

The post-colonial, independent Sri Lanka is still influenced by the colonial past and the patriarchal value system that was engraved into the Sri Lankan society. Though Sri Lanka produced the first female president in the world, unfortunately the nation is lagging behind when it comes to gender equality, due to a multitude of factors including social biases and discriminatory structural barriers that directly affect women. In sustainable development the main principal is to “leave no one behind” and inclusivity and equality are paramount for a future of sustainable development.

1. Economic Security of Women and Girls (SDG 1 – No poverty)

Sri Lanka is currently facing an economic crisis mainly due to the financial mismanagement of the government which includes; pre-pandemic tax cuts, extreme money printing, corruption and a plethora of other contributory factors. Covid-19 pandemic also affected the tourist industry of Sri Lanka adding to the depletion of foreign currency reserves. According to the World Bank, Sri Lankans’ Year-on-year inflation accelerated to 17.5% in February 2022 and according to the data from Central Bank of Sri Lanka the annual inflation rate in Sri Lanka has reached a record high of 64.3% in August of 2022.

The economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka has mainly affected the households which are led by females, and according to government statistics one quarter of Sri Lankan households are in fact led by females. Due to the pandemic, fuel crisis and the economic crisis most industries had to let go of their employees and many individuals lost their livelihoods. Furthermore informal employment was also severely impacted due to the current situation in the country and according to a labour force survey done in 2019, 1.7 million women in Sri Lanka are engaged in informal employment. And as these women and girls are engaged in informal employment, they are not entitled to any employment benefits or protection.

According to labour force survey data: the economically active population of females were only 36.6% in 2017 compared to 63.4% of males and in 2019 the percentage of economically active female population dropped to 35.4% while the male population rose to 64.6%. Furthermore, out of the 411,318 population of unemployed individuals in 2019, a proportion of 55% were females. There are many structural barriers women face when joining and participating in the labor force of Sri Lanka and these include discriminatory work environments, not having adequate family support, disparities in wages and when getting promoted, not having affordable and quality childcare services and disparities faced when accessing employment opportunities.



2. Food Security of Women and Girls (SDG 2 – Zero hunger)

In early 2021 the import of chemical fertilizers were banned by the Sri Lankan government and this led to stunted yield in crops and the fuel crisis affected the usage of farm machinery and negatively impacted the transportation chain of the food supplies. The fuel crisis not only affected the agriculture sector but also the fisheries industry as well. Not having enough foreign reserves to export food stocks has further added to this problem.

According to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, year on year food inflation has risen to 93.7% in August 2022. OCHA highlights that 4.9 million people in Sri Lanka are food insecure. UNICEF points out that families are adapting negative coping mechanisms such as reducing having three meals per day to two meals per day, taking smaller portions and less nutritious food and that 7 out of 10 families are cutting down their food intake in order to cope with the current situation in the country. Sri Lanka has the second highest rate of acute malnutrition among children under 5 years in South Asia. Cultural practices of food allocations, where sons are given preference over daughters can compound to this issue of food insecurity and negatively impact the food security and nutritional status of girls. And practices such as women eating after other family members can contribute towards under-nutrition and food insecurity. Pregnant and lactating mothers are also severely affected and maternal malnutrition can lead to other negative consequences such as low birth weight of newborns.

3. Health Security of Women and Girls (SDG 3)

More than 95% of Sri Lankans rely on free public healthcare services. Sri Lanka imports around 80% of its medical supplies from other nations and due to the depletion of the foreign reserves many essential medicine such as cardiac drugs, anti-rabies vaccine, and medication such as ceftriaxone and metronidazole are currently out of stock. Consumables such as syringes, infant feeding tubes, closed suction tubes, and stitching materials are also lacking in healthcare facilities. And owing to the fuel crisis as well as frequent power cuts most of the operation theatre facilities are not functioning and the health system as a whole has been negatively impacted. Furthermore skilled healthcare professionals are changing their profession or leaving the country due to the crisis situation and the severe burnout following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The current crisis has escalated sexual and gender based violence and has resulted in severe reduction of sexual and reproductive healthcare services including contraception and maternal healthcare. Challenges in transportation and access to skilled medical care can increase maternal mortality in Sri Lanka. According to the Sri Lanka Health Ministry an estimated 215,000 Sri Lankan women are currently pregnant, including 11,000 adolescent girls and their health security is at risk due to the current circumstances in the country.





