1	10.8	20.8			

a Excluding Northern and Eastern Provinces.

b Fourth quarter 1997.

Source: Labor Force Surveys 1985/86, 1994 (1st Quarter).

the entry of a few women to new areas of employment, the majority of women are concentrated in domestic and plantation agriculture, traditional local industries, assembly-line industries in the modern sector, in the education and health subsectors, and in domestic service. The number of women working as paid employees declined during the 1980s and then began to increase in the 1990s again (Table 6). The reasons for this are not clear. More and more women are becoming own-account and unpaid family laborers. An increase in the number of women who are own-account workers was registered from 1996 to 1997 when the overall percentage rose from 16.9 percent to 20.5 percent.

Table 6: Employment Status
(percent)

Employment Status	1981		1985/86		1990		1997 ^a	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Employer	2.4	1.2	3.0	0.9	4.4	1.2	3.2	1.5
Paid employees	62.3	79.4	58.2 ^b	58.4 ^b	59.5	55.6	56.5	61.2
Own-account workers	32.5	12.9	29.6	17.7	28.4	18.1	36.1	20.5
Unpaid family workers	2.8	6.5	9.2	23	7.7	25.1	4.2	16.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

a Fourth quarter 1997.

b Regular Employees: Male 28.5% Female 29.6%

Casual Employees: Male 34.7% Female 28.9%

Sources: Census of Ceylon 1981.

Labor Force and Socio-Economic Survey 1985/86, 1990.

Labor Force Survey 1994 4th Quarter, excluding Northern and Eastern Provinces, Department of Census and Statistics.

Sectorwise (Table 7), overall participation in agriculture has remained roughly constant in the last decade. Around 42 percent of the female labor force are still engaged in agricultural activities. Women, however, tend to be seen as farmers' wives rather than as economic producers in their own right. In the Mahaweli Settlement Program, for instance, this official perception has meant that women lost access to land, and to equal opportunities for training and extension. In fisheries, modernization has affected adversely women's traditional activities such as fish processing and net repair.

Plantation women were the earliest women wage earners in Sri Lanka, but they were recruited largely as workers of the family unit in a subordinate position in the male-dominated culture of South India from which they had migrated to meet the labor needs of colonial plantations. These plantations were nationalized in the 1970s. The principle of equal wages was accepted in 1984 as a result of trade union action, but women still work longer hours than men and have hardly any control over their earnings. Donor-funded projects in the 1980s and 1990s have introduced health and education services and environmental sanitation and housing to communities bypassed by such programs for several decades. While mortality rates have declined, women's lack of control over their economic resources has impeded the improvement of their nutritional status and other aspects of their quality of life. Since 1991 privatization of

Table 7: Population Employed by Industries^a

Industry	1985/86					1997				
	Total (no.)	% Total Distri- bution	% Male Distri- bution	% Female Distri- bution	% Female of Total	Total (no.)	% Total Distri- bution	% Male Distri- bution	% Female Distri- bution	% Female of Total
Agriculture, Hunting, Forestry, Fisheries	2,530,967	49.3	47.2	54.2	33.2	2,134,431	38.2	36.3	42.3	35.1
Mining and Quarrying	66,726	1.3	1.6	0.6	12.9	64,951	1.2	na	na	na
Manufacturing	648,469	12.6	10.04	18.6	44.5	875,351	15.7	11.9	23.8	48.1
Electricity, Gas and Water	21,484	0.4	0.6	0.04	3.1	46,251	0.8	na	na	na
Construction	226,913	4.4	6.04	0.6	4.6	284,585	5.1	na	na	na
Wholesale and Retail Trades	513,872	10.0	11.5	6.6	20.0	703,135	12.5	na	na	na
Transport, Storage and Communication	220,025	4.3	5.9	0.5	3.2	237,116	4.2	na	na	na
Finance, Insurance Business	65,094	1.3	1.4	0.9	23.2	89,364	1.6	na	na	na
Community Services, Personnel Services	631,408	12.3	10.6	16.3	40.1	979,238	17.5	16.0	20.7	37.5
Activities not classified	206,791	4.0	5.1	1.5	11.2	176,545	3.2	35.8	13.1	14.5
Total	5,131,749	100.0	100.0	100.0	30.2	5,590,967	100.0	100.0	100.0	31.7

a Excluding Northern and Eastern Provinces. Detailed information by sector, available in 1985/86, is no longer being produced in the Labor Force Survey.

na = Data not available.

Source: Labor Force Survey, 1985/86, 1997 (4th quarter).

the management of plantations has raised issues of job security and the efficacy of social sector programs. The rising educational levels of young plantation men and women also creates a demand for better quality employment.

The most visible change in the economy is the rapid increase in export-oriented industries as a response to both national policy and structural adjustment programs since 1979. Three EPZs have been established in Katunayake (1978), Biyagama (1985), and Koggala (1990). Factories function outside the zones in urban centers initially and since 1991 in the rural sector as a result of the Rural Garment Factory Scheme. Over 80 percent of workers have been women, especially young women between 18 and 30 years.

Women have access to employment opportunities and incomes but they are employed chiefly in semi-skilled labor-intensive industries irrespective of their educational level, without opportunities for upgrading skills. Long working hours, exposure to occupational health hazards, vulnerability to job insecurity, inequitable gender division of labor, and gender subordination in the labor market are characteristic features of women's work in Sri Lanka.

The State policy of promoting the concept of "big investor-small producer" in its industrialization strategy in the 1990s has also led to the proliferation of subcontracting industries, where the majority of producers are women. Women's poverty is also perpetuated by the inequitable distribution of profits among entrepreneurs who reduce production costs by using outworkers, intermediaries who amass profits, and workers paid low piece rate payments and unprotected by labor legislation or trade unions.

In the rural sector, the failure to develop local industries has limited women's access to off-farm employment opportunities. A few "centers of excellence" produce goods for the tourist market but there is a pervasive air of depression in most rural industries.

Around half the labor force in professional, semi-professional, and middle-level employment are women because the education and health services have been their traditional fields of employment. But few women have been able to advance beyond the "glass ceiling" and to reach high-level decision-making positions in the public and private sectors. There is at present one woman Secretary of a Ministry and a few women as chief administrators in the public sector and in a bank. The majority of women workers in the services sector are at the bottom of the employment structure in domestic service or manual labor and are outside the purview of labor legislation (Table 8). However, despite this, the number of female managers has also increased although the number of women employed as professionals has declined.

