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Women's access to decent work in Sri Lanka: Addressing context-specific barriers

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Key messages

Recommended policy interventions to increase women's participation in decent work in Sri Lanka include:

- Reviewing the proposed 'National Human Resource Development Policy for Sri Lanka 2023-2028' to incorporate policy recommendations and actions to promote decent work.
- Promoting the availability of affordable childcare.

Decent work and women's economic empowerment in Sri Lanka

Decent work is work that provides social security, adequate pay earned within normal working hours, and rights at work. Improving women's access to decent work is not only important for economic growth but also for development and gender empowerment.

The International Monetary Fund emphasizes the importance of women's economic empowerment for Sri Lanka's recovery efforts from the recent economic crisis (IMF, 2022). Successive Sri Lankan governments have shown commitment to this cause by signing international agreements and initiating national policies. However, these have had limited success.

In 2022, a team of PEP local researchers in Sri Lanka set out to assess how women's access to decent work is influenced by the country's economic, legal, infrastructural, and social contexts. They employed a [mixed method approach](#) (see text box to the right) to examine context-specific barriers that hinder women's ability to secure decent work in the country.

Given the absence of a definitive measure for 'decent work,' the study employed proxies based on employment status, earnings, and working hours. The definition of decent work as referred to herein therefore entails **non-vulnerable full-time employment, where workers earn at least the legislated minimum wages within standard working hours.**

Methodology

Recognizing that quantitative data alone could not fully capture the influence of Sri Lanka's legal, social, and cultural context on women's access to decent work, the quantitative analysis was therefore complemented with a qualitative component.

- The quantitative analysis focuses on economic barriers by primarily using the Labour Force Survey (LFS) data produced by the Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka.
- The qualitative approach followed a deductive framework for both data collection and analysis. Interviews with key stakeholders were the primary data source.

The study's findings underscore the imperative for policy interventions aimed at dismantling the multiple barriers that currently prevent women from accessing decent work in Sri Lanka.



Key findings

Findings from the PEP study show that:

Access to decent work is generally very low in Sri Lanka, and particularly amongst women.

- Women's general participation in the country's labour force has stagnated at around 30-35% since the late 1990s, and only 7.6% of the working-age women were in decent work in 2018.
- This is partly due to the fact that women tend to select low-quality employment that is close to their residences and has flexible working hours.

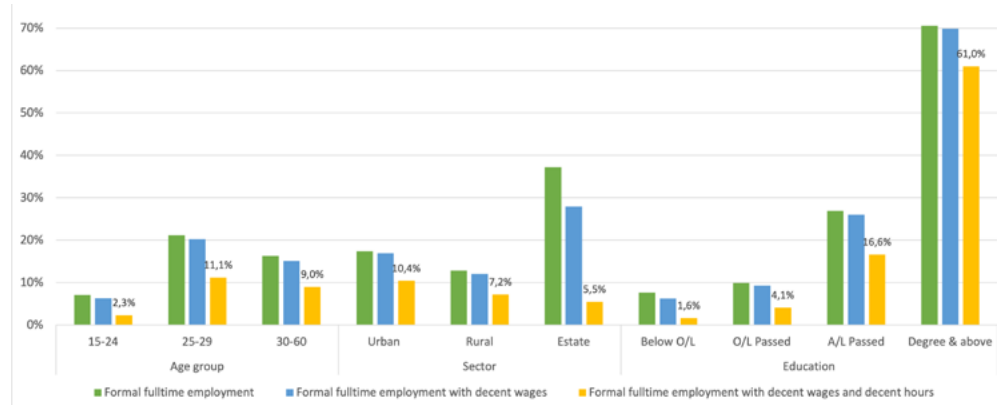
Women's access to decent work is lowest amongst low-skilled women*, and particularly those aged 15 to 24 (2.3%). Access is also relatively lower for women living in districts with high unemployment rates, or with a high ratio of employment in agriculture.

- Indeed, women's employment in Sri Lanka is largely limited to a few industries, with most low-skilled women employed in agriculture and manufacturing, and most high-skilled women in education.

With higher levels of education, access to decent work increases exponentially.

- Therefore, improving access to education and English literacy contributes to improving access to decent work. However, expansions in education need to be accompanied by the creation of jobs for skilled workers.

