



Gender Equality in Sri Lanka

Factsheet

Overview

Sri Lanka is South Asia's third largest economy, with much of its population living in rural areas. In 2022, the nation entered a severe debt crisis, which has had adverse effects on economic growth, poverty levels, and gender equality.¹ Sri Lanka relies heavily on plantation crops for foreign earnings; however, estate areas, including tea plantations, are particularly susceptible to poverty. Over half of the population living in these areas are in poverty.²

Sri Lanka faces notable development challenges in terms of gender equality and is ranked 92 out of 170 countries on the United Nations Gender Inequality Index (GII).³ While progress has been made in addressing inequality, gender-based violence remains an issue, and women are underrepresented in various sectors, including the national parliament, where only 5% of seats are held by women.⁴

This factsheet highlights the extent of gender inequality in Sri Lanka using references and data points from third party sources.

Tea

Tea is a major contributor to Sri Lanka's economy as one of the nation's largest exports and a leading source of livelihood for almost a million people. Tea production in Sri Lanka relies heavily on female workers, with women making up around 65% of the total tea workforce.⁵ Most tea pluckers – often the lowest paid and most labour-intensive role – are women, while men typically hold higher-paid supervisory positions.

Education

Through a combination of free and compulsory state education, and several successful policy initiatives, Sri Lanka has achieved near gender parity when it comes to enrolment in education.⁶ Women have particularly high levels of tertiary education, accounting for over 60% of university students.⁷ In rural areas where tea is typically produced, 8% of women obtain a university degree compared to 4% of men.

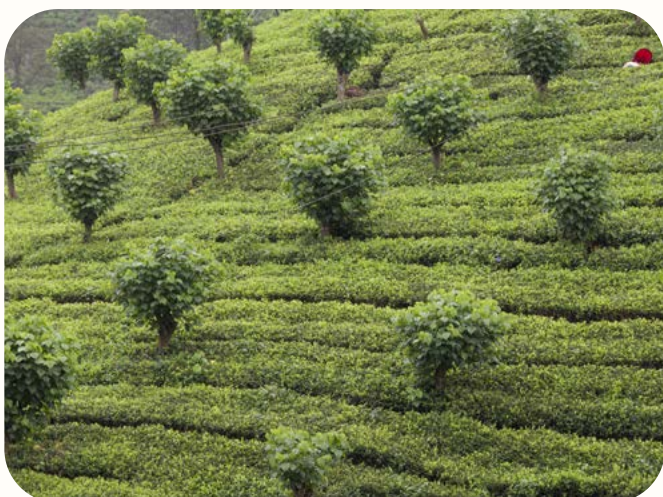


Despite advancements in educational attainment for women, gender disparities remain when it comes to enrolment in training and skills development programmes, contributing to particularly low levels of female labour force participation.⁸ Additionally, rural women are less likely than urban women to have a secondary or university education.⁹

Women's economic status

In line with the situation globally, poverty disproportionately impacts women throughout the country. Women earn around 69% of what men earn for similar work and are concentrated in precarious jobs within the informal sector.¹⁰ Again, despite achieving relatively high levels of educational attainment, women in Sri Lanka have higher unemployment rates and limited representation in management roles. Only one in three women participate in the labour force, and women are more than twice as likely to be unemployed than men.¹¹

The proportion of employed women in managerial positions is just 26%.¹² This can be attributed in part to a lack of accessible childcare facilities and societal expectations that place the responsibility of caretaking on women in the family.¹³ The lack of support for flexible working arrangements in Sri Lanka's labour law is another barrier to women's participation in the workforce.¹⁴



Levels of bank account ownership among men and women in Sri Lanka are relatively equal; however, there is a gender gap in access to digital finance. Digital finance can empower women to control their finances independently, make investments, and build savings. However, women in Sri Lanka are less likely to own a mobile phone (79% of women compared to 86% of men) or use mobile phones for saving, sending, or receiving money (1.2% compared to 4.9% of men).¹⁵

Land ownership

Land ownership is important for women's empowerment as land can serve as a basis for food production and income generation, and act as collateral to access finance. It also holds significant social value and can determine cultural identity, political power, and participation in decisionmaking.¹⁶ However, in Sri Lanka, women own just 16% of private land.¹⁷ This means women are often denied access to and control over services and benefits, including subsidies and credit.¹⁸ Inequalities in land ownership are caused in part by gender biases in customary laws, as well as cultural practices that favour male land inheritance.¹⁹

Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) is an ongoing problem in Sri Lanka, occurring in households, communities, and workplaces. One in four women (24.9%) report having experienced physical or sexual violence at some point in their lives.²⁰ In estate sectors like tea, GBV is more prominent and is exacerbated by higher poverty levels, a lack of law enforcement, and limited support services for survivors.²¹ 39.6% of women in the estate sectors have been subject to physical or sexual violence by a partner, compared to 20.4% nationally.²²

Instances of GBV have also risen due to the economic crisis. High inflation, rising poverty levels, and increased financial strain on households have

heightened the risk of violence, while disruptions in services have made it more challenging for victims to access help.²³ Over the past few decades, the Sri Lankan Government has taken several measures to address GBV. These include the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act, the National Action Plan to combat Sexual and Genderbased violence, and the ratification of various international conventions.²⁴

conflicts with the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, which does not specify a minimum legal age for marriage. Child marriage in Sri Lanka also takes the form of longterm cohabitation, which are unions recognised by the community as equivalent to marriage without being legally registered.²⁶

Child marriage

Rates of child marriage in Sri Lanka are relatively low compared to other South Asian nations, with approximately 10% of girls married before the age of 18 and 1% before 15.²⁵ However, some communities still experience a high prevalence of child marriage due to poverty, traditional practices, and a lack of awareness, among other factors. The legal minimum age for marriage is 18; however, this

ETP's programmes

Through our projects, policy work, and engagement with the private sector, we work towards a tea industry that prioritises the safety and well-being of women and girls, where they are free from GBV, respected, and have equal access to opportunities and resources.

We aim to have high participation of women across our programmes, and we work closely with local communities to ensure we tackle the most pressing issues for women in tea. However, efforts focused on supporting individuals, while necessary, are not enough on their own to achieve lasting progress at scale. This is why ETP uses a systems change approach, as reflected in our [Strategy2030](#). This involves working holistically with a diverse range of stakeholders to tackle the deep-rooted and systemic causes of inequality, rather than solely addressing its symptoms.

Click [here](#) to learn about some of the key initiatives we run in Sri Lanka.

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