

# Sri Lanka: Women's labour and the demand for social welfare

Beware plans for a local version of India's Aadhaar!

Saturday 16 June 2018, by [Cat's Eye Collective \(Sri Lanka\)](#) (Date first published: 11 May 2018).

## A feminist perspective on social security in Sri Lanka

International Labour Day on 1 May was honoured in Sri Lanka by several major trade unions and other Left organisations. This was despite the Government's attempts to 'shift' May Day to 7 May, to prevent it from 'overlapping' with Vesak Poya. The decision to shift a day that honours labour rights in order to make space for a religious holiday – particularly one which is observed by the majority community – is not a neutral one.

Sri Lanka's Cat's Eye feminist collective felt this was a good moment to reflect on the path we have taken in Sri Lanka: from being a country with State bodies that respected workers' rights and social welfare provisioning, to a country where the Government thinks it can simply 'shift' May Day!

A recent news report revealed that the Government is planning to implement the World Bank funded Social Safety Net Project, [1] which is envisioned as a "one-stop shop" platform centralising the fragmented social protection programmes across several ministries. The project will develop a single registry of citizens, enabling each individual beneficiary to be identified using biometric technology. In other words, an Aadhaar for Sri Lanka! [2]

In India, the Aadhaar scheme was heavily promoted by the Modi Government as a wonder of technology and a solution to many of India's problems. Simultaneously, resistance has built up against the project by many who work with and are from marginalised communities in India. The strength of this resistance is illustrated by the stay on the Aadhaar scheme that they have managed to achieve in the Supreme Court of India. The Aadhaar scheme is not only a violation of privacy, but has also worsened existing social hierarchies in India. Hardly an enlightened path for us to follow!

Cat's Eye is of the view that the proposed approach for Sri Lanka, far from being a solution, is dangerous and undemocratic.

As with anywhere else in the world, in Sri Lanka too the burden of weakening social welfare is borne by those most marginalised in society: poor women. Social welfare programmes go hand in hand with women's labour both in the public and private spheres. The depletion of this social safety will have adverse effects on women's lives, especially given that many of them are already part of the precarious labour economy.

Decline in political will to safeguard social welfare schemes

Sri Lanka has a long history of social welfare provisions. The country's development in the post-independence period was centred on a web of State-run free or subsidised public services. It was accompanied by a robust social security system and effective protections for the labour force. They

contributed to the achievement of high human development indicators for Sri Lanka, as compared to other countries in the region. In spite of these achievements, the political will to maintain the system has gradually eroded and no investment has been made to make a clear link between social welfare provisions and enhanced living standards.

The liberalisation of the economy in 1977 and subsequent neoliberal policies promoted by the IMF and World Bank contributed to the deterioration of the welfare state. Public services such as free health and education, housing, subsidised transport and utilities, pensions for older persons and welfare programmes such as food stamps have come under attack. The effects of this erosion are further sharpened by the increase in precarious working conditions such as daily wages, small livelihood incomes and short term employment contracts amongst the poor – especially women.

Many changes to social welfare programmes have been justified as ‘restructuring’. The restructuring we are told will address the issues of inefficiency and corruption while making ‘better targets’ for these programmes. For example the replacement of food stamps with targeted cash transfers for the poor under Samurdhi, was to make the delivery more efficient and reduce corruption. However, it has failed to achieve the aim of ensuring nutritious food to families, as the money is often used for debt repayments and other expenses.

The attempt at finding a ‘better target’ has left us with a reduced number of people receiving social welfare. The cumulative result of this strategy is further exclusion of groups of people such as older persons, unemployed, disabled and others facing income insecurities. For women, it has increased their fears of being cut out of social welfare programmes altogether.

The social welfare system has gone hand in hand with hard-won labour provisions, such as pension, provident funds and severance pay. These provisions too have come under scrutiny in recent years with those within and beyond the State referring to them as “too restrictive”. It goes without saying that the “restrictions” that are being referred to, are from the perspective of profit-making employers who want to further exploit labourers.

