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Empowering women in the workplace

04 Nov 2023 | By Roshani Fernando



- **B**reaking barriers and cultivating growth

As the world grapples with the multifaceted challenges of workforce expansion, economic growth, and women's rights, the often overlooked aspect of childcare comes to the forefront.

In a candid conversation with Women's Centre Projects Manager Gayani Gomes, National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) Planning and Information Division Director Shanika Malalgoda, and Industrial Services Bureau (ISB) Executive Director/CEO Neelakanth Wanninayake, *The Sunday Morning Business* explores the intricate dynamics of childcare rights and women's participation in the labour force, dissecting barriers and challenges, and promising solutions.

Free trade zones and garment factories

The Women's Centre, a trailblazing organisation founded in 1982, has been a stalwart guardian of women's rights, primarily within the free trade zones and garment factories of Sri Lanka. Gayani Gomes, representing this venerable institution, shed light on their remarkable journey spanning four decades. With over 20,000 paying members from garment factories across the country, they have expanded their outreach to 12 districts, making a significant impact.

"One of the standout features of the Women's Centre is its daycare centre within the Katunayake Free Trade Zone. This facility, dedicated to the children of single mothers working in the area, stands as a symbol of hope in the lives of countless women. These workers, many of whom are internal migrants hailing from rural and war-affected regions, often find themselves in dire straits," she said.

They reside in cramped boarding houses with their families, and as they strive to make a living, the youngest family members are left in the care of their slightly older siblings. These young caretakers, some as young as five or six, shoulder the responsibility of looking after infants as young as three or four months.

This arrangement, while often born out of necessity, underscores the urgency of addressing childcare rights in Sri Lanka. The statistics are disheartening, with over 2,000 reported cases of serious crimes against children and more than 1,000 cases of child sexual harassment in 2023.

While it is the responsibility of society and the Government to ensure the welfare of children, it is the duty of employers to create a supportive environment for their workers. Gomes emphasised the immediate benefits of these efforts, not only for women but for the entire nation – as women gain economic independence, they automatically become empowered, fostering a more robust national economy.

National policies

Shanika Malalgoda provided insights into the national policies on early childhood development and child daycare centres.

“The Ministry of Women, Child Affairs, and Social Empowerment has formulated an intricate policy, complete with nine strategies, all underpinned by a comprehensive five-year action plan. The plan, a collective effort involving Government bodies, INGOs, NGOs, and private sector stakeholders, focuses on practical implementation. Recognising the diverse needs of different regions, both urban and rural, the plan aims to address these distinct challenges systematically.”

Moreover, the ministry acknowledges the importance of working closely with grassroots stakeholders, considering that different sectors, regions, and social levels require tailored solutions. Sri Lanka’s early childhood development is a critical facet of the nation’s progress, and these policies seek to embrace its multifaceted nature.

In parallel, the National Child Protection Authority’s guidelines for child daycare centres have significantly improved the quality and facilities of these centres, positively impacting the lives of countless children.

Gender equality and decent work

Neelakanth Wanninayake provided a different perspective, addressing the challenges women faced in the workforce and the role women played in economic growth. Drawing attention to Sustainable Development Goals five and eight, he highlighted the significance of both gender equality and decent work in driving economic growth.

Wanninayake’s portrayal of the current economic landscape in Sri Lanka isn’t rosy. He emphasised the need for productive, quality-driven innovation in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). A comprehensive industry diagnosis report conducted by the ISB has revealed several barriers to industrialisation: “These include unfriendly policy

environments, limited access to finance, inefficient infrastructure, and a dearth of innovation.”