Figure 2: Women's access to decent work by age, sector and level of education



*Low-skilled women: Women with an education level below General Certificate in Education – Ordinary Level [O/L]"

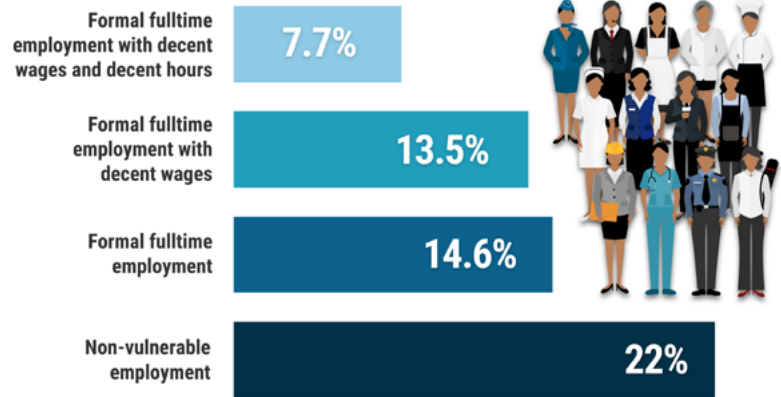
Source: Authors' compilation based on Labour Force Survey 2018, Department of Census and Statistics

Furthermore, attention should be paid to removing social barriers that prevent women from accessing quality jobs. Women are responsible for most household work and caregiving duties. Without assistance from extended family members or outside sources, many women struggle to balance work and housework. Study findings also show that:

Affordable, good quality and convenient childcare can improve women's access to decent work. However, the use of childcare facilities in Sri Lanka is very low.

- Available childcare is inadequate and unregulated. Many care facilities lack basic amenities, and caregivers are not well-trained.
- Recent policy documents (e.g., National Policy for Child Day Care Centres and National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Development) have identified the need for improving access to affordable childcare facilities. However, these policies have not yet been translated into action.

Sri Lankan Women's Access to Decent Work: Types of Employment as a share of 15-60 Population



Source: Author's compilation based on Labour Force Survey 2018, Department of Census and Statistics.

Note: Non-vulnerable employment – jobs other than self-employment and unpaid family work; and formal employment – employment covering social security.

Another important barrier identified through the study is the **lack of reliable and safe public transport**. This makes commuting to work time-consuming and tiring, and is a major deterrent to women looking to access work outside their vicinity.

Finally, while the necessity for gender equality is well recognized in Sri Lanka's constitution, the country's labor laws frequently go against these ideals. Indeed, the study has found that:

Labor legislations contribute to hindering women's access to decent jobs in the following ways:

- Imposing additional requirements for employers to provide safeguards when employing women, which makes hiring women more expensive for firms.
- Providing incentives for women to leave employment after marriage by allowing them to withdraw their retirement contributions.



Recommendations for policy interventions

Based on the evidence generated through this study, the authors identify two main options for policy interventions that would effectively contribute to increasing women's access to decent work in Sri Lanka. Consideration was also given to the fiscal constraints faced by the government at present while identifying these policy interventions.

Policy Option 1: Reviewing the proposed 'National Human Resource Development Policy for Sri Lanka 2023-2028' to incorporate policy recommendations and actions to promote decent work..

To achieve this, the authors recommend to:

- Divert the policy focus from 'creating jobs for women' to 'creating decent jobs for women' by incorporating recommendations to improve women's access to decent work.
- Focus attention and interventions on the segments where access to decent work is particularly low, such as low-skilled women and women in agricultural areas.
- Create public awareness on the importance of decent work.

Policy Option 2: Improving availability of affordable childcare.

To achieve this, the authors recommend to:

- Finalise and implement the National Policy for Child Day Care Centres and the National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Development (currently in draft form).
- Provide incentives to encourage the private sector to engage more in the provision of childcare services.
- Promote training for building the capacity of the personnel involved in childcare services.
- Conduct research to identify cost-effective means of providing childcare services, such as through the assessment of related practices in other countries.

References

International Monetary Fund. (2022). 2021 Article IV Consultation - Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Sri Lanka. Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund.

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