The demand for domestic labor from oil-rich countries in West Asia and East Asia and even Europe drew women from low-income families who were attracted by the relatively high remuneration paid as compared with their local wages or income. By 1994 these domestic workers accounted for around two thirds of all migrant workers and 78.4 percent of unskilled migrant workers. Around 68 percent were between 21 and 35 years and several had young children. Unlike in earlier years, the Foreign Employment Bureau (established in 1985 in the Ministry of Labor) now attempts to check unscrupulous recruitment practices by agencies, assists migrant women workers with credit and insurance, and provides some pre-employment training. These women make a crucial contribution to

Table 8: Population Employed by Major Occupational Groups (1985/86 and 1994)

Industry	1985/86					1997				
	Total (no.)	% Total Distri- bution	% Male Distri- bution	% Female Distri- bution	% Female of Total	Total (no.)	% Total Distri- bution	% Male Distri- bution	% Female Distri- bution	% Female of Total
Professional, Technical and Related	272,890	5.3	3.8	8.7	49.6	388,222	7.5	6.2	10.6	43.9
Administrative and Managers	26,398	0.5	0.7	0.1	6.9	71,359	1.4	1.5	1.1	23.6
Clerical and Related	280,503	5.5	5.9	4.6	25.3	185,041	3.6	2.7	5.6	48.3
Sales Workers	442,050	8.6	9.9	5.7	20.1	645,856	12.5	14.8	7.7	19.1
Service Workers	241,501	4.7	4.2	5.9	37.7	na	na	na	na	na
Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Forestry, Fisheries	2,438,226	47.5	44.9	53.4	33.9	1,405,585	27.3	27.6	26.6	30.4
Production and Related	1,420,889	27.7	30.3	21.6	23.6	1,102,653	21.5	20.2	24.1	35.1
Elementary Occupations	na	na	na	na	na	1,219,982	23.7	23.6	24.02	31.6
Not Classified	9,248	0.2	0.3	0.01	3.1	129,651	2.5	3.5	0.4	5.2
Total	5,131,745	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	5,148,356	100.0	100.0	100.0	31.2

na = Data not available.

Sources: Labor Force Survey 1985/86 and 1994 1st Quarter, excluding Northern and Eastern Provinces.

foreign exchange revenue and to family income and maintenance. However, the absence of employment contracts and adequate support services results in continuing exploitation of many women by agents and employers, sexual abuse, family dislocation, and children in crisis. Women workers also acquire no new skills to enable them to achieve upward occupational mobility on their return.

State policy encourages self-employment as a response to women's unemployment. Women have been major participants in these programs but have generally enjoyed only minimal economic returns. Income-generating projects to integrate women in development have been marginalized by their isolation from mainstream development and have been under-resourced. Credit and savings projects patterned after the Grameen Bank model by banks and organizations and social mobilization introduced initially by the Change Agents program have given women access to credit without collateral on interest guarantee and have strengthened group solidarity and individual self-reliance. The Janashakthi Bank Societies—"banks" organized by women in low-income families in the Hambantota District since 1991—are an example of the credit culture or discipline developed by women operating in small groups. However, most self-employment programs lack critical inputs such as access to technology, vocational skills development, management training, and market information, which are necessary for optimal credit utilization. Consequently, loan repayment rates are high but there has been little significant increase in incomes and relatively few women have been able to move from low productivity, low-income self-employment to microenterprises. Successful women entrepreneurs have been largely those from families with economic resources such as members of the Women's Chamber of Industry

and Commerce or some of those supported by NGOs assisting in entrepreneurial activities. Women are not a homogenous group, but program organizers tend to perceive them as secondary earners with capacity and aptitudes only for ad hoc elementary projects.

Sociocultural Aspects

Patriarchal values still influence gender relations in the Sri Lankan society and economy but women in their central role as mothers and as economic producers have often de facto powers in the family. Studies have indicated that education, employment, and access to an independent income over which women have control have empowered women both in the family and in society. The last factor, access to an independent income and control of the resources they generate, appears to be the most critical. For instance, women wage agricultural or factory laborers have more “power” than women whose economic contribution is subsumed in family income. Dual-worker families appear to have a more egalitarian relationship. There has even been a role reversal in some families in which women are primary income earners. Studies have shown that joint decision-making by spouses in household matters and the welfare of children is more prevalent than is apt to be presumed. The exception is the plantation labor community who in their enclaves have clearly unequal relationships in which men have even claimed access officially to their spouses’ wages.

Gender ideologies that impact adversely on women are still predominant in Sri Lanka. Women continue to be seen by many policymakers and administrators as “dependent wives” or “supplementary earners” to be used as a labor reserve. The inequitable gender division of labor within households has changed very little and despite the extension of women’s economic roles, household work is seen as “women’s work”—a norm that some women tend to internalize. The preference for sons is limited, but child-rearing and socialization practices reflect gender role differentiation. Unequal power relations that have been most resistant to change are reflected in male control of female sexuality as in the incidence of rape, incest and sexual harassment, and in domestic violence. The education process does not seem to have empowered women adequately to challenge existing sociocultural practices by promoting the equality of women and men or to respond adequately to changes in the external environment. Increasing awareness of women’s rights can be expected to contribute to the erosion of negative sociocultural values about women.

Policies and Programs for Women

Government Policies and Plans

While Sri Lankan women enjoy high status compared to the rest of South Asia, gender issues have yet to be mainstreamed into the national or local planning process and tend to receive scant attention in national plans as seen in the sporadic reference to women's issues in mainstream development planning in the annual Public Investment Program, which operates as a five-year rolling plan. Improvements in Sri Lanka's social indicators such as high literacy, increased life expectancy, and a low fertility rate were achieved through universal application of social policy that did not discriminate against women but, at the same time, did not seek to actively promote women's issues. As has been noted in the section on review of education, girls' education was easy to promote because it was free and gender stereotyping in education, while diminished, still exists (Center for Women's Research or CENWOR, 1995). However, as the NPAW notes, "Despite these many achievements, one cannot feel complacent about the real situation of women, the majority of whom live under economically deprived conditions and circumstances" (page 1).

Nevertheless, awareness of gender issues has been kindled by stimuli from the international environment since International Women's Year in 1975, and by national participation in world conferences on women in Mexico, Copenhagen, Nairobi, and Beijing. The most concrete outcome of this participation has been the ratification of the CEDAW in 1981, but little interest has been taken subsequently in incorporating the provisions in the legal system so as to ensure women their rights.

The most significant achievement has been the formulation of a Women's Charter for Sri Lanka by representatives of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MWA) and other key ministries, as well as women's organizations who have been lobbying over the years on critical issues pertaining to women. The Charter is an adaptation of CEDAW to local needs and has seven sections—Civil and Political Rights, Rights within the Family, Right to Health, Right to Education and Training, Economic Rights, Social Discrimination, and Gender-Based Violence. The Charter was accepted as a national policy by the Government in March 1993, and a national committee was appointed in 1994 of 15 women and men from state agencies and NGOs, representing diverse areas of interest to oversee the implementation of its Charter. Women's organizations lobbied on the eve of the 1994 general elections for more visibility of the Charter at the national level and were successful in obtaining a commitment to the Charter from the two major political parties. However, the Charter has no legal validity as it is as yet only a policy document reflecting aspirations and intentions, and the ethnic conflict appears to have relegated its implementation to a lower level of priority. The National Committee has neither been equipped with resources to facilitate the implementation of its Charter nor does it have qualified personnel to undertake its functions as a referral channel for women victims of violations of human rights. The term of the first Committee expired in August 1997 and a new committee has been appointed.

