Glass Ceilings, Sticky Floors or Sticky Doors? A Quantile Regression Approach to Exploring Gender Wage Gaps in Sri Lanka

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Despite Sri Lanka’s achievements in improving the status of women, they are still treated unequally in the labour market. A study conducted by a team of Sri Lankan researchers investigates whether wage discrimination in Sri Lanka is greater at the top (Glass Ceilings) or the bottom (Sticky Floors) of the wage distribution. Some key findings:

A small average wage gap in Sri Lanka masks large variation between sectors and across the wage distribution. Whereas wages are 23-31 percent higher for men than women in the private sector, somewhat unexpectedly, they are 9-21 percent lower in the public sector.

Men and women with identical characteristics are not paid equally. Indeed, women are found to be paid less, even when they have better characteristics. This indicates that policies that combat discrimination against women in the workplace may be more important in closing the gender wage gap than policies to reduce gender gaps in characteristics such as education. Indeed, in Sri Lanka, if anything, women have more education than men on average.

Do occupation, industry and part-time status matter? Women face a greater unfair disadvantage within the same occupation or industry than between occupations or industries. This suggests that women choose jobs in occupations or industries where they are relatively less discriminated against. Nevertheless, they are still underpaid compared to identical males within these occupations and industries.

Glass ceilings, sticky floors, or both? The study shows that there are larger wage gaps among the least-paid workers, even after controlling for education, experience, age and other characteristics (Figure 1). This suggests the presence of « sticky floors », or that poorer (low-earning) women face a greater unfair disadvantage than women further up on the wage distribution. Evidence of glass ceilings is limited.

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Figure 1


Future research should explore whether an across-the-board minimum wage would be more effective in promoting equity at the bottom of the distribution than existing wage setting mechanisms (wage boards that set minimum wages for manual workers by skill level in each sector). Moreover, policies that may lower female wages at the bottom of the distribution (restrictions on overseas employment and on the termination of employment) need to be re-assessed in light of these results.

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