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Lihini Ratwatte

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Converging Crises and the Cost of Exclusion: Unveiling the Invisible Women of Sri Lanka's Economy

By Lihini Ratwatte¹

Abstract

In Sri Lanka, women's labor force participation has never exceeded 35% in over three decades. As of 2022, the country was ranked 110 out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index. The gaps in women's participation in the formal economy alongside women's limited political empowerment are two leading causes for the country to be lagging in such global gender equality indicators. At a large cost to the economy, the existence of archaic gender norms that promulgate women's unpaid care work often exclude women from the formal labor force. This paper dissects the socio-economic and socio-political factors that lead to the invisibility of women in Sri Lanka's economy, while seeking to understand how such underlying causes have been aggravated within the precarity of the post-pandemic context. It is important, now more than ever, to recognize the invisibility of women in Sri Lanka's formal economy, while bringing about a transformative vision with a multi-pronged approach to address existing gaps and challenges. With reference to key principles of feminist economics, including the theoretical foundations of Claudia Goldin, Nancy Folbre, and Diane Elson, among others, the paper will make a case for inclusivity and intersectionality in policy recommendations aimed at encouraging women's entry, active engagement, contribution, and retention in Sri Lanka's economy. The paper reaches a conclusion that when women lead, participate, and benefit equally in all aspects of life, societies and economies will thrive, thereby contributing to sustainable development and inclusive economic growth.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Intersectionality, Women and Work, Sustainability, Inclusive Growth, Feminist Economics, Sri Lankan women

Introduction

Sri Lanka's low female labor force participation (FLFP) is an enigma, given the country's upward trajectory in women's educational attainment across secondary and tertiary academic institutions. In 2020, 70% of students enrolled in state universities were women, while 68.5% of graduating students were women. Most disciplines currently produce a higher percentage of women graduates with notable exceptions in the male-dominated STEM fields of science, technology, engineering and medicine (Arudpragasam, 2022). Regardless, FLFP in Sri Lanka has stagnated between 30 to 35% over the past three decades (Ranaraja et. al, 2016). In 2021, just 30.9% of women were in the labor force, compared to 71.1% of men (Department of Census and Statistics, 2021). According to the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report, Sri Lanka has the 17th largest gender gap in labor force participation in the world. Sri Lanka ranks low for FLFP even within the South Asian region, despite ranking higher in other human development indices such as women's education (Solotaroff et. al, 2020). Sri Lanka's stagnant

¹ Lihini Ratwatte is a gender and development specialist experienced in research, policy analysis, and advocacy. She holds a BA in International Studies, Communications, and Gender Studies from Monash University, and a MA in Global Diplomacy with specializations in Negotiation, Global Public Policy, Strategic Studies, and International Economics from SOAS, University of London. Drawing from her academic and professional expertise, Ms. Ratwatte's research focuses on the nexus of gender, development, peacebuilding, and security in Sri Lanka and the broader Asia-Pacific region. Email id: Lihini.Ratwatte@gmail.com

FLFP has remained unaddressed for too long and has been decreasing since 2017 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2021).

Women in Sri Lanka constitute roughly 52% of the estimated total population of 21 million, although over the past three decades, only 30 to 35% of the country's economically active persons are women (Department of Census and Statistics, 2016 and 2021). It is important to note that even within the category of employed women of working age, approximately 60% are engaged in the informal sector (Department of Census and Statistics, 2016 and 2021). Most Sri Lankan women are either unable or unwilling to engage in paid work due to a series of socio-economic and socio-political indicators fueled by supply and demand side factors. Supply side analyses have identified unpaid care and household work, skills deficits, and gender discrimination as underlying factors, while demand-related elements such as the characteristics of companies and attitudes of senior management are largely unexplored (ILO, 2018 and 2020; UN Women, 2022). Women also face an additional layer of challenges including social stigma, scarce opportunities, limited accessibility, and inadequate infrastructure and legislation resulting from existing structural gender inequalities exacerbated by the gendered impact of COVID-19 (Meegaswatta, 2021).

