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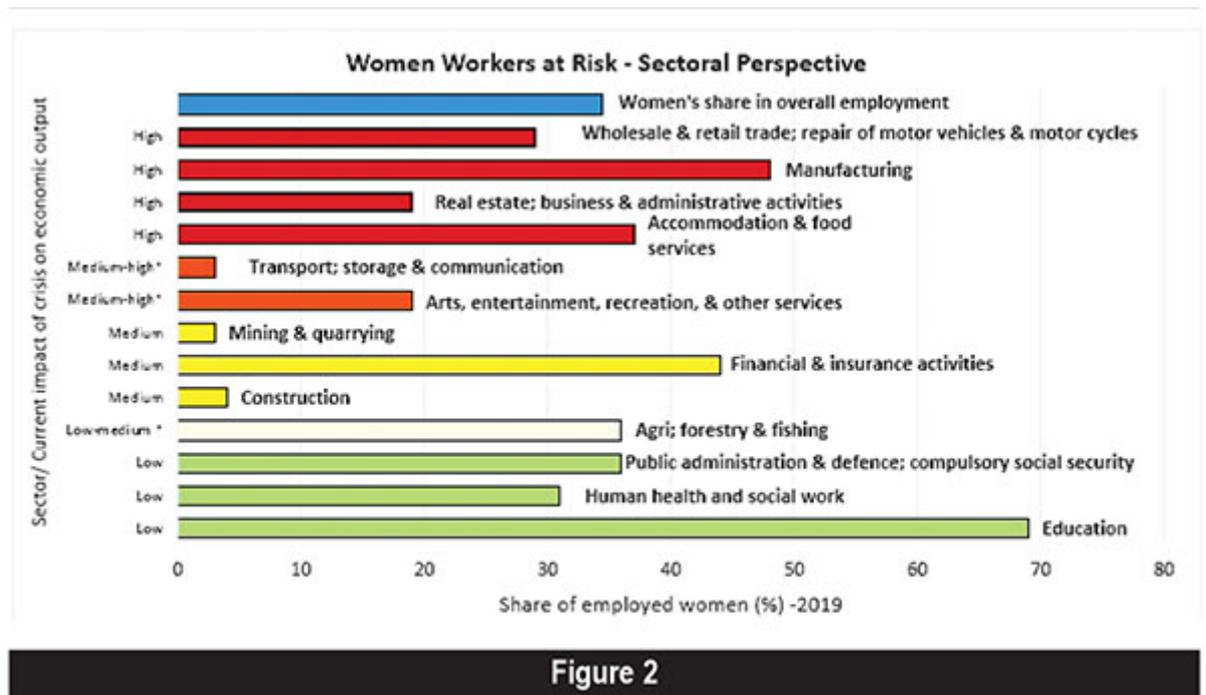


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Women's increasing vulnerability COVID-19

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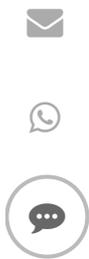
Sri Lanka's Gender-based Employment Segregation



By Sunimalee Madurawala



Although COVID-19 may be gender-blind, it has created a crisis that has disproportionately affected women across the globe. The economic impact of the pandemic is mostly



through the labour market. Estimates show that women's jobs are 1.8 times more than men's jobs, and while women make up 39% of global employment, they account of overall job losses. While many factors affect the vulnerability of women's employment during the pandemic, existing gender gaps in the labour market, women's employment in highly-affected sectors, the ability to telecommute and the amount of unpaid care carried out by women have been identified as the main determinants. In this context examines women's vulnerability in the Sri Lankan labour market due to the sector employed in. It also looks at gender-based employment segregation – a key factor women's overrepresentation in certain industries and underrepresentation in others proposes policy measures to address this imbalance.

Impact of COVID-19 on Employed Women in Sri Lanka

A comparison of labour market figures and indicators for Sri Lanka for the fourth quarter of 2019 and 2020 shows a severe impact on women (Figure 1). While the absolute number of employed men has increased by 38,938, the number of employed females has decreased by 189,148. The number of economically inactive persons has increased between the two periods. Females account for 64% of that increase in economically inactive persons. The labour force participation (LFP) rates for both sexes have decreased significantly but the fall is more prominent for women. The unemployment rate has increased for both sexes during 2020 whereas the increase for men is marginally higher than that for females attesting to the lowered LFP of women.

The Sector Matters

The greater impact on employed women due to the pandemic is linked directly with the sectors they are employed in. Calculations of the author on women's employment based on an assessment by the International Labour Organization indicate that the employment share is high in both low-risk and high-risk economic sectors (Figure 1).

Manufacturing (including the sub-sector of textile manufacturing), accommodation and food services, and wholesale and retail are high-risk sectors with relatively high female employment shares. Female representation is relatively high in some medium-high risk sectors such as 'arts, entertainment, recreation, and other services' and 'financial and insurance activities', respectively, as well. Even though health is a low-risk sector, women employed in the health sector face a higher risk of contagion.

Gender-based Employment Segregation – a Cause for Women's Employment Vulnerability

Gender-based employment segregation – ‘the unequal distribution of men and women and within job types’, is often the major reason for women’s (or men’s) over-representation in certain sectors. In most cases, especially for females, their choice of employment is influenced by their traditional gender roles they play in society (i.e. direct and indirect care responsibilities such as caring for children, the elderly, and the sick, cleaning, cooking, shopping, and fetching water and fuel). For example, in Sri Lanka, the female share in frontline occupations is high (i.e., health professionals, health-related professions, and domestic workers). These occupations are directly linked with women’s traditional gender roles.

Gender-based employment segregation creates unfavourable labour market conditions for women, leading to gender gaps in wages, job quality and employment trajectories. Demand-side factors such as supply-side factors, limit women’s choice in selecting an employment sector, contributing to employment segregation. Gender gaps in skills and qualifications, domestic and care responsibilities, safety (i.e. harassment at workplaces and when using public transport), and lack of role models and networks are some important supply-side factors. Gender inequality in recruitment, evaluation and promotion processes, employers’ perceptions of women employees (where employers perceive women employees as more suitable for certain jobs) and features of the workplace culture are important demand-side factors.

Way Forward

Both training in hard skills and soft skills would increase women's chances of secure employment in fields traditionally dominated by males. Specific interventions that redistribute women's domestic and care responsibilities (i.e. expanding access to public infrastructure for care and investing in labour-saving technology, and redistributing responsibilities between men and women within households and between households and other institutions) would lessen the burden of care responsibilities borne by women. This would create an enabling environment for women to participate in labour market activities and to expand the array of employment options available for them.

Strengthening the legal framework and law enforcement mechanisms is important to ensure the safety of working women both at the workplace and when travelling to work. Encouraging and promoting female role models who have succeeded in traditionally male-dominated careers would inspire women to choose such careers. In addition, establishing workplace practices such as gender-blind recruitment, evaluation, and promotion processes are needed to address demand-side factors of gender-based employment segregation.

* This blog is based on the comprehensive chapter on “The COVID-19 Pandemic and Women: Ensuring Gender Equality beyond the Pandemic” in IPS’ forthcoming annual publication ‘Sri Lanka: The State of Economy 2021’.

Link to blog: <https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2021/09/07/sri-lankas-gender-employment-segregation-does-it-increase-womens-vulnerability-amidst-covid-19/>

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