The NPAW was prepared in 1995 by MWA, the National Committee for Women, and representatives of women's organizations, but it has not yet been incorporated in national or sectoral programs although sectoral activity plans have been prepared. This NPAW identified eight areas

of critical concern: (i) violence against women, women and human rights and women and armed conflict; (ii) political participation and decision-making; (iii) health; (iv) education and training; (v) economic activities and poverty; (vi) media and communication; (vii) environment; and (viii) institutional strengthening and support. In 1998, MWA prepared a three-year development plan and a project has been developed with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for strengthening the MWA.

Meanwhile, national and district programs have been generally “gender blind” while claiming to be “gender neutral.” The Accelerated Mahaweli Women’s Program saw women chiefly as farmers’ wives, and women’s cheap labor has been utilized in industrialization and in meeting the demands of the international labor market. National policies have not been examined at the stage of formulation or implementation for their impact on women. Meanwhile, women make a crucial contribution to the economy, but have been incorporated in the global market on unequal terms without commensurate benefits and under poor working conditions. The majority of participants in state-sponsored self-employment programs are women but such programs are concentrated in low-skill, low-productivity, low-income economic activities without adequate inputs to improve skills, technology, and market information. Legal reforms have not been fully responsive to the needs of women, although recent amendments to the Penal Code are expected to reduce the incidence of gender-based violence. Most importantly, women appear to have problems in access to the highest levels in decision-making in the public and private sectors.

The absence of gender-disaggregated data makes it impossible even to estimate the proportion of the national budget spent on meeting women’s needs as half the population. The Department of Census and Statistics has been sensitized recently by participation in a United Nations/Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN/ESCAP) project and has brought out two publications of gender-specific data. There is however lacunae in data in crucial areas. Gender concerns are not taken into account in the work of policy-oriented state institutions such as the National Development Council, the Human Resources Development Council, the Institute of Policy Studies, the Council for Agricultural Research Policy, and the Industries Commission, or in major state research institutions such as the Ceylon Institute of Scientific and Industrial Research and the National Aquatic Research Agency. With the exception of the Foreign Employment Bureau, the Ministry of Labor has not been concerned strongly with the working conditions of women and its Women and Children’s Unit has been understaffed.

Government Organizations and Institutions

The national machinery for women’s affairs—the Ministry of Plan Implementation since 1983 and the Women’s Bureau from 1978 to 1997—has functioned as a compartmentalized entity in the public sector and has not been able to mainstream gender issues or even the NPAW in Sri Lanka’s national plans. The Women’s Bureau was, over the years, part of a larger ministry with more prestigious functions such as health and subsequently, transport. A separate MWA was created in 1997 and it is hoped that it will not be marginalized as a women’s domain. The National Committee for Women created in 1993 is a policy advisory body. There is as yet no mechanism that effectively links the national machinery with the Department of National Planning.

Focal points were established in the late 1980s in line ministries to liaise with the national machinery but had an unsuccessful record. Focal points have been revived currently at high decision-making level positions in relevant line ministries but have yet to operate effectively in a transferable administrative service. MWA has collaborated with national NGOs and women's organizations in advocacy programs and in the preparation of the post-Beijing National Plan of Action and envisages the cooperation of these organizations in implementing the Plan. MWA however faces a major problem in promoting the implementation of programs island-wide as women's affairs is not a devolved subject under the 1989 Amendment to the Constitution. Provincial Councils include women's issues in their mandates but no provincial ministries for women exist. There are no official links between MWA and provincial ministries and there is ambiguity in their relationship.

The Women's Bureau operated in the past as a "project unit." It has implemented projects over the years particularly in the Integrated Rural Development Programs (IRDP), but these have been ad hoc women's projects that have operated outside the main IRDP sectoral programs. In the late 1980s, it promoted the organization of Women's Societies in communities, but evaluation studies reported that they had not been successful in empowering women at the grassroots level. In the 1990s it has implemented programs with a broader perspective such as in legal literacy, counseling, and establishing women's and children's desks in police stations, but they have been hampered by limited resources.

The only other women-specific state agency is the Farm Women's Agricultural Extension Program of the Department of Agriculture, which has a limited mandate in improving home gardens and has therefore little scope for increasing women's productivity and incomes in the agriculture sector.

Nongovernment Organizations

NGOs (mixed NGOs and women's organizations) have been active since the early twentieth century in welfare-oriented programs. Local women's organizations such as the Lanka Mahila Samithi, the Sri Lanka Federation of University Women, and the Sri Lanka Women's Conference, which are affiliates of international organizations, have been active since the 1930s and 1940s. It is during the UN Decade for Women, however, that they have extended their activities from delivery of services, community development, and self-employment enterprise development to research, advocacy, and activism. In fact, the most visible development since the Beijing Conference has been the organization of women at all levels, from the grass roots upwards in groups, although there is no strong women's movement in Sri Lanka. NGO lobbying on the Charter on the eve of the general elections in 1994 has been effective on issues such as gender-based violence culminating, for instance, in amendments to the hundred-year-old Penal Code. NGOs, particularly women's organizations, have been engaged in recent years in gender sensitization at all levels, from policymakers to large communities. Both the Women's Charter (1993) and the NPAW (1995) have been the outcome of State-NGO collaboration. Consciousness has been created among women of the critical issues in the Beijing Platform for Action by the NGO Forum, which was established initially to assist the country's participation at the Beijing Conference.

NGOs and women's organizations often have their own special focus, for example, rural women, rural development, university women, social mobilization for collective action, credit, entrepre-

neurship, legal reform, research, advocacy, training and activism, domestic violence, family health and rehabilitation, environment, and media. NGO consortia at national or district levels have developed in recent years to promote solidarity. Also active in the field and with greater resources than local organizations who are donor-dependent, are international NGOs such as World University Service, Swiss Contact, CARE, Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries (HIVOS), For ut vikling (FORUT), Oxford Famine Relief (OXFAM), CEBEMO, Netherlands Organization for International Development Cooperation (NOVIB), Plan International, Intermediate Technology Development Group, and the International Council on Research on Women. Much still remains to be done, however, by both external funding agencies and NGOs to increase the incomes of poor women and to facilitate their exit from poverty.

CURRENT ISSUES FOR SRI LANKAN WOMEN

This section provides an overview of three issues that affect the status of Sri Lankan women—poverty, the civil conflict, and migrant women workers. The analysis is both factual and anecdotal in recognition of the fact that gender-specific data is often unavailable on poverty and its incidence. Sri Lanka’s civil conflict has not been well documented from a gender perspective despite women’s roles and the impacts of this conflict on them. As migrant workers, Sri Lankan women make tremendous contributions to the economy but the social consequences of this phenomenon are less well understood.

Women and Poverty¹

In Sri Lanka poor women, especially those who are household heads or old, face enormous hardships and must struggle to ensure their family’s economic survival. Macro data and micro studies indicate that their quality of life and employment conditions have deteriorated during the last two decades as a result of, among other factors, increased living costs, which pushed women into low-skilled, low-paid jobs. Indeed in the NPAW, the Government acknowledged that “Women have faced continuing unequal access to economic policies followed by the governments over the last two decades with an increase in the number of women in poverty with little state support for them to withstand the adverse impact of such development policies” (NPAW 1995, page 59).