COVID-19 impacted life as we knew it, leaving humanity to grapple with the evolving socio-economic and socio-political realities, particularly within the world of work. It is predicted that FLFP will continue to decline due to the residual impacts of the pandemic. UN Women reports that between 2019 and 2020, Sri Lankan women's employment in the private sector declined by 8% and men's employment by 4%. Such gender and sector-wise changes in employment resulted from lockdowns and related mobility restrictions impacting the operations of different sub-sectors (UN Women, 2022). Although the majority of companies and organizations promoted work from home during lockdowns, employees' limited access to information communication technologies (ITC), infrastructure, workspaces at home, and their limited prior experiences in working from home significantly constrained certain operations (UN Women, 2022). The pandemic brought forth innovative solutions to the world of work, such as hybrid working modalities, the four-day work week, and an increased emphasis on office safety and health (OSH) practices. Yet the resulting fallout from the pandemic impacted women to a greater extent due to the inherent gendered inequalities embedded across societies and institutions.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has rated four sectors as at high risk of severely being impacted by COVID-19 in terms of job losses and a decline in working hours. The four sectors are: 1) accommodation, food services, and hospitality; 2) real estate and related administrative activities; 3) manufacturing; and 4) wholesale/retail trade. In 2020, 41% of women were employed in these sectors, compared to 35% of men. This suggests that women's employment was likely to be hit more severely than men's by the COVID crisis (ILO, 2020). In low-income and lower-middle-income countries, there is a risk that many manufacturing jobs will disappear, especially in the garment industry, which absorbs large numbers of women in the lower rungs. The absence of stronger systems of social protection may jeopardize the health and incomes of these workers as well as the viability of businesses (Das & Kotikula, 2019). Given that the majority of women are engaged in informal sectors, or in sectors that are of high risk due to the fallout of COVID-19, women are experiencing disproportionate challenges within the labor force compared to men (UN Women, 2022). This situation has been further intensified due to the ongoing economic crisis in Sri Lanka, which is thought to be the worst since the country's independence in 1948.

When a woman takes up employment, the increase in household income is offset by an increase in both personal and household-related costs. However, the patriarchal structure of the family and society is disproportionately reliant on women's unpaid labor of care and household work for its day-to-day functioning (Verité Research, 2022). Thus, formal labor force

participation may impose an additional physical and psychological cost on women as a result of both the so-called “double burden” (Rai et. al, 2013) and gendered expectations. Within this context, it is essential that Sri Lanka unveil the invisible efforts of women and understand the economic cost of their exclusion from the formal workplace. In doing so, it is vital to bring about an inclusive and transformative vision to address the widening gender gap in women's economic participation.

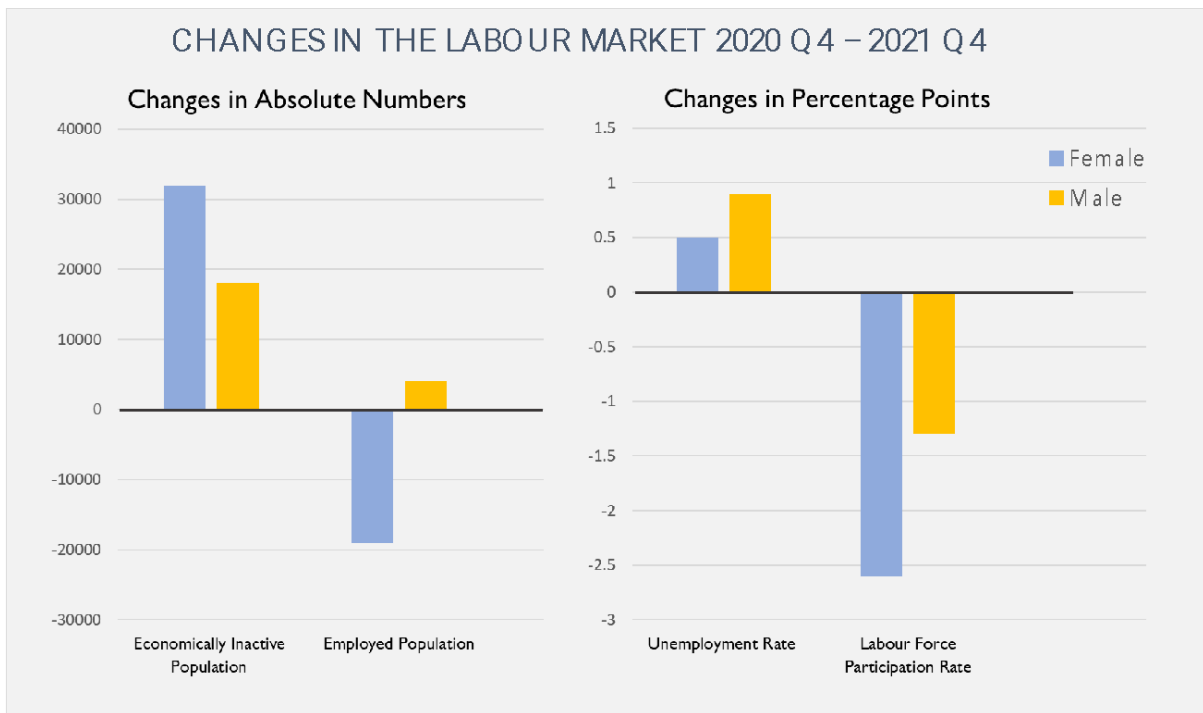
The Precarity of Converging Crises and the Gendered Impact

