

Sri Lanka: Women's Labour Force Participation – Three Themes

Sunday 23 July 2023, by [KODIKARA Chulani](#) (Date first published: 10 July 2023).

The IMF Staff Report on Sri Lanka released in March 2022 outlined a number of policy prescriptions to address Sri Lanka's unprecedented economic crisis, including increasing women's labour force participation. The few lines in the report on this issue provoked some responses within mainstream and social media with a rejoinder by [Devaka Gunawardena](#). [1] As Gunawardena pointed out at the time, "on the face it, there should be no controversy over decisive action to expand the representation of women in the labour force", but on what terms, and how do we understand and analyse women's experience within it? The editors of *Polity* felt that there was insufficient debate and discussion of these questions. In July 2022, in conversation with Professor Kanchana Ruwanpura of the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, we set out to deepen our understanding about these issues.

The following seven articles by [Nadia Augustyniak](#), [Mythri Jegathesan](#), [Chulani Kodikara](#), [Sepali Kottegoda](#), [Buddhima Padmasiri](#), [Ranmini Vithanagama](#) and [Shyamain Wickramasingha](#), the book review by [Asha Abeyasekera](#), and the [interview of Menaha Kandasamy by Hasini Lecamwasam](#), which will be published as a thematic section on 'Women and Labour' in the forthcoming *Polity* print issue, (together with Gunawardena's essay), is the outcome of that idea. [2]

This introduction seeks to foreground three significant themes that emerge from the several contributions to this *Polity* special section that problematise the sweeping recommendation to "increase women's labour force participation": firstly, the undervaluing of women's labour in the formal labour market; secondly, women's participation in the informal labour market; and thirdly, women's contribution to social reproduction and care work. But first, we examine what is defined as a "gender gap" in mainstream definitions of women's labour force participation (WLFP), the call to increase WLFP, and feminist understandings of WLFP.

The Gender Gap in Labour Force Participation

The labour force participation rate gives the share of the working-age population who are active in the labour market, whether employed or seeking employment. In many countries and contexts across the world, there is a gender gap in labour force participation. An ILO - UN Women study conducted in 84 countries found that the labour force participation rate of prime-age men is 95%, meaning that almost all men aged 25 to 54 participate in the labour force. Conversely, prime-age women have a labour force participation rate of 52%. These statistics indicate a gender gap of 43 percentage points in labour force participation (ILO/ UN Women 2020).

In Sri Lanka, the labour force participation of women is at 32.1%. It is almost half of that of men who comprise 70.5% of the labour force (Department of Census and Statistics 2022).

The question of identifying barriers to and increasing female labour force participation emerged as

an explicit concern of the IMF in recent years, which seems to do with the macro-economic implications of this gap the IMF first outlined the gains to be made by increasing labour force participation of women in a report titled *Women, Work and the Economy: Macroeconomic Gains from Gender Equality* in 2013. According to the IMF, increasing the number of women in the labour force contributes to economic growth. The increase is said to be “macro critical” (Action Aid 2017: 8). By 2015, this issue was made part of its guidance note for preparing surveillance reports on the economic and financial policies of member countries. Action Aid, which reviewed 124 surveillance reports issued by the IMF in 2016, states that that the latter advised more than one in five countries to increase women’s labour force participation.

However, in analysing this gap, feminist economists have long drawn attention to the definition of ‘labour’ and ‘work’ in mainstream economics and the fact that most women workers are not recorded as ‘workers’ in such statistics. Put differently, formal labour force statistics do not account for the numbers of women working in the informal sector – as paid domestic labour, in small-scale home-based work, as well as in casual /non-formal work.

Secondly, these statistics do not account for women’s tasks associated with social reproduction and the care economy. Because of the salience of patriarchal gender norms, the burden of unpaid care work is borne largely if not solely by women. Societies have historically managed the problem of the arduous, everyday work that has to be done to bring up and care for a family by gendering this work, i.e. by making this the duty and responsibility primarily of women and by socialising girls /women to believe that it is work that they must do. Women who do not conform to this norm maybe labelled as ‘bad’ women. Thus, even when and if women are to find a ‘proper’ job, it has to be on top of the work done at home (Ghosh 2021). In the context of this reality, to be able to juggle better their responsibilities at home, women may prefer public sector jobs like teaching and work in the informal economy, even though the latter is coupled with more exploitation. [3] Jayati Ghosh concludes that:

The general invisibility of women’s work is itself a mostly accurate reflection of their status in society: where women’s official work participation is low, this is typically a sign of less freedom and mobility of women, lower status and lower empowerment. Indeed, where more women are active in the labour market and are employed (especially in formal activities), the share of unpaid work tends to come down and even the unpaid labour performed by women is more likely to be recognised and valued. This is why looking at the extent, coverage, conditions and remuneration of women’s work is often a useful way of judging the extent to which their broader status in society has improved (2015: 48).

