

## Opinion: Achieving Gender Equality: Quō Vādis, Sri Lanka?

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What are some of the challenges women in Sri Lanka face from a gender equality standpoint and how can we tackle them? Below are the responses from researchers at the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS), Ashani Abayasekara, Kithmina Hewage, Harini Weerasekera, Chathurga Karunanayake and Tharindu Udayanga.

### Ashani Abayasekara

The failure to translate Sri Lanka's female educational achievements into similar achievements in the labour market is a long-standing puzzle. Even among employed women, the share in managerial positions and STEM fields like engineering and IT, which are typically high-skilled and offer higher earning potential, are negligible. A key underlying reason is ingrained cultural norms about the gender division of household chores; that is, women have lower chances to engage in more demanding jobs as primary bearers of family responsibilities.

Better provision of quality and affordable childcare, active labour market policies that inform women about job openings and career opportunities, mentoring schemes and other interventions that minimise gender stereotypes and biases in work settings, and flexible work arrangements – such as part-time work and work-from-home options – can potentially help bring more women into productive employment.

### Kithmina Hewage

Small and Medium Enterprises form the backbone of the Sri Lankan economy. Women-led SMEs in particular face considerable structural challenges because of policies, processes and cultural biases that limit the scope for economic growth as well as empowerment. This is why we see women facing challenges such as lack of access to finance, harassment in public and private sector institutions and numerous other challenges.

Structural issues can be solved through better intersectional representation, but that representation should not just be tokenistic. We need to make sure that insights are taken into consideration, and then translated to actionable policies and processes that solve these structural problems.

### Harini Weerasekera

One of the issues affecting working women in Sri Lanka is the lack of flexible working hours and conditions granted by employers. Although the private sector in Sri Lanka has made some headway in this respect, the public sector still has a fairly rigid 9-5 work policy in place, except for the brief pandemic work-from-home stint that was experienced over the last year. Accommodating this as a

long-term policy option in sectors where it is possible to do so would be progressive – rather than it being a one-off pandemic-only policy.

Flexible working options for women is a strategy that can be implemented to increase the country's low female labour force participation rate, and for it to work, employers should move towards results-based evaluation criteria as opposed to the standard time/attendance-based evaluations that we see today.

### Chathurga Karunanayake

Closing gender gaps in the labour market is one of the most pressing challenges today both globally and locally. The challenges are reinforced by gender wage gaps, voluntary or involuntary discrimination in the workplace, and archaic legislation that makes hiring women more expensive, as well as work environments that are unfriendly towards females.

To bridge these gaps, the country needs to: (1) ensure having equal remuneration for work of equal value, (2) introduce policies that change conventional gender ideologies that hinder women's participation in non-regular work environments and (3) introduce more targeted interventions that enable female night work, shift work and working from home.

As a whole, these policy reforms should acknowledge that the bulk of unpaid family and household work is currently performed by women. Realising these policy targets will require a cohesive effort on the part of the government, policymakers and the corporate sector.

### Tharindu Udayanga

We have smart, educated women in the country, but the percentage of women who are in political and public decision-making bodies remains dismally low. Sri Lankan women, especially younger ones, need to acquire marketable skills and be encouraged to take up STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) subjects so that the imbalance in the field of science and technology – where men vastly outnumber women – can be rectified. Women should also receive equal pay.

Providing career development initiatives, improving access to part-time/flexible work thereby enabling them to maintain a work-life balance, and addressing socio-physical constraints are essential to support women in the workforce. Such measures can generate overall economic gains for the country, while also bringing about a more equitable sharing of development benefits.

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