All this is needs to be seen in the context where labour laws do not address a large majority of workers in Sri Lanka as they are in the informal sector or are migrant labourers working in other countries. A large number of women are a part of these sectors. The sectors in which poor women work, such as agriculture, fisheries and the service sector are prone to seasonal variations, droughts, floods and employment insecurity. In such a context, fluctuating incomes and debt are constant companions which visit upon many a poor household.

As if this erosion of existing systems is not enough, new mantras that benefit those in power such as ‘public private partnerships’ vis a vis development mechanisms are the life-force of the emergent neoliberal economy with its slew of free trade agreements and foreign direct investments. In this climate, social welfare measures are no longer important for policy-makers and are seen needing to be gradually dismantled.

We are a long way off from universality of protection that would allow people to live in dignity throughout their lifecycle.

### **Social security and the family**

Even when women are included in social welfare programmes, their life and labour is acknowledged and supported primarily when it fits within the contours of family and marriage.

For example, our public health programmes provide care for women’s bodies primarily when pregnant, and while nursing a child. Restricting a woman’s worth to her role as a mother invisibilises

a life-cycle approach to social welfare provisions, which takes into consideration the changing stages and needs of a life-cycle. Similarly, in order to access Samurdhi, women have to show participation in the family structure. This alienates women who are outside what is considered the norm, such as those who do not wish to marry, those who do not wish to bear children or cannot bear children, or those who may not identify as heterosexual.

The primacy of the family, and the woman's role in it, as the unit that mediates access to services is based on a normative understanding of society. Women's real lives however spill beyond this structure in all societies, especially in our societies ravaged by war. As a result of moving out of family structures due to domestic violence, war and displacement, disappearance of a husband, divorce, etc., women become less important to the State. Women's economic vulnerability is increased further by old age, social stigma around unmarried status, and ostracism on any other non-normative life choice that women may make. In all such instances they are less entitled to social welfare. In effect women are being abandoned by State mechanisms in their most vulnerable situations.

Can such a complex set of social, cultural and economic conditions be addressed by single-registry systems using biometric technology? Not only does such technology violate individual privacy, they are far from equipped to understand the ever-changing nature of everyday life of ordinary people. There is no reason to believe that limitations of such technology will not rear their head in Sri Lanka.

### **Preserving and enhancing social security**

It is clear that a vibrant history of social security and welfare our country has been proud of is being eroded. The measures that are brought in as solutions to mediate in these issues are undemocratic.

In order for the State to remain tuned into the pulse of the most marginalised in the country, any measures to address the question of poverty must make space for the voices of the poor. It is through these voices we can paint a holistic picture of current circumstances and possible solutions. Such a process will enhance democracy not just for the poor but for the country as a whole.

We must never lose sight of the direct connection between social welfare measures and the high human development indices of Sri Lanka. This connection must form the basis for a strong political will that maintains social welfare measures.

In order for Government policy to be holistic and relevant it must take into consideration changing conditions of labour, such as the growth of the informal sector and the overwhelming reality of migrant labour, and the resulting changes in society as a whole.

It must be recognised that women bear the burden of unequal economic policies within the home, workplace and society in general. Therefore, the voices of women are key to a better understanding of today's realities and for reimagining a more inclusive, equal and just State policy and society.

The Cat's Eye gaze will observe the solutions being suggested by State and non-State actors, and weigh their equity and fairness from the perspective of marginalised sections of society, particularly of poor women.

(The Cat's Eye column is written by an independent collective of feminists, offering an alternative feminist gaze on current affairs in Sri Lanka and beyond.)

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## Footnotes

[1] Sunday Times. Finance Ministry to Review Social Protection Programmes. 2018, 22<sup>nd</sup> April.

[2] 'Aadhaar' is the digital social security programme implemented in India, under the current Modi government; known as the 'world's largest biometric ID system'