Action Aid does acknowledge that the country specific advice provided by the IMF on how to do this recognised the need to address issues such as child-care provision and education, as well as addressing discrimination against women, improving elderly care provision, and facilitating flexible working hours for women (Action Aid 2017: 9-10). Indeed, Christine Lagarde, the former head of the IMF, in a 2016 blog post lauds Canada for lengthening maternity and parental leave from 37 to 52 weeks in 2001 and for establishing a national system of early learning and child-care supported by increased government spending on early childhood development. She recognises that these measures contributed to an increase in women’s labour force participation in Canada. Yet there is no recognition of all the paid and unpaid labour that women are involved in. Moreover, as Action Aid points out the IMF’s policy prescription to increase WLFPP is not accompanied by any policy recommendations relating to fiscal support in order to address the structural barriers that impede women’s full enjoyment of economic rights. Nor is the IMF concerned about the way in which women who are absorbed into formal employment remain under-paid and excluded from basic rights and protections available under labour laws.

Three Themes on Women's Labour Force Participation in Sri Lanka

As mentioned above, Sri Lanka's labour force participation of women is under half of that of men. As Vithanagama points out, this statistic does not tell us much about the considerable regional-variations in WLFP (15.4%-44.8%), or the push and pull factors that shape women's job seeking. She draws attention to the fact that in developing countries in particular, women often take up paid work not necessarily because they want to but because they have to, which defies the very essence of empowerment—a process characterised by the ability to make choices from a vector of available alternatives.

Women in the Formal Labour Force

Much of women's labour in the formal labour force is concentrated in low paid jobs. This is why as Jegathesan points out in her contribution, "investigating the terms on which women participate in the labour force is crucial to any meaningful assessment of whether such participation constitutes empowerment." Indeed, the contributions of Kandasamy, Jegathesan, Wickramasingha, and Padmasiri illuminate this point in stark terms with reference to the tea, garment, and sugar industries respectively. The tea and garment industries, which are among the most profitable export-oriented sectors of the formal economy, rely heavily on the skill and labour of women. Yet women's wages remain negligible, the conditions of work appalling, and women continue to be marginalised from top-down decision-making levels in these industries. In the plantation sector, there are still no toilets, and eating places for field workers even in 2023 (Kandasamy). In garment factories, even though formal employment allows for leave, managers rarely allow workers to avail these at times of need. Workers are forced to negotiate their right to take leave, almost always with repercussions, and requests for leave and absences are met with reprimands and disciplinary actions (Wickramasingha). In one sugar plantation, analysed by Padmasiri, formal workers are entitled to leave, but their terms of employment remain only marginally better than those hired on a daily basis.

The conditions and experiences of women workers in these sectors are compounded by the challenges to organise collectively and the domination of existing trade unions by men. In the plantation sector, Jegathesan is unequivocal that this exploitation relies on the complicity of male leaders of the Malaiyaka Tamil community and "their refusal to centre and give women workers meaningful channels of decision-making and to represent their most basic needs for survival at both the industrial and national levels".

Women in the Informal Labour Market

The undervaluing of women's work in the formal labour market is of course only part of the problem of the dominant understandings of WLFP. Official statistics of WLFP in Sri Lanka, as elsewhere, do not in fact reflect women's work in the informal or precarious wage labour market. Women in poor, economically distressed households and from lower education backgrounds almost without exception, end up working in informal sector jobs that are neither regulated nor protected by the State.

As Padmasiri emphasises women's contribution to agriculture, for instance, is categorised as "contributing family workers" and not reflected in labour force participation statistics. Moreover, even their work for corporates were not formalised until very recently. Even though the contribution of women is crucial for the industry, they are categorised as unskilled, unproductive, and secondary labour. In the case of the Pelwatte Sugar Company, Padmasiri notes that in 2021, the company did take a policy decision to absorb informal workers who had worked for more than 15 years to be part of formal employment, offering them marginally better terms of employment.

Yet, the trend is moving in the opposite direction. For instance, formal employment in the garment sector is being increasingly and progressively informalised, disproportionately affecting women. Wickramasingha notes a trend towards informalisation in the garment sector. Although informality is presented as a choice, she states that it is in fact experienced by women as a lack of choice, generated by women's need to juggle productive and reproductive work. In the plantation sector there has been a trend of women taking up informalised domestic work since the 1990s, despite the precarious and unfair terms of employment. Kandasamy estimates that around 75% of domestic workers in the country are from plantations. However, the difference here is that there is ongoing struggle being waged by women domestic workers who are denied paid leave, employment or gratuity and EPF, to formalise their status as workers and their conditions of work, through their own unions.

