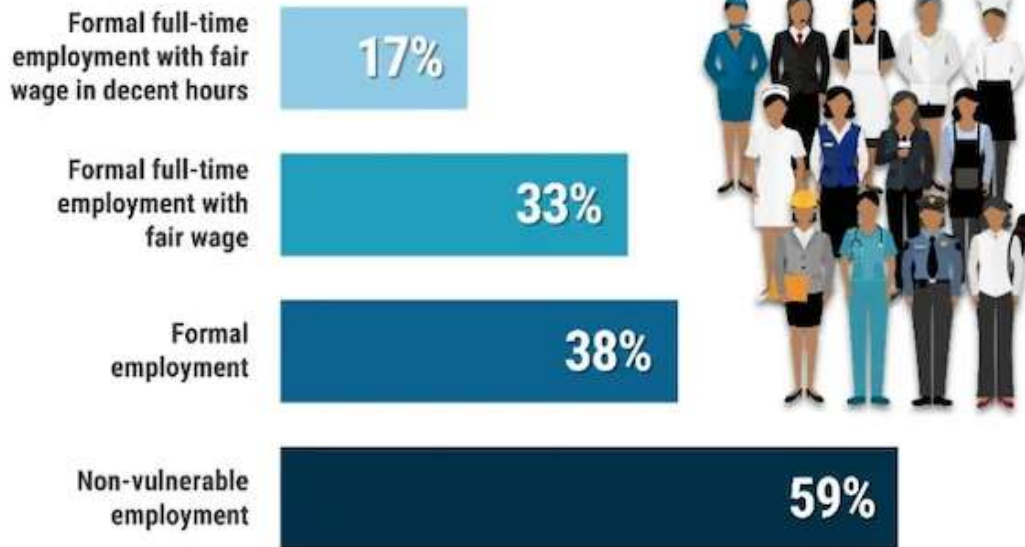


Share of Employed Women by Employment Type



Source: Author's compilation based on Labour Force Survey 2018, Department of Census and Statistics.

Promoting decent work matters for women than just any job

4 months ago | BY Dr. Nisha Arunatilake

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Sri Lanka's low female labour force participation rate has received intense policy attention over the past several decades for many reasons. It is widely assumed that improving female labour force participation will not only empower women and reduce gender disparities but will also promote productivity and economic growth. Over the years, a popular strategy for promoting female labour force participation by successive governments has been to encourage self-employment opportunities or entrepreneurship. However, female labour force participation has remained below 35% for years. Self-employment jobs are highly vulnerable to economic fluctuations as social safety nets do not cover them. Furthermore, on average, self-employment income is lower than other types of income. To empower women and drive economic growth, policy should focus on facilitating women's access to decent work over access to any job.

Measuring decent work

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), decent work refers to jobs that provide workers with dignity, equality, fair wages, and safe working conditions. Further, those in decent work have a say in their work and are protected from discrimination. The main components of decent work are workplace rights, employment, social protection, and social dialogue. However, the lack of standard indicators to measure decent work and the difficulty in capturing all aspects of decent work, make it challenging to determine the availability of decent work. For example, an aspect such as social dialogue is not easy to capture.

Despite the difficulty in measuring, it is important to understand whether the jobs performed by women in the market are decent jobs. The Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) reported that in 2021, 32% of women aged 15 years and above (or

working-age women) were in the labour force. Of these, only 29% were employed, while the rest were unemployed.

Since there is no standard measure for decent work, several indicators with varying degrees of decent work components were used to analyse the share of working-age women engaged in various aspects of decent work. These include non-vulnerable work, full-time employment, formal employment, fair wages, and fair wages for decent working hours.

Non-vulnerable work is a relatively better type of work compared to vulnerable work. The latter is categorised as any job that contributes to family work or work on one's own account. These types of employment are considered vulnerable because the workers depend on the revenue generated by their enterprises and are not covered by social security.

Full-time employment is defined as working for more than 35 hours a week.

However, the concept of part-time work is not defined in Sri Lanka. As such, many workers in part-time employment do not receive the same benefits as those in full-time employment.

Formal employment refers to paid workers in the formal sector (Government/semi-Government sector; private sector firms with more than 10 workers; or smaller private sector firms), excluding employees without a permanent employer or employees whose employers are not contributing to their pension or Provident Fund.

Fair wages are defined as the minimum wage with legislated allowances. In 2018, this amounted to Rs. 13,500 a month. According to the decent work concept, a fair wage should be earned during regular work hours, which are 45 hours per week in Sri Lanka.

Disparities in women's access to decent work

The share of women engaged in decent work is significantly lower than the share of the total employed, and the prevalence levels decrease as more aspects of decent work are included in the measure. Specifically, only 38% of females in formal employment were covered by some form of social security. The share of employed

females covered by social security and receiving a fair wage was slightly lower at 33%. However, nearly half of the formal full-time female employees receiving a fair wage need to work more than the legislated 45 hours in order to earn the fair wage. Such excessive work hours are a barrier to accessing decent work for females, given their care responsibilities at home.

Another issue concerning access to decent work in Sri Lanka is the inequality in access. Access to decent work varies widely across age groups, residence sectors, and education levels. A recent study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has identified several reasons, including access to quality education, access to physical infrastructure such as secure transportation and electricity, labour market conditions in the area of residence, social norms, outdated legislation, and the poor implementation of legislation. These inequalities in access to decent work must be eliminated in order to improve overall access to decent work.

Low-skilled females (those with an education level below the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level) have the least access to decent work. However, access to decent work increases with higher levels of education. Furthermore, access to decent work is also low for those outside the urban sector. Lastly, access to decent work is lower for females aged 30 years or more, compared to females in the age group of 25 years to 29 years. This disparity could be due to older females choosing to work fewer hours due to their other responsibilities.

The way forward

In Sri Lanka, less than 17% of female workers are in decent work. Access to decent work varies widely across women of different ages, from different localities, and with different skill levels. If the Government intends to reduce inequality and promote growth by improving women's access to jobs, it should prioritise promoting access to decent work. Facilitating access to other types of work is unlikely to push women out of poverty and provide them with better social security and a fair income.

According to the IPS' State of the Economy 2022 report, improving women's access to decent work should prioritise job creation in productive sectors. This can be

achieved by investing in expanding productive sectors and innovating to improve productivity and job creation. Further, attention should be given to policies that reduce barriers to accessing decent work.

(The author is the Director of Research at the IPS and Head of the Labour, Employment and Human Resource Development Unit at the IPS. She can be contacted at nisha@ips.lk)



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