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4. Educational security of Women and Girls (SDG 4)

Covid-19 resulted in lockdowns that resulted in closing down of schools throughout the country. Though online teaching methods were implemented students were unable to follow them due to factors such as not having access to computers or not having access to an affordable internet connection with adequate coverage. 95% of schools in Sri Lanka are located in peripheral areas and are attended by children who live in poverty. And after the opening of educational institutes students are facing difficulties in attending schools and universities due to transportation being unaffordable due to the price hike in fuel resulting in an increase in number of dropouts. According to recent assessments in nine districts, 55 per cent of the households reported the current situation in the country having a negative impact on children's education while 33.9 per cent households struggle to support their children to continue education.

The fuel and economy crisis aggravated the situation and even several universities were closed down affecting not only the primary and secondary education system but also the tertiary education in Sri Lanka. Depletion of forex has exacerbated the issues pertaining to education. Tertiary education in Sri Lanka is already limited to a selected few in state universities and most students have to pursue their studies in universities abroad or in private universities in Sri Lanka that are affiliated to foreign universities that require payments to be made in foreign currency or an equivalent amount to be paid in local currency. Shortage of foreign exchange and depreciation of the Sri Lankan rupee has sharply reduced the affordability of education and students have had to halt their educational pursuits.

Despite families and the culture in Sri Lanka valuing education, and girls been given the same access to education, a significant number of young women drop out from secondary education due to poverty and early marriage. Most Sri Lankan families see education of young women as a tool that would assist in marrying them off to a suitor and statistics mirror this trend where the unemployment rate for women is two times higher than the rate for men in Sri Lanka and where Women's adult literacy (90.80%) is lower than that of men (92.77%).

5. Gender Equality (SDG 5) and Reducing Inequalities (SDG 10)

According to a UNDP report Sri Lanka is ranked 75th in gender inequality index (GII) with a GII of 0.383. GII measures inequality between women and men in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment (political participation and education), and labour market participation. There are structural, cultural and social barriers in the Sri Lankan context that result in discrimination and inequalities rendered to the women and girls in Sri Lanka. According to the Women's Wellbeing Survey (2019), 47.5 per cent of women felt men are superior to women. Furthermore, it is reported that 1 in 5 women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime and the crises situation in the nation has intensified violence against women in the country.

Women who are part of minority groups such as Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender women face higher level of discrimination and violence due to their sexual orientation and gender identity as they are a minority group that is made invisible due to ostracization and exclusion when strategies

are formulated and implemented to curb violence against women. According to a recent study done by UCLA school of law it depicts that LBT women are 5 times more likely than non-LBT women to experience violent victimization.

Furthermore LBT women face more discrimination and stigma in the Sri Lankan society due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. Heteronormative policies and regulations in all sectors of society have resulted in unequal treatment to these individuals and the depth of the economic crisis has exacerbated these issues. For example, transgender women are facing issues pertaining to healthcare and hormone replacement therapy where female hormones cost approximately Rs. 3,000-5,000 compared to male hormones that can be purchased at around Rs. 1,500-2,000. As the LGBTIQ community is criminalised by the current legislator in Sri Lanka these individual don't have a support mechanism to address these issues.

The current crisis situation in Sri Lanka has affected all individuals throughout the nation and has exacerbated issues pertaining to the security of women and girls throughout Sri Lanka, especially women and girls with intersectional identities are rendered more vulnerable during the current circumstances in the nation.