A major obstacle to gender analysis of poverty in Sri Lanka is the absence of gender-disaggregated poverty-related data, which makes it difficult to compare female and male poverty quantitatively or to state definitively the degree to which it is increasing or decreasing. Macro income data that excludes information pertaining to women working and living in the harsh realities of the informal sector have been used to conclude in official documents that there is no major difference in the incomes of male and female “income receivers.” Data relating

¹ The Government is currently carrying out an extensive poverty assessment, the results of which will be available in late 1999.

to female heads of households or single parents have not been analyzed by socioeconomic background or poverty indicators, leading to the conclusion in a World Bank study² that the incidence of poverty among female heads of households is not worse than that among male heads of households.

It is difficult to estimate accurately the proportion of the poverty group as definitions and measures of the “poverty line” vary in different studies, both in use of income and calorie intake data. It has been reported that poverty increased from 1979 to the end of the 1980s and has remained static since then despite national poverty alleviation programs introduced since 1989. Two studies using 1991 survey data from the Department of Census and Statistics give different estimates, neither of which yields gender-disaggregated results. The World Bank study gave the following figures—35.3 percent Sri Lanka, 28.4 percent urban, 38.1 percent rural, and 27.5 percent estate; and using a lower “poverty level”—22.4 percent Sri Lanka, 18.3 percent urban, 28.4 percent rural, and 12.6 percent estate. Using the same data the Department of Census and Statistics has given the following figures in its own study—37.2 percent Sri Lanka, 37.9 percent urban, 36.8 percent rural, and 19.7 percent estate. While these are average figures, they show that poor women can be found in all three sectors.

Women who need to support themselves and their families as a consequence of the death, physical incapacitation, or unemployment of their spouses, divorce, or separation, or who are unmarried mothers or single women who are not parents but who bear the main burden of supporting their families are a part of the process of “feminization of poverty” if they do not have adequate resources to cope with changes or economic constraints. Such women tend also to be disadvantaged by low educational status, have limited or no access to land, or are victims of gender inequality in wages in employment. A study (CENWOR 1991) of a sample of female-headed households in poor neighborhoods found that nearly three fourths plunged into further economic deprivation after an event that changed their lives. They were compelled to seek work outside the home in the informal sector to support their children, and had no prospects of escaping from their poverty status.

Women in low-income families bear the increasing burden of maintaining families in the context of escalating costs of living, declining real incomes, and reduced state support. The most vulnerable are the unemployed, the unviable self-employed, landless laborers, small farmers, workers in small enterprises, petty traders, and domestic and construction workers.

Two new vulnerable groups have emerged in recent years. A recent study found that due to changes in the demographic structure and the increasing aging population and rising female life expectancy (which is higher than male life expectancy at 74 years for female compared to 70 years for male), a higher proportion of widows and elderly poor women become more impoverished. As a result, over half the inmates of the Elders’ Home in the study were women, and majority of these women were there because there was no one to look after them at home. It was also found that the human and material resources of low-income families were insufficient to care adequately for aging women. Likewise, geriatric care and homes for the aged are totally inadequate to meet the needs of low-income families.

² World Bank (1995). *Sri Lanka Poverty Assessment*.

Another disadvantaged group of women emerged as an outcome of the ethnic conflict in the north and east since the mid-1980s and the social unrest in the south in the late 1980s. Women who have not been economically active have been rendered destitute by the loss of male breadwinners, and have had to seek avenues of income generation for family survival. Many have been displaced from their homes and face psychological trauma. They have shown great courage in developing coping strategies but they need assistance to acquire economic resources and to undergo counseling.

In Sri Lanka pro-poor policies date from the 1940s with free education and health services and subsidized food. The erosion of some of these benefits in the 1980s led to the introduction of national poverty reduction programs, the Janasaviya in 1989 and Samurdhi in 1995, and to other programs such as the World Bank-funded National Development Trust Fund (NDTF) in 1991, implemented in a context of social unrest created by hardships. Recent evaluations of these and other programs, particularly self-employment programs for women in low-income families indicate that they have not increased income levels significantly and that most participants are still trapped in a poverty syndrome. Poverty reduction programs are temporary measures to protect the poor. They cannot counter macro policies that create or perpetuate poverty. Macro policies need to accelerate economic growth, increasing at the same time the access of women to productive activities and assets, skills training, employment, and credit, to challenge gender role stereotypes, and to provide or promote support services such as subsidized day care, insurance policies for all ages, homes for the aged, and rehabilitation of war victims.

Impact of the Civil Conflict on Women

Since 1983, Sri Lanka has been engulfed in civil conflict burgeoning largely from youth unrest and ethnic conflict that has been a life-threatening and traumatic experience for women. Conflict and violence have been located mainly in two regions. These conflicts have had social and economic impacts on women and led to an increase in the number of female-headed households.

In the south, youth unrest unleashed an intensive period of violence by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, with counter-violence by the State between 1987 and 1991. The violence took the form of assassinations, disappearances, and torture. Few women were reported to be killed but some were detained and tortured, raped in custody, or disappeared. The survivors of this violence were chiefly women and children who, despite the cessation of violence six years ago, still bear the scars of their experiences. Women widowed by the conflict lost family assets such as land through the negative attitudes of kinsfolk and officials and had no access to free legal aid to secure their rights. Widows who belonged largely to the age group 20–40 years were vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence at the hands of men in the community as well as by officials. The psychological effects of torture, disappearances of spouses and children, family disruption, and reduction to destitution have created trauma and psychosomatic disorders with hardly any access to counseling services or to assistance in developing appropriate coping strategies. Analysis of the impact is hampered by the lack of information and data on the situation of women in the affected areas of Sri Lanka.

In the north and east, the war has continued unabated for over a decade. Women have been victims of rape by military personnel (both Indian and Sri Lankan) and have consequently faced social ostracization vis-a-vis traditional cultural norms. Some young women have been “militarized” by enlistment in the Eelam Tiger cadres in a syndrome of glorification of violence and have been sacrificed as suicide bombers and “martyrs.” The Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam has established a women’s wing that comprises approximately 3,000 female fighters. There is a separate training camp for women with its own leadership structure. Most recent recruits tend to be young (in their teens), fresh out of school, and not as educated as the male recruits (S. Subramanian 1998).

Large numbers of women (no accurate data are available but the World Bank recently estimated that more than 50,000 people had been killed and 800,000 families displaced) are now household heads. Many have been widowed by loss of husbands through death or abduction, thus leading to an increase in the number of female-headed households. Accurate data on the number of female-headed households are not available. The majority of them have been confronted with problems of adjustment to new situations of displacement, as refugees overseas or internally. The internally displaced belong to all three ethnic groups—Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhalese—and women in these families have borne the brunt of an arduous life in refugee camps and resettlements or return to heavily war-damaged homes. Despite the state rehabilitation program of assistance to displaced families, sanitary and health conditions have been substandard due to limited resources and sometimes because of mismanagement. Women face constraints in child care and in the education of their children, and lack access to economically productive activities. Overarching all these tribulations are the psychological effects of violence, particularly anxiety, depression, and trauma. As in the south, counseling services are minuscule and have been left to voluntary organizations.