The Work of Social Reproduction

Irrespective of whether women work in the informal or formal labour market, they bear the burden of care work at home. As Sepali Kottegoda points out, 60.5% of women are engaged in housework as opposed to 4.9% of men in Sri Lanka. This means that more than half of all Sri Lankan women are engaged in unpaid housework day in and day out - cooking, cleaning, childcare, and looking after the disabled and the elderly—all of which is completely discounted in the country's measurements of economic activity.

Women on average spent 13.77 hours per day on care work compared to 8.98 hours spent by men (Kottegoda). As Augustyniak, Kottegoda, and Abeyasekera's review of Michele Gamburd's book highlight, care work is deeply gendered, disproportionately undertaken by women, time-consuming, physically demanding, experienced as a moral obligation and ethical imperative, and emotionally laden. However, Gamburd's monograph already identified a crisis of care in contemporary Sri Lanka, particularly in the context of migration for work, which as Abeyasekera points out is only likely to become more acute in the wake of the current economic crisis. Moreover, as Kodikara notes, in the North and East, women's productive labour and care work is also conditioned by the labours of traumatic memory because women bear the overwhelming burden of searching for truth and justice for war-related atrocities and keeping the memories of the dead and the disappeared alive.

Women as a Quick-Fix Solution

In my contribution, I point out that during times of crisis, women's bodies and their labour often enter policy discussions as part of a quick-fix for structural problems. Following the end of Sri Lanka's civil war in 2009 - the Sri Lankan State, together with the international community promoted small and medium self-employment and entrepreneurship development (SMEs) as a magic bullet to alleviate poverty and empower women, particularly women-headed households in the North and East, and to rebuild the economy of those areas. But these programmes were deeply precarious and impossible to sustain in the long term. Poultry and livestock died, hens went missing, petty trading ventures collapsed due to a lack of steady markets, the rains didn't fall, and crops failed. Moreover, what women earned from these activities were extremely meagre. Self-employment is no longer the flavour of the month. In the context of the current economic crisis - the expectation is that more women will enter the labour market. In order to facilitate this, the government is in fact reforming the labour law regime relating to night work, migration, and so on.

If international institutions and the government want to empower women by increasing women's access to formal waged labour, it is necessary to ensure fair wages and significantly improved working conditions for women. Even so, the formal labour market may not be an option for many poor women. What a close study of the empirical data reveals is that there is no ready solution to

empower such women to enter the labour market. As I emphasise, poor women need support to engage in a diverse and plural repertoire of livelihood strategies. They need to have access to wage labour some days of the week or month. On other days, they will have to necessarily depend on one or more self-employment activities because of the inability to leave their homes, even if these remain at the survival end of the self-employment continuum. This need for flexibility and diversity must be recognised and responded to by the State at this moment of economic crisis, including by foregrounding (or supporting) a robust social welfare programme.

There is already enough evidence that women's household burdens are increasing in the context of the rising cost of living, power cuts, gas shortages, and fuel shortages. Poor and even middle-class women who were using gas for cooking may now be forced to use firewood which is laborious to collect and more time consuming to use, as well as bad for their health. To manage the rising cost of living, women have to include home-gardening of vegetables among their daily tasks. They are walking to places where they used to take a bus or a trishaw, adding to their time-poverty. So, if international institutions, the government, policy makers, and economists are going to talk about women's labour force participation, it is necessary to talk about it in all its complexity. Because if it is pursued as an end in itself without addressing the structural causes of women's economic inequality, and without broadening our definition of what constitutes labour, we run the risk of entrenching or even worsening gender inequality.

Chulani Kodikara

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] For instance see: Ahilan Kadirgamar (2022), Niyanthini Kadirgamar (2022), and Twitter threads by Amita Arudpragasam (<https://twitter.com/aarudpra/status/1539892618204950528>), Niyanthini Kadirgamar (<https://twitter.com/EnHui/status/1539411979357638656>), and Ambika Satkunanathan (<https://twitter.com/ambikasat/status/1539085638741291008>).

[2] The articles in this cluster were edited by myself, Hasini Lecamwasam, and Balasingham Skanthakumar. The book review by Asha Abeyasekera was edited by Dominic Esler. Kanchana Ruwanpura contributed to the editing of articles by Shyamain Wickramasingha and Mythri Jegathesan. I am also grateful to Mythri Jegathesan for reading through this introduction and her edits and comments.

[3] While large numbers of women work in the informal economy, it should be noted that contrary to the global trend, there are still more men than women in the informal economy in Sri Lanka (See World Bank 2013: 13)