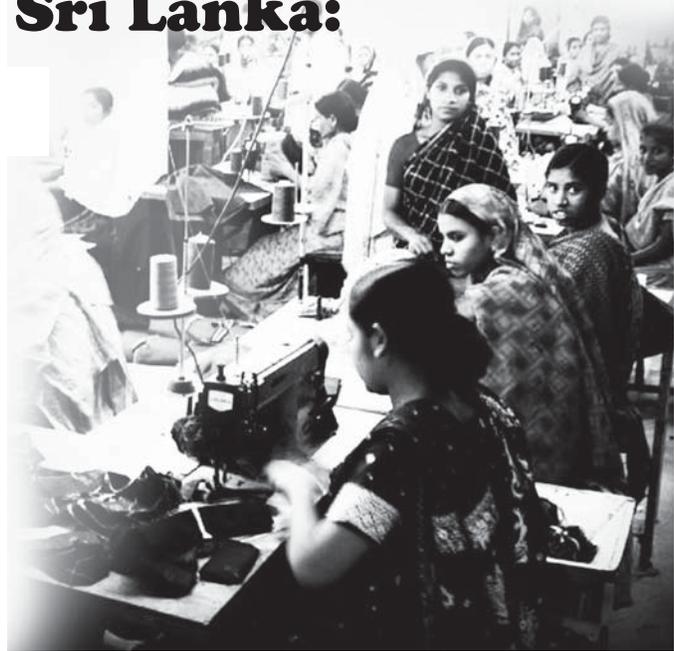


Gender equality in Sri Lanka:

A slow process



The social justice argument for gender equality has always been for the narrowing of the gap between employment of men and women. This has unconsciously gained momentum because of the ageing population and the low birth rate, which inevitably requires that more women should be employed and, at the same time, the irrepressible need for them to have more children to fill the vacuum.

This certainly poses problems for women working in the city where both husband and wife are employed, in the absence of well-run and affordable child-care centres to look after their children while they are at work. It also calls for husband's participation in and sharing of household work necessarily involving a change of role of men. The absence of mandatory paid maternal and paternal leave to be taken alternatively at child-birth, as in most developed countries, will heighten the complexity of the problem.

In suburban and rural areas, this problem may be mitigated to a great extent by the assistance of members of the extended families, a system that is fast eroding.

Achieving greater gender equality requires not only liberation for women but also for men. It is bound to take away the stereotypes of the male breadwinner, which is deeply ingrained in the patriarchal family system experienced in Sri Lanka in its long history. A cultural

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change is indeed a lingering, slow process, and is less likely to be achieved in decades.

Gender equality is incomplete if it does not embrace the economic issues involved - the other side of the same coin.

In developing countries like Sri Lanka, women on average attain lower levels of education than men resulting in less productivity and earnings than their male counterparts.

This has been partly solved by the Free Education system, the establishment of Central Schools, and Universities in most of the districts to bring education within the reach of those living in urban, suburban areas and rural villages, narrowing the gap in education and employment opportunities between the rich and the poor, and men and women.

While gender biases limit women's access to employment and resources, it certainly creates economic inefficiencies. The gender wage gap implies an inefficient allocation of labour and skewed

investment in human capital to the detriment of women. Most of these inequalities are stemming from historical, cultural and traditional societal mores.

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In 2008, the textile industry earned \$3.5 billion in total and found employment for 250,000 persons, mainly young women from rural areas.

The other significant source was the employment of women in the Middle East and a few other countries as housemaids or household workers. The number of women so employed in 1996 was 110,

lower- paid jobs than men.

and wage gap.

In the long run, it may be possible for export-oriented firms to adopt cost-cutting techniques by the use of wage differential as a tool. The bargaining power of skilled workers will rise while unskilled workers may not, resulting in loss of jobs and widening the gender

To avert such a situation, it is the duty of the government to set up technical colleges and also launch trade apprentice schemes across the country to train both men and women in various trades to fit into the more competitive, integrated global economy.



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479, which increased to 125, 493 in 2005 with a slight decrease in 2007 that accounted for 102,176, according to the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment.

The remittances from Middle East countries in 1996 were Rs. 26, 728 million that increased to Rs.160, 502 million in 2007 (provisional).

This has resulted in women having greater access to income and has changed their position in the society, raising their status, winning greater independence and gaining more control over household resources and management.

It is possible that an increase in unskilled labour-intensive exports such as clothing, garment industries and ceramics may tend to increase the demand for lower-skilled labour, narrowing the gender wage gap as the demand tends to increase the wages of unskilled workers, provided the supply remains constant, relative to the wages of the skilled since women are employed in lower- skilled and

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