There are no reliable estimates of families affected by violence in the north, east, and south. What is clear, however, is that women in affected families are meeting challenges and constraints with courage but have inadequate support with respect to material and even basic needs, legal aid, and psychological counseling.

Migrant Women Workers

A new trend in the economic activities of Sri Lankan women in the last two decades has been their migration overseas in large numbers for employment. A confluence of factors at the end of the 1970s precipitated this movement. The economic hardships of low-income families in a context of rising living costs caused by the implementation of structural adjustment programs since 1977 and the continuing high incidence of unemployment pushed many women to respond to the increasing demand for domestic labor in recently oil-rich West Asia, in relatively affluent countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong, China, and even in western Europe. Market liberalization and consequent relaxation of travel and foreign exchange restrictions facilitated the process. The State even promoted such migration with a view to reducing unemployment and balance-of-payments problems.

The dimensions of such migration are significant, expanding from a thin trickle in the mid-1970s to a large outflow in the 1980s and 1990s. The percentage of women among the migrant workers was only 0.4 percent in 1976. Since 1980 the number of women migrating temporarily for employment

exceeded that of men, their percentage increasing from 50.8 percent in 1980 to 67 percent in 1991 and 79.9 percent in 1996, thus “feminizing” the migrant labor force of around 130,000 departures in official records in 1995. These statistics pertain to only those who left through official channels as the Bureau of Foreign Employment was only established in 1985. It is estimated that around 40 percent sought the services of the Bureau till the mid-1990s, and that the majority used unlicensed agencies or personal contacts. Recent policy changes have increased the percentage of those seeking the assistance of the Bureau to around 70 percent.

Gender inequalities are apparent in the migration of labor. In 1979, 84.9 percent of professionals, 84 percent of middle-level workers, and 98.2 percent of skilled workers were men and 77 percent of unskilled workers were women. By 1992, 94 percent of the total female labor outflow were domestic workers or housemaids, at the bottom level of the process in terms of skills, remuneration, and prestige. It is also interesting to note that Sri Lanka was until recently the only country in South Asia to “permit” women to seek such employment overseas. In Sri Lanka, too, migrant women workers also included large numbers of the most conservative community, the Muslims, partly because they had preferential access to Arab countries in the “Middle East” or West Asia. Around 60 percent of women migrant workers are employed in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, another 30 percent in other Arab countries, and 10 percent in all other destinations. A recent phenomenon has been the migration of young Sri Lankan women to Mauritius, Seychelles, and Maldives as garment factory workers. The majority of women migrant workers are between 18 and 40 years, and married with children, often young children. Those who went to the Middle East were mostly school dropouts with six to eight years of schooling, and the majority had not had access to employment earlier. In the case of countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong, China migrant women workers tended to have around ten years of schooling, some with secondary (GCE OL) and senior secondary (GCE AL) qualifications and to have been employed earlier in Sri Lanka. Beginning with the hinterland of Colombo, women workers now come from all parts of the island, including the plantations.

Until recently, these women migrant workers were left to market forces to determine their entry to and conditions of employment, notwithstanding the fact that they have been among the highest foreign exchange earners in the country. They lacked both support services and the protection of a regulatory framework. Consequently, they have undergone considerable hardship, as documented in micro studies of their experiences. They have been exploited by unscrupulous recruitment agencies in this new and profitable “industry” of intermediaries unregulated by employment contracts. They have entered an alien environment without training in relevant skills in handling modern household equipment or in a foreign language such as English. Access to child care services is minuscule, compelling them to entrust the welfare of young children to their extended family—chiefly to their husband, grandmother, or even to a neighbor in some instances. In their workplace they are often exploited by employers, working long hours without adequate sleep, confined to houses, and several have been vulnerable to sexual abuse and physical violence, without legal protection. Without adequate guidance regarding bank facilities or investment their remittances have been sometimes misused by spouses and their savings misappropriated.

Lack of adequate information prevents generalization from these experiences. Studies have found that large numbers have had positive experiences and have contributed significantly to family resources and welfare such as in acquisition of land, housing improvements, and education of children, in addition to visible changes in consumption lifestyles. Others have been victims of

traumatic life-threatening experiences culminating in death. It appears too, that this group of women who migrated courageously for employment for family survival, maintenance or mobility, and who have contributed both to national revenue and to the quality of life of their families, have themselves benefited very little from their own occupational mobility, and have, at best, been empowered by their independence and self-reliance without protection or support in an alien, and often unfriendly, working environment.

Some of the long overdue policy agenda have been initiated in the last few years, particularly the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (Amendment) Act No. 24 of 1994, which sought to remedy the deficiencies of the earlier Act No. 21 of 1985, and to strengthen and expand its function of promoting overseas employment, regulating its operation, and ensuring fair wages and standards of employment. A minimum salary of US\$100 dollars per month for domestic workers, a memorandum of understanding with recruitment agencies in Singapore and the United Arab Emirates, compulsory licensing of recruitment agencies, compulsory registration of migrants prior to departure, assistance for loans, free insurance cover and a free instructional cassette, compulsory training before departure, welfare schemes in the form of scholarships for children of migrant workers, and mechanism to redress grievances are the major policy initiatives taken by the Government since 1995. Training is currently conducted in 15 state centers and 21 centers organized by licensed agencies. A presidential task force appointed in late 1997 to examine the problems of migrant women workers and to propose remedial action has just presented a report, which however has yet to be finalized and released to the public.

The regulatory framework in the form of bilateral agreements of employment contracts to ensure minimum standards of employment and social and gender justice has yet to be introduced. Child care services are totally inadequate to meet the needs of migrant women workers. Guidance to returnees to make optimal use of their savings and counseling for victims of sexual and physical abuse are other priority areas for intervention. The plight of garment workers overseas, especially in cases of sudden closure of factories due to the recent financial crisis, has been overshadowed by the concerns of domestic workers and the small volume of migration of industrial workers.

GENDER ISSUES RELEVANT TO BANK OPERATIONS

Sri Lanka's Development Experience and Gender Issues

As in other developing countries, development policies and programs in Sri Lanka have had a differential impact on women and men. This is clearly a consequence of economic and social structures that reflect both the gender inequality as well as the gender role assumptions of policymakers, planners, and administrators who develop ostensibly “gender neutral” policies.

Since the late 1970s, the introduction of market-oriented macroeconomic policies and structural adjustment programs as well as economic globalization has had a significant impact on women. “Trickle down” policies have failed to benefit women because of the context of structural and gender inequality in the allocation of resources down to the household level, and the deterioration in the quality of employment available to women as a consequence of the international and local demand for low-cost female labor.

Sri Lankan women have made a crucial contribution to their country's development process in domestic and plantation agriculture, in industry, and in services. At the national level, industrialization has depended to a significant extent on the labor of women. At the household level, family survival and maintenance in low-income families depended on the labor inputs of women in these families. Women have responded to the demand for overseas domestic labor and have sought active participation in self-employment programs that have proliferated in the last two decades.

