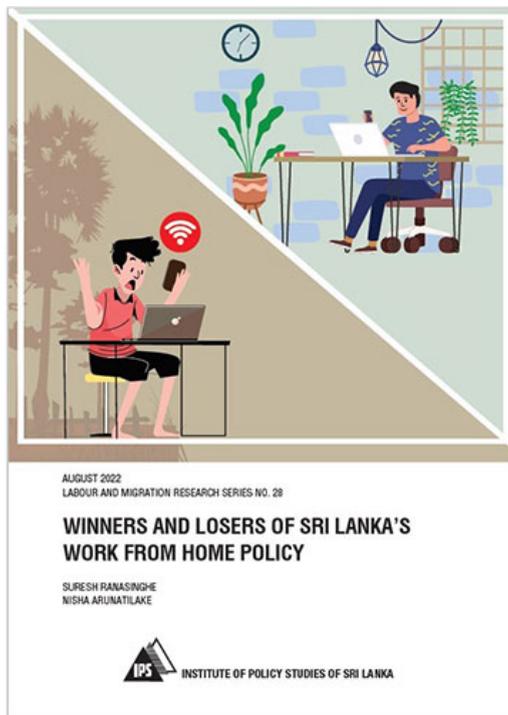


BUSINESS

Winners and Losers of Sri Lanka's Work from Home Policy

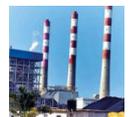
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f A new publication by the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS) has identified that a key barrier to remote work in Sri Lanka is the lack of relevant regulations and legislation governing the Work from Home (WFH) practice. Accordingly, the publication advocates legal reforms to facilitate WFH and improve labour market activities in the country amidst the ongoing economic crisis. The study notes that the Home Work Convention, 1996 adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) can be a springboard to reform domestic laws.

The latest IPS publication, 'Winners and Losers of Sri Lanka's Work from Home Policy', is authored by Suresh Ranasinghe and Dr Nisha Arunatilake. The authors note, "The main legislations that provide a legal framework for work and remuneration such as the Shop and Office Act No. 19 of 1954 and the Wages Boards Ordinance No. 27 of 1941 do not facilitate WFH. Thus, it is vital to reform existing laws to facilitate WFH. The international standards included in the Home Work Convention, 1996 can be used to reform domestic laws to provide legal solutions to contemporary labour market problems."



The authors also call for increased investment in Information and Communications (ICT) infrastructure, together with training and financial support for workers. Given the nature of employment, however, workers in some occupations will find it challenging to WFH and as such, exploring means of supporting these workers is worthwhile to restore economic activities. Alongside this, employees' well-being and continued productivity must be ensured. Therefore, attention should be paid to employees' working time, performance, digitalisation, communication, occupational safety and health, and work-life balance.

The IPS study finds that the feasibility to work remotely in Sri Lanka is generally balanced by age, but it is significantly unbalanced by gender, educational attainment, income level, occupation, firm size, sector, and geographical location. Experiences of many developing as well as developed countries imply that severe recession can have negative impacts on future earnings and job security. Given this, remote work can be used as a long-term policy tool to enhance the available employment opportunities and safeguard employment. Thus, it is essential to identify the potentials and pitfalls of the WFH policy to facilitate the development of the WFH practice within Sri Lanka's unique labour market context.

According to the study, workers in the ICT, education, finance, and insurance sectors benefit the most. Generally, these occupations require less physical proximity and have a high reliance on digital tools and technologies. However, those in the agriculture and industrial sectors have low WFH feasibility, and notably, most employees are in occupations where the feasibility to work remotely is low. Those who are less educated and reside in the estate sector also have very low WFH feasibility. Not surprisingly, employees' ability to WFH increases with the level of English literacy but slightly deteriorates with age. Similarly, the ability to WFH is high in the Western province of Sri Lanka while the Southern, Northern and Eastern provinces have low plausibility to WFH.

The study contends that WFH can be used as a policy tool to address problems relating to female employment. Many legal loopholes do not cover the major problems faced by female employees. Further, day-to-day travelling to the office and home is a burden and health concern faced by pregnant female workers. In this context, remote work can be used to facilitate pregnant female workers by including a WFH policy in the existing legislation. Additionally, when employers design flexible work arrangement facilities, support must be given to female employees with care responsibilities. Equally, to enable female employees to WFH, it is vital that employers continue to promote family-friendly policies to encourage men to share the responsibilities of household activities.

To purchase a copy of ‘Winners and Losers of Sri Lanka’s Work from Home Policy’, contact: Amesh Thennakoon, Publications Officer, IPS on 0773 737717 or amesh@ips.lk. For more information on IPS publications, visit: <https://www.ips.lk/publications>.

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