It must be emphasized that COVID-19 and the resulting economic crisis had a significant gendered impact that disproportionately affected women. For instance, the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns and mobility restrictions led to an increase in domestic violence, known now as the “shadow pandemic” (UN Women, 2021). Women and girls were the primary victims of the shadow pandemic and they often had to live in the same quarters as their abuser(s) due to support services and shelters being unavailable during prolonged lockdowns. Women also faced challenges in accessing healthcare during the pandemic, with routine screenings and appointments being postponed or canceled. Women's health was particularly affected, with access to reproductive health services, among others, being limited in many parts of the world (Johnson, 2021).

As of 2021, while women represented approximately 31% of the total labor force in Sri Lanka, over 60% of employed women were engaged in the informal sector (Department of Census and Statistics, 2021). As discussed previously, women are highly concentrated in industries such as retail and hospitality, which were hit hard by the pandemic. Women are more likely to work part-time or in the informal sector, and have limited access to social protection mechanisms, which makes them more vulnerable to job loss. A study conducted by the International Finance Corporation (2020) further reported that women-led and women-run small and medium enterprises in Sri Lanka saw a decrease in sales due to the existing digital gender gap, which hindered their ability to digitize their businesses during lockdowns.

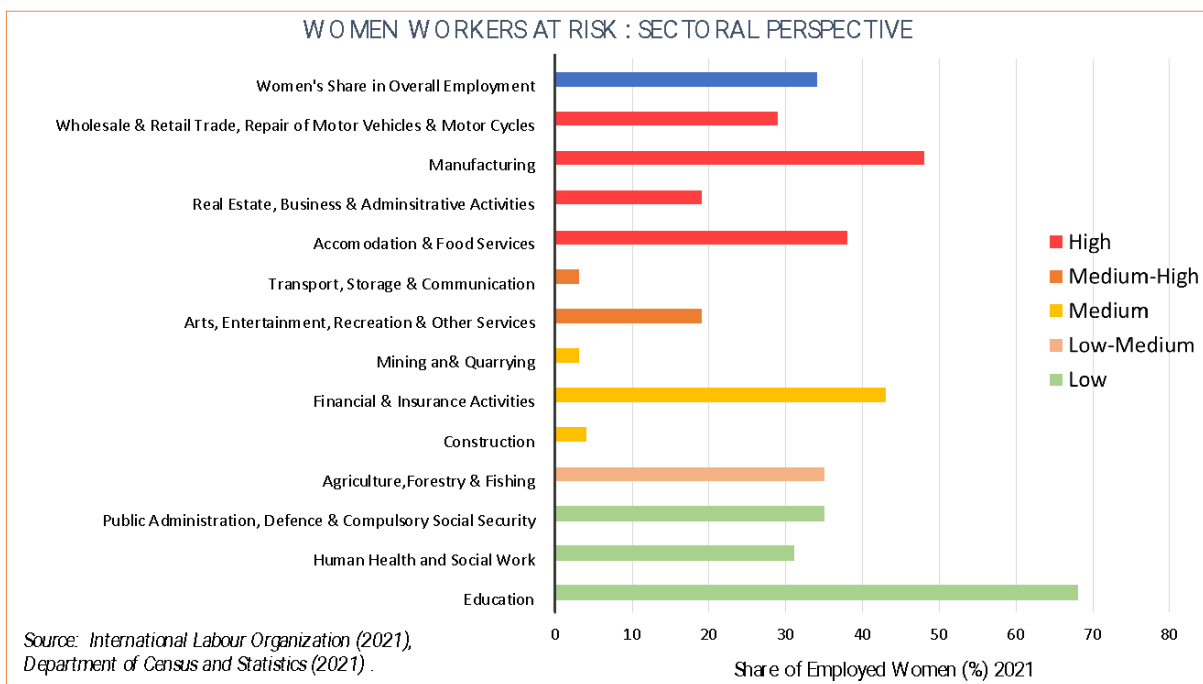
Moreover, with schools and childcare centers being closed throughout the pandemic, women had to take on an increased care burden at home. This resulted in women having to reduce their working hours or leave the workforce altogether to care for children, spouses, and/or elderly family members. In particular, women heads of households (WHH) in Sri Lanka faced a double burden of engaging in unpaid care work while earning an income to provide for their families (Ratwatte, 2021). A comparison of labor market figures and indicators for Sri Lanka over the period of 2020 to 2021 shows a severe impact on women (Figure 1), whereby the number of employed men increased by 38,938, while the number of employed women decreased by 189,148 (Madurawela, 2021).

