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## Empowering Sri Lankan Women: Highlights from the National Policy Conference on Women's Access to Decent Work in Sri Lanka

November, 6, 2023



**By Kimuthu Kiringoda and Himani Vithanage**

In Sri Lanka, only 7.7% of working-age females are engaged in formal employment with decent wages and decent working hours. The country's persistent challenge of low female labour force participation is compounded by a multitude of unique barriers to improving women's access to decent work.

Decent work is multifaceted, incorporating productive work that delivers a fair income in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity (ILO, 1999) (<https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/sustainable-growth-and-jobs/employment-and-decent->





### Creating Decent Jobs for Women

In the discussion on the importance of creating decent jobs, Mr Neelakanth Wanninayake, Executive Director at the Industrial Service Bureau, brought to light that the majority of the Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Sri Lanka struggle with issues like poor quality consciousness, low productivity, limited innovation, and diversification. Some of the major barriers to industrialisation, including policy issues, lack of access to finance and credit, inefficient infrastructure, lack of innovation and technology transfer, and poor entrepreneurial culture, need to be addressed to generate decent job opportunities in the country.

Transforming precarious jobs to decent jobs in addition to the creation of decent jobs was also a point that received attention. As access to decent work significantly differs at the regional level, implementing policies at the regional level was emphasised.

Gender segregation in the labour market in Sri Lanka was another prominent issue, with women often confined to certain types of professions, such as teaching and low-skilled service sector jobs. As stated by Ms Gayani Herath de Alwis, First Vice Chairperson of the Women's Chamber of Industry and Commerce (WCIC), in the transport and logistics sector in Sri Lanka, female representation is only 3.4% compared to 96.6% of male representation. ([https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/WorkingPaper\\_MindGenderGap1.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/WorkingPaper_MindGenderGap1.pdf)) A significant factor contributing to this is the limited awareness of job prospects within specific industries that offer decent job opportunities. As such, Ms De Alwis emphasised the importance of raising awareness to attract women to decent jobs and ensuring their retainment in the workforce once entered. Further, the significance of having strong male advocates to promote women's engagement in decent work, access to financial and non-financial services, and strengthening the linkages in the supply chain while integrating women into the entire value chain are some critical points highlighted by Ms Aarthi Arunasalam, Programme Manager, Gender and Economic Inclusion, International Finance Corporation Sri Lanka (IFC).





### **Women's Access to Decent Work and Childcare Services**

Ms Thanuja Jayawardene, General Manager, Women's Empowerment, Advocacy and Code of Conduct at MAS Holdings, highlighted the challenges faced by the private sector in implementing childcare policies in the absence of a coherent National Policy. All panellists agreed it is a societal responsibility to protect children and ensure their sound development in their early years. The two issues that Ms Jayawardene mentioned regarding creches at the workplace are the cost for the business and the different requirements of varied classes of employees. In the apparel sector, the factory floor and office cadre have different requirements and shifts. But it was reiterated that the apparel sector was built on the backbone of women to whom extensive care and attention should be given.

Another point that the panellist stressed is parental responsibility and parental care. All the experts agreed that child-rearing responsibility should shift from the mother to both parents, reaffirming the need for provisions for paternal leave. Taking steps to reduce crimes committed against children was also discussed by Ms Gayani Gomes, Project Manager of Women's Centre Sri Lanka, citing examples from the free trade zones.

Ms Shanika Malalgoda, Director (Planning and Information), Child Protection Authority, highlighted the National Guidelines for Day Care Centres in the discussion as a sound tool to maintain standards of care, along with the five-year action plan introduced by the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Arguments were raised by the audience against the policy, stating that there are too many bodies involved, making the implementation complex. Ms Malalgoda said they cannot avoid multi-sectoral engagement and are working with limited resources in the Ministry.

Many experts in labour and gender-related work participated in the event, and the audience contributed to the discussion with important insights.

Watch the full discussion on IPS' YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZu7RNj698U>



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**Himani Vithanage** is a Research Assistant working on health, education and labour policy at IPS. She was the recipient of IPS' Saman Kelegama Memorial Research Grant for 2021. This blog is based on her research study analysing the issue of school dropouts in the estate sector of Sri Lanka. She holds a BA in Economics from the University of Colombo, and a BSc in Economics and Finance from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

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19 JAN 2024, 03:00 PM

**Market | Closed**

Share Volume | 22,389,078

Turnover | 518,653,312.15

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10,432.85

-28.03

-0.27%









2,950.32

-6.88

-0.23%

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## Daily Exchange Rates 2024-01-19

COUNTRY	BUYING	SELLING
 USA U.S.DOLLAR	315.9284	326.0600
 UK STERLING POUND	400.1434	415.7820
 EUROPE EURO	342.4556	356.4514
 SWITZERLAND SWISS FRANC	360.9791	378.2591
 CANADA CANADIAN DOLLAR	232.6611	243.0886
 AUSTRALIA AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR	206.2157	216.2877
 SINGAPORE SINGAPORE DOLLAR	234.1135	244.1736
 JAPAN JAPANESE YEN	2.1225	2.2078



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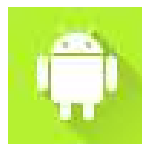


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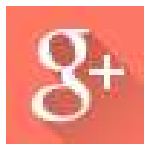
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