

Empowering SL Women: Highlights from National Policy Conference on Women's Access to Decent Work

Author [LBO](#)
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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). Due to the heavier household and caregiving responsibilities falling on women, they face challenges when participating in the labour force and securing decent work.

Sri Lanka's labour market is characterised by several gender-specific challenges. Dr Nisha Arunatilake, Director of Research at IPS, notes that employers consider women's additional household and caregiving responsibilities when hiring workers, affecting the demand for female workers. Furthermore, Sri Lankan legislation places higher costs on employers when hiring females, including maternity leave and added security expenses. Even when women are recruited, they face

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constraints and disadvantages in opportunities for promotions and career development owing to their household duties.

Another main issue in Sri Lanka is the limited availability of decent jobs, especially outside the Western province. As stated by Dr Arunatilake, "about 30% of the jobs in these areas are in the agriculture sector," which mostly comprises vulnerable jobs with low income. This, combined with employers' preference for recruiting males, further restricts women's access to decent work opportunities.

A recent IPS [study](#) revealed that only 8% of Sri Lanka's working-age population is engaged in formal employment with decent wages and decent working hours. For females, the percentage is 7.7%, lower than the male percentage of 8.3%. The study also emphasised that access to decent work improves when women are English literate and have higher levels of education. Additionally, households with male members in formal work increase prospects for women to enter decent work. Unfortunately, the presence of school-going children decreases their chances of decent work, as women shoulder increased responsibility for their children's education.

Outdated labour laws still retain provisions that are discriminatory to women. The lack of female representation in decision-making committees further compounds the challenges faced by women seeking decent work.

In light of these challenges, the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS), in collaboration with Partnership for Economic Policy (PEP) and Co-Impact, hosted the National Policy Conference on Women's Access to Decent Work in Sri Lanka on 31st October 2023. The conference served as a platform for policymakers and key stakeholders to discuss means of improving women's access to decent work in the country, focusing on two main aspects: the importance of creating decent jobs for women and the role of childcare facilities in enhancing women's access to decent work in Sri Lanka.

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](#). 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

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integrating women into the entire value chain are some critical points highlighted by Ms Aarthy 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.



Kimuthu Kiringoda is a Research Officer at the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS) with research interests in health, labour markets, tourism, SMEs and SDGs. She holds a BA (honours) degree in Economics from the University of Colombo. She also holds a Bachelor of Laws (LLB) from the University of London and MSc in Sustainable Management from the University of Bedfordshire (UK). (Talk with Kimuthu: kimuthu@ips.lk)



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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