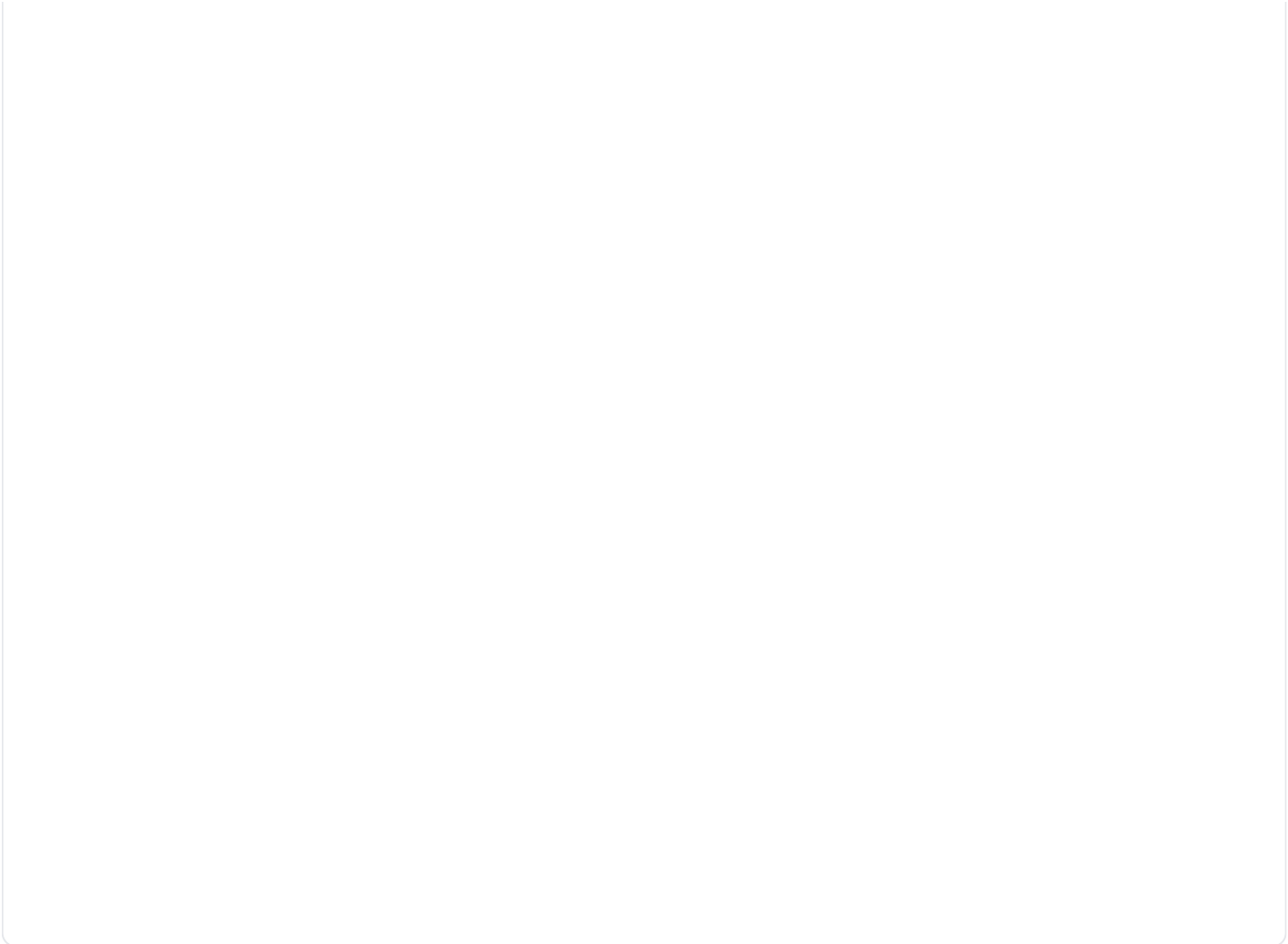
To bridge these gaps, Wanninayake suggested a renewed focus on innovation and entrepreneurship, starting from the school level. With the majority of women in the workforce, especially in regions like the northwestern, southern, and central areas, gender-based disparities can be alleviated by empowering women and fostering economic growth.

In conclusion, the discussion is centred on the pressing need to improve childcare rights and boost women’s participation in the labour force as a pivotal step toward achieving a vibrant and robust economy in Sri Lanka. Gomes, Malalgoda, and Wanninayake collectively underscored the importance of concerted efforts from the Government and employers to create supportive working environments and implement proactive policies.

Universal access to affordable, high-quality childcare facilities, extended paid parental leave, flexible working arrangements, and strong anti-discrimination policies with effective monitoring mechanisms are critical components. A brighter economic future for Sri Lanka necessitates not only women’s empowerment but also a broader commitment to social welfare and economic growth, ultimately contributing to a prosperous and equitable society.

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