There has been insufficient recognition by development planners of the nexus between Sri Lankan women's traditional role and their other economic and social roles. The dichotomy between these roles in planning and implementation has led to the development of programs that focus on women's roles or maximize their labor inputs for economic development with poor returns.

Country Strategy and Gender Issues

Bank's Operational Strategy in Sri Lanka

The Bank has recently finalized a new country operational strategy for Sri Lanka that will cover the period 1998 to 2001. Essentially, the emphasis of Bank operations in the medium term will be to further support the process of structural transformation in Sri Lanka. Such support will be provided at two levels, nationwide and to specific geographic locations. Nationwide support shall provide for policy and institutional reforms and human resource development addressing the need for marketable skills. Activities at specific geographic locations will foster the physical and institutional development of secondary towns outside Colombo and mitigation of the environmental impacts and social costs associated with the transition process.

A number of new key areas of Bank involvement have been identified in the new strategy. Four pillars of support have been identified:

- (i) **Policy and institutional reforms** at the national level including support for private sector development, public sector development, and improved productivity and technology in the agriculture sector;
- (ii) **Human resource development** focusing on reducing unemployment and underemployment including support for growth, policy reforms, and skills development. Special emphasis will be placed on the role of the private sector;
- (iii) **Mitigation of the environmental and social impacts associated with the national economic and social transition** through the preservation of natural resources to guarantee the long-term sustainability of economic growth; and
- (iv) **Infrastructure improvements** based on two guiding principles: (a) the proper attribution of responsibilities between the private and public sectors, and (b) the geographic location outside the Colombo area to support the physical and institutional development of secondary towns and rural areas.

Sri Lanka possesses a unique and well-developed system of social safety nets and distributive policies that help spread the fruits of growth relatively evenly. The Government remains committed to continue support for these programs during the strategy period, although more focused or targeted interventions may be required in consideration of fiscal constraints. This will be essential in reaching women and the poor.

Resolution of the ongoing civil conflict could require a realignment of the Bank's strategy. In the event that a peaceful settlement is reached, Bank operations could be reoriented to assist the efforts for extensive rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Bank's Gender Strategy in Sri Lanka¹**Issues**

The status of Sri Lankan women is at a higher level than other countries in the region. Sri Lankan women outlive men, enjoy high human development, and are recognized as equals under the country's Constitution.² However, despite the advances made by women, numerous inequities remain that prevent women from being equal partners in Sri Lanka's economic and social development. Accordingly, the main goal of the gender strategy for Sri Lanka should be to ensure that the benefits of economic growth and poverty reduction accrue to women. In particular, efforts must be made to reduce women's unemployment, which is double that of men, by increasing women's access to employment and/or productive assets. Lastly, the emerging issue of Sri Lanka's aging population is especially pertinent because women are starting to outlive men and there is real concern that the number of poor, elderly women will increase in the short to medium term.

With the anticipated increasing role of the market economy, one of the major sources of women's empowerment must be their access to employment opportunities. Labor force participation rates for women have increased substantially over the last two decades and women now constitute one third of the workforce. This growth in women's employment has, however, generally been in the informal sector or in low-wage work. Wage inequality continues to discriminate against women to the extent of around 25 percent. Although education levels of women are relatively high, unemployment levels are still typically twice those for men (Table 9).

Table 9: Unemployment Rates by Education Level and Gender

Level	No Schooling	1–5 Years	6–8 Years	9–10 Years	GCE or Degree	All Levels
Men	3.7	8.3	9.6	12.2	14.7	9.9
Women	1.6	10.2	21.2	29.6	34.1	20.8

Despite the pioneering role of Sri Lanka in the appointment of women to positions of political leadership (i.e., the world's first female Prime Minister in 1960), the percentage of women in senior administrative posts remains below 10 percent. The orientation of the current education and training systems tends to perpetuate the employment of women in low-paying jobs and fails to recognize the opportunity and potential of educating women to be an engine of change towards the planned modern economy. This issue is specifically addressed in the proposed Bank actions.

Women also remain disadvantaged in areas such as divorce settlement, land-titling, and custody of children and though protected by labor legislation in the formal sector, remain vulnerable to economic exploitation in the larger, informal sector where most are employed. A less visible but widespread problem affects the increasing number of women working as overseas domestic workers.

¹ This section is also appended to the COSS 1998–2001 for Sri Lanka.

² More information can be found in "Social Sector Development in Sri Lanka—Issues and Options" (1998).

Apart from the difficulties endured in host countries, such women frequently encounter serious domestic breakdown upon their return.³

Because of the lack of gender-disaggregated statistics on poverty, it is not possible to determine accurately whether Sri Lanka has been affected by the same process of feminization of poverty that is observable in other developing member countries of the Bank. On the one hand, the estimated 20 percent female-headed households face formidable difficulties in ensuring the survival of their families (e.g., difficult access to agricultural extension and to technical information that could help raise their household income) and yet, in the areas of education and health, it is apparent that gender presents much lower barriers to access than does poverty itself.

Mainstreaming Gender

The Bank's gender strategy for Sri Lanka should highlight three main areas:

- (i) **Focus on poor women.** In Sri Lanka, the poorest and most disadvantaged women are those living in low-income households. Strategies to help these women are linked to those that have already been identified for the poor (e.g., Janasaviya or Samurdhi); however, special emphasis must be given to the needs of women. The increasing number of aging women will require specific attention. In concrete terms this will mean the following: (a) strengthening the Government's capacity to analyze the situation and needs of poor women. This can be done through the technical assistance mechanism, building on the results of the poverty assessment exercise; (b) conducting a background study on aging women in Sri Lanka to identify some of the main issues and how they can be incorporated into the Bank's future lending program; (c) supporting government efforts to collect monitoring and evaluative data on the impact of poverty reduction programs on women; (d) studying the impact of the civil conflict on Sri Lankan women, in particular the economic impact of the creation of thousands of female-headed households, the extent of women's poverty, and identification of the means through which Bank assistance can be utilized and targeted towards women once the civil conflict has been resolved; and (e) assessing, through advisory technical assistance support, the needs of returning women migrant workers and how they could best be reintegrated into the economy.
- (ii) **Mainstream gender issues.** In terms of direct policy work, the opportunities for Bank assistance to the Government are limited. The most practical approach for the Bank, therefore, is to give special attention to gender considerations in each of its loans. Specific areas requiring attention are most likely to be in women's employment, professional and vocational training, and the estate sector. In general terms, however, project designs need to give closer attention to the constraints that limit the full participation of women. This factor becomes of critical importance in the case of impoverished women whose multiple roles frequently debar their involvement in the very programs that are intended

³ All too commonly, repatriated savings have often been squandered and families have fallen victim to child neglect and alcohol/drug problems.

to benefit them. The Bank can play a role in mainstreaming gender issues by (a) ensuring that the impact of each Bank loan on women is determined and that women's participation is sought for project design; (b) including gender issues in all Bank economic and sector work for Sri Lanka; (c) assisting the Government to establish a special internship program for women to facilitate their employment in nontraditional areas such as higher ranks of the civil service, and in vocational, scientific, and information technology; (d) providing an advisory technical assistance to help the Government strengthen its institutional mechanisms for promoting gender equity, for integrating gender issues into policies, plans and activities, to realize its goals from the 1995 Beijing Conference, and for collecting gender-disaggregated data; and (e) providing support to the Ministry of Education's skill training programs that emphasize the need to eliminate gender-stereotyping in the Sri Lankan education system, especially in scientific and vocational education.