Figure 1: Changes Observed in the Labor Market—2020 to 2021



Furthermore, the greater impact on employed women due to the pandemic is linked directly with the sector-wise employment distribution. Calculations (Figure 2) made by the Institute of Policy Studies on women’s employment in Sri Lanka based on an assessment conducted by the International Labour Organisation (2021) indicate that women’s employment share is high in both low-risk and high-risk economic sectors.

Figure 2: Share of Employed Women in Low-Risk and High-Risk Economic Sectors



Against the backdrop of the pandemic, existing gender-based employment segregation, or the unequal distribution of men and women across and within “certain job types,” has resulted in women being concentrated in high-risk informal sectors (Das & Kotikula, 2019, pp. 37-39). Women’s choice of employment is often linked with traditional gender roles associated with direct and indirect care responsibilities (Madurawela, 2021). Further, in Sri Lanka, women are largely represented in several COVID-19 frontline occupations as health professionals and as care workers, roles which are directly linked with traditional societal gender roles (Arunatillake, 2021). Both demand-side factors and supply-side factors limit women’s choice in selecting an employment sector, thus causing employment segregation. As highlighted in the introduction, gender gaps in skills and qualifications; domestic and care responsibilities; safety and security concerns (i.e. harassment at workplaces and when using public transport); and the lack of role models, connections, and networks are among a few supply-side factors (ILO, 2018). Gender biases in recruitment, evaluation, and promotion processes along with employers’ perceptions of women employees and features of the workplace culture are among key demand-side factors (Madurawela, 2021). Gender-based employment segregation creates unfavorable labor market conditions such as gender gaps in wages, inferior job quality and stunted employment trajectories for women (Das & Kotikula, 2019).

This situation has been aggravated by the ongoing economic crisis in Sri Lanka, especially since economic relief measures are not always dispersed equitably to address the diverse needs and circumstances affecting women. Therefore, it is vital that the gendered impact of such converging crises within the world of work are addressed through an intersectional lens. From an economic perspective, the active engagement of women in the labor force is a driver of economic growth for the country. Women’s economic participation is also important in advancing women’s empowerment. When a woman works outside the home, her economic independence allows her to have greater bargaining power within the household, leverage more decision-making abilities, and exercise personal autonomy (Heath & Jayachandran, 2016).

Understanding the Cost of Exclusion

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), about half of the world’s work is unpaid, and most of that work is performed by women. Examples of unpaid work include cooking, cleaning, fetching food or water, and caring for children and the elderly. These tasks are not counted as a part of economic activity, as they are difficult to quantify based on values in the marketplace. Nevertheless, the economic value of unpaid work is substantial, with estimates ranging from 10% to 60% of Gross Domestic Product (Georgieva et. al, 2019). Archaic gender norms, values, social institutions, and other cultural factors can constrain the redistribution of unpaid work by preventing men from sharing the burden at the domestic space. Women disproportionately shoulder the burden of unpaid work, and according to the IMF study, globally women perform an average of 4.4 hours of unpaid work per day while men only undertake an average of 1.7 hours (Georgieva et. al, 2019). There are also many variations across countries. In Norway, the gap of unpaid work per day is small with women undertaking 3.7 hours and men undertaking 3 hours. On the other end of the spectrum, in Egypt, women perform 5.4 hours of unpaid work per day and men perform only 35 minutes. In the United States, on average each day women perform 3.8 hours of unpaid work and men perform 2.4 hours (Georgieva et. al, 2019). Research being carried out at present proves that these numbers have increased for women subsequent to COVID-19 and the global recessions (Johnson, 2021; Verité Research, 2022).

A World Bank study conducted in 2018 demonstrates that women account for only 38% of human capital wealth versus 62% for men. In low and lower-middle income countries, women account for less than a third of human capital wealth. While these losses differ between

regions and countries, on a per capita basis gender inequality in earnings could lead to losses in wealth of \$23,620 per person globally (Quentin and Bénédicte, 2018). With reference to the 141 countries included in the study, the loss in human capital wealth due to gender inequality is estimated at \$160.2 trillion under the assumption that women would earn as much as men. Therefore, the human capital wealth could increase by 21.7% globally, and the total wealth by 14% with gender equality in earnings (Quentin and Bénédicte, 2018). From an instrumental point of view, achieving gender equality in FLFP would have dramatic benefits for women and girls' welfare and agency. This, in turn, would greatly benefit their households and communities, and help countries reach their full development potential.