- (iii) **Provide access to microfinance/self-employment.** The programs of the National Development Trust Fund and NGOs have consistently shown that women have a strong interest in microcredit and that this interest appears to be closely related to the level of poverty. At present, no sustainable microfinance service for women exists despite this considerable demand. Access to microcredit is of special importance to the estimated 20 percent female-headed households since the latter are confined to the informal sector and have limited resources or bargaining power. The promotion of the development of small-scale self-employment schemes for women, especially rural women already working in agriculture or women living in urban poor areas, may be a good approach to improving their income. Such activities could serve as a "springboard" to larger microenterprises. All Bank-financed microfinance initiatives should make credit for poor women a high priority. Special emphasis should be placed on access to credit for women victims of the civil conflict, plantation workers, returning migrant workers, and poor women. Vocational training, especially in nontraditional areas, should be given to women pursuing self-employment to be financed by credit.

Gender Issues in Bank Programs in Sri Lanka

Gender is a crosscutting issue in development policies and programs such as those supported by the Bank. At the national level of policy and institutional reforms, there is clearly a need to "mainstream" gender issues into the planning process and to ensure gender sensitivity in formulating policy directions. Unfortunately, even the provisions of high profile instruments such as UN conventions and the Women's Charter of Sri Lanka have not yet been integrated into national policies and plans. Incorporating a gender perspective in policy reforms is therefore imperative to economic development, gender equity, and human resource development in Sri Lanka.

In this respect, there are several gaps in areas identified by the Bank programs. Public enterprise reforms have been implemented for nearly a decade but gender-disaggregated data are still not available to ascertain their impact on women. Women constitute over half the agricultural labor force but are apt to be seen as dependent housewives or as supplementary family labor rather than as active participants in the labor force. If productivity and technology levels are to be improved

in this sector, provision must be made for equal access to skills training and extension programs. Both the Farm Mechanization Center and the Farm Women's Agricultural Extension Program of the Ministry of Agriculture—both sectoral institutions or agencies—need to better consider the extensive current and potential role of women in agriculture and the need to enhance their life chances and contribution through access training and credit.

The private sector is already dominant in the manufacturing sector, and the garment industry, the main contributor to exports, has been virtually “feminized.” Studies have shown that women have been used as low-cost dispensable labor in low-skill/low-wage employment, and unless there is more rapid transfer of technology and upgrading of skills, significant human resources will be underutilized and women denied upward occupational mobility and hence the opportunity to improve their status in the Sri Lankan economy. The Bank needs to pay specific attention to this issue in its activities.

In this context the human resource development component of the program is an important area of intervention. Currently it is chiefly NGOs and women's organizations who have taken action (within their limited resources) to reduce gender imbalances in enrollment in vocational and technical education, to diversify training and thereby provide employment opportunities for women, and to provide vocational information and counseling in collaboration with the private sector operating as a catalyst of change. Such initiatives can be replicated and extended through national policy and action, again in collaboration with the private sector, so that women are not disadvantaged in access to skills and resources.

Projects in the area of self-employment and credit in the context of human resource development also highlight several gender issues. Access to microcredit without inputs in skills training, technology, and market information have confined women to production for the low-income consumers' market and perpetuated their low economic status and poverty. Underlying the negative experiences of the past two decades is inequality in access to skills and services and gendered perceptions of the peripheral role of women in development.

The Bank's strategy in the area of poverty reduction is to rely on economic growth and on government-supported programs that address poverty and inequalities in income and access to social services. The interface between poverty and gender, and the need to protect vulnerable groups through macro economic and social policies, must be clearly recognized. The increasing population of ageing women caused by relatively higher female life expectancy, and the lack of support for such women in low-income families, in particular, creates a new vulnerable group.

Agenda 21, which was formulated at the Rio Conference,⁴ offered fresh perspectives of the role of women in environmental issues. Women are seen not merely as victims of environmental degradation but as protectors of the environment. It is the latter role that offers potential for the

⁴ Agenda 21 is a blueprint for global partnership in the twenty-first century aimed at reconciling the twin requirements of sustaining both the quality of the environment and a healthy economy for all peoples of the world. It was approved by governments at the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, popularly known as the Earth Summit.

active participation of women in forestry and water resources projects not only as users and carriers, but also as managers.

A number of specific issues concerning women can be identified in some of the sectors where the Bank will be active under the new strategy. Specifically, these may include:

- (i) **Human resource development.** Training opportunities for women need to be diversified so that they will not be displaced or marginalized in an increasingly technologically sophisticated economy. Traditionally, women tend to be excluded from many new sectors, a result of the educational system and the socialization process.⁵ Imbalances in technical training programs should be reduced and better vocational counseling made available to girls.
- (ii) **Policy and institutional reforms.** In the agriculture sector very few rural women have opportunities for off-farm employment. It is important to recognize that rural women are not a homogeneous group and may have different capabilities depending on their educational levels. For example, women with a secondary school education can work in areas such as food production, which utilize relatively sophisticated technology. In so-called “traditional” rural industries, such as coir and pottery, rural women are marginalized by the lack of access to new designs, technology, and skills and therefore, markets. As illustrated in the Bank’s gender strategy, it is necessary to support gender mainstreaming in key sectors such as education and agriculture so as to support policy and institutional reforms.
- (iii) **Infrastructure improvement.** The impact on and involvement of women is often not recognized in infrastructure projects. In the water sector, for example, women’s participation in projects could be built in by training them in the maintenance of new facilities. In transport sector projects, women’s needs and demands (including a comparative cost analysis) need to be assessed and potential benefits, as well as adverse impacts, determined.
- (iv) **Mitigation of the environmental and social impacts associated with the national economic and social transition.** The specific environmental and social impacts on women need to be included in all aspects of program design. As concerns social safety nets, the situation of the growing number of Sri Lankan women living in poverty must be considered as a present and future reality.

Gender Issues in the Bank’s Loan and Technical Assistance Pipeline (1998–2001)

At the operational level, it is imperative that gender issues be considered in the formulation and implementation of all Bank technical assistance (whether advisory or for project preparation) and loans. Gender issues are relevant to and should be a part of the analysis of

⁵ ADB 1997, pp. 34–35, 50.

all pipeline activities no matter which sector. The matrix on the next page juxtaposes gender issues in the pipeline for Sri Lanka to guide Bank staff in integrating gender issues into their work. In addition, the Bank's gender strategy makes a number of suggestions for sector studies and technical assistance relating to gender issues in Sri Lanka that could be included in the pipeline.

Institutional Support

If the Banks' programs are to reach women, different mechanisms and support systems are needed. At the macro level MWA and the Women's Bureau, and since 1993, the National Committee on Women, are the focal points for women's issues. These components of the national machinery for women's affairs are relatively isolated from mainstream national planning. Collaboration with them is necessary for focusing on gender issues.

At the policy level the most important link is with the Department of National Planning of the Ministry of Finance and Planning, which is responsible for the preparation of the Public Investment Program (the five-year national rolling plan) and for approval and supervision of donor-assisted programs. The critical role of the department in integrating gender in national planning is hardly recognized and gender issues receive relatively low priority in its own perception. The most effective mechanism for institutional support of gender-related planning perspectives would be the establishment of a gender unit within the Department of National Planning with representation from the state national machinery for women's affairs, other relevant ministries, NGOs and women's organizations, and the private sector. The unit could monitor plans and implementation activities for their impact on women. Despite suggestions by women's institutions and organizations and official sources, the unit has yet to achieve reality. It is currently envisaged that a gender steering committee could examine programs at the planning stage and monitor their implementation. Technical inputs are also necessary on gender policy analysis and gender audit to ensure that programs meet women's needs and aspirations and national development goals.

Line ministers have focal points that are expected to liaise with MWA and donors on programs and reforms. The provincial ministries have ministries with a mandate for women's affairs among other functions. Ambiguity in the relationship between the Central Ministry and these ministries and the absence of a coordinating mechanism have prevented fruitful collaboration. These provincial administrations, however, are responsible for programs in specific geographical locations and their participation is crucial for the successful implementation of programs island-wide.

The Bank has initiated a new policy of cooperation with the NGO community and NGO networks in program implementation. NGO inputs are necessary in planning as NGOs have both commitment to and awareness of the needs of communities. Where gender issues are concerned, all NGOs are not sensitive to such issues. One of the most important and visible developments in the last two decades has been the growth of women's organizations and the expansion of their activities functionally and geographically, although Sri Lanka has not had

Gender Issues in the Bank's Pipeline (1998–2001)

Sector	Planning	Implementation/Delivery
Agriculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess differing gender roles in rural areas. • Assess differing access to factors of production. • Determine differing roles of gender in decision-making. • Ensure that the design of the components of gender analysis clearly targets women. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that issues identified during planning are properly addressed during implementation. • Include necessary support and capacity building for executing agency or NGOs assisting in implementation. • Monitor that components are impacting positively on women, i.e., access to land, credit, technology, and training.
Transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify utilization by gender and differing needs and demands for services. • Assess women's willingness to pay for improved transportation. • Ensure women's participation in such aspects as maintenance and location (e.g., of roads or railway station). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that executing agency or NGO concerned is meeting the needs of women as identified.
Financial sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess women's access to the financial system, i.e., credit. • Assess women's access to other productive resources. • Identify constraints faced by women in gaining access to credit and/or productive resources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that delivery systems are responding to women's needs and constraints. • Train staff of financial institutions to work with women. • Ensure that management information system is gender-specific (i.e., number of women borrowers, etc.).
Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify women's needs and demands for energy. • Determine potentially adverse impacts of projects on women. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that executing agencies are meeting the needs of women as identified. • Provide necessary institutional support.
Social infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify differential needs, by gender, in access to health, water, education services, and the constraints thereof through a participatory approach. • Assess role of women in decision-making regarding utilization of social services. • Determine need for and extent of participation of female staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide support to executing agencies as well as the NGOs that assist them in delivering services to women. • Provide training if needed. • Monitor impact on women, e.g., access to water, involvement of women in maintenance, better quality health care, etc.

a strong women's movement. Women's institutions and organizations engage in research, advocacy, training, action, and activism, and attempt to sensitize policymakers and to mobilize communities. The cooperation of research institutions will be useful for gender analysis, gender-sensitive base line studies, and impact studies. Women's organizations working in communities are potential partners in specific implementation activities. Women's groups/institutions that engage in programs such as gender sensitization, legal literacy, functional literacy, and political awareness are another category of useful partners.

Age-Specific Enrollment Rates in Schools by Gender^a
(1991)

Age Group	Male	Female	Total
5-9 years	90.1	87.3	88.7
10-14 years	86.6	87.5	87.1
5-14 years	88.3	87.4	87.9
15-19 years	37.5	42.6	39.9
20-22 years	3.1	4.6	3.8
5-22 years	62.1	63.4	62.8

a Excludes Northern Province and part of Eastern Province; based on population projections.

Source: *School Census 1991*, Ministry of Education, Statistics Division.

**Government Institutions Relevant to Women in Development/
Gender and Development Issues**

1. Name : National Committee on Women
Contact person : Dr. Wimala de Silva
Address : 11/2, Malalasekera Pedesa, Colombo 7
Telephone no. : 595841

2. Name : State Ministry of Women's Affairs
Contact person : Mrs. Kamala Wickramasinghe
Address : 177, Narahenpita Road, Colombo 5
Telephone no. : 591294

3. Name : Women's Bureau of Sri Lanka
Contact person : Mrs. Kanthi Iwjetunge, Director
Address : 177, Narahenpita Road, Colombo 5
Telephone no. : 591294

4. Name : National Planning Division
Ministry of Policy Planning & Implementation
Contact person : Dr. P J Alailima, Director
Address : Secretariat Bldg., Colombo 1
Telephone no. : 422957

5. Name : Farm Women's Agricultural Extension Program
Contact person : Mrs. Rose Samuel
Address : Agricultural Extension Division
Department of Agriculture, Gannoruwa
Peradeniya
Telephone no. : 08-88124

6. Name : Women and Children's Unit, Department of Labor
Contact person : Mrs. Pearl Weerasinghe
Address : Labor Secretariat
Kirula Road, Colombo 5
Telephone no. : 587315

Women in Development Resource Personnel in External Funding Agencies

1. Name : United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
Contact person : Ms. Manel de Silva
Address : 202, Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 7
Telephone no. : 580691
2. Name : United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
Contact person : Mrs. Jayanthi Liyanage
Address : 231, Galle Road, Colombo 4
Telephone no. : 589101, 584204, 586168
3. Name : International Labour Organisation
Contact person : Ms. Shafinaz Hassendeen
Address : 202, Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 7
Telephone no. : 500865
4. Name : Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)
Contact person : Mrs. P Kailasapathy, Ms. Soma K Mendis
Address : 12, Anderson Place, Colombo 5
Telephone no. : 502640/1
5. Name : Netherlands Development Corporation
Contact person : Ms. Ambeherya Haniffa
Address : 25, Torrington Avenue, Colombo 5
Telephone no. : 596914
6. Name : Norwegian Agency for Development (NORAD)
Contact person : Ms. Ms Vidya Perera
Address : 34, Ward Place, Colombo 7
Telephone no. : 692263
7. Name : Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA)
Contact person : Ms. Sujatha Wijetileke
Address : 47/1, Horton Place, Colombo 7
Telephone no. : 688452
8. Name : Frederick Ebert Stiftung
Contact person : Ms. Sonali Goonesekere
Address : 4, Adams Avenue, Colombo 4
Telephone no. : 502710 / 11
9. Name : The Asia Foundation
Contact person : Ms. Dinesha de Silva Wickramanayake
Address : 4/1A, Rajakeeya Mawatha, Colombo 7
Telephone no. : 698356

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