There is evidence to indicate that COVID-19 and the subsequent economic crisis have exacerbated existing gender inequalities and vulnerabilities. For instance, a post-pandemic study conducted in Sri Lanka by Verité Research (2022) shows that COVID-19 had a significant impact on women at work. Women who perform a disproportionate share of unpaid household and care labor are further constrained by numerous structural barriers to enter and succeed in Sri Lanka's labor force. This comes at a significant monetary and non-monetary cost to the economy, as well as to the woman herself. It is important, therefore, that policies and interventions take into account the specific needs and experiences of women in order to address these gendered impacts and ensure that women are not left behind (Johnson, 2021).

Similarly, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of women through an intersectional lens. For example, women heads of households (WHH) in Sri Lanka are often considered a homogenous group, despite experiencing discrimination across varying intersectional factors. WHH also face a double, if not triple, burden stemming from the social stigma associated with widowhood or single women while having to balance employment with unpaid care responsibilities. Due to traditional gender roles and patriarchal societal values, women are often the key bearers of social reproduction in any society. Within this context, social reproduction (Hoskyns and Rai, 2007) refers to the labor that goes into reproducing, sustaining, and maintaining social life. This includes biological reproduction, unpaid care work at the household, voluntary work for the community, and providing emotional support for families. The double burden of unpaid care work and daily income generation activities undertaken by WHH from varying backgrounds and circumstances was heightened during the pandemic and the political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka. Such increased inequalities have led to a "depletion through social reproduction" (Rai et. al, 2013, pp. 89), witnessed in the lives of women as they engage in a double burden of social reproduction, which in turn hinders their economic empowerment and personal safety.

Disproportionate care burdens constrain women and girls from engaging in productive labor, which not only creates a dearth of opportunities but significant economic costs for themselves, their households, and countries. In essence, women's invisibility in economies has serious costs for society in terms of lower productivity and forgone economic growth. Therefore, a fairer allocation of unpaid work would not only benefit women but would also lead to more efficient workforces and stronger economies (Charme, 2019).

The Causality of Women's Invisibility in Sri Lanka's Formal Economy

The invisibility of women in Sri Lanka's economy is driven by a myriad of socio-economic and socio-political factors. As discussed previously, the gender-based segregation of the labor market along sectoral and occupational lines condition the relative demand for women employees. Sub-sectors such as food and beverages, textiles and garments, education, health, and social services exerted the strongest demand for low-skilled jobs. As a result, export orientation is not associated with an increased demand for women workers, thus reflecting the weak export orientation of Sri Lanka's economy within the ongoing economic crisis (UN Women, 2022).

A study by UN Women in 2022 indicates that hiring managers whose perceptions align with social attitudes that prescribe certain types of jobs for women also prefer not to hire women for high skill-oriented jobs. Additionally, Sri Lanka's Shops and Offices Employees Act prohibits women from working at night. Employers who were legally constrained from offering flexible working hours and nightwork for women are unable to finance maternity benefits and as a result hire fewer women (Madurawela, 2021). They also prefer to employ women if they perceive them as more skilled, loyal to the firm, hardworking, honest, and conscientious than men (UN Women, 2022). Employers consider women workers in mid-tier occupations as having the highest skills deficits, particularly in interpersonal skills, decision-making abilities, strategic thinking, and problem-solving skills. Additionally, companies in Sri Lanka are behind in the application of modern and digital technology in business operations and do not seem to be positioning themselves to use the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to apply modern technologies when reskilling workers (UN Women, 2022). Companies that sought to work from home during the pandemic were constrained by employees' limited access to ITC infrastructure, inadequate workspaces at home, and their limited expertise in this form of work. Many employers were willing to hire women with disabilities but were constrained by the lack of experience and opportunities available to train and integrate these women within their core infrastructure (Wanigasinghe, 2021; UN Women, 2022). Therefore, the crowding of women into lower quality jobs has a negative effect on workers as a whole, by diminishing the labor share of their income within the formal economy. In essence, such situations are influenced by global macroeconomic conditions and policies that have circumscribed the expansion of high-quality jobs relative to labor supply, thus intensifying competition for good jobs and weakening the bargaining power for women engaged in lower quality jobs (Seguino and Braunstein, 2019).

In addition to the instrumental value and gains of engaging women in the productive economy, there is also an intrinsic value through the empowerment of women in the workforce. Henceforth, this paper will dissect the socio-economic and socio-political factors that lead to the invisibility of women in Sri Lanka's economy, while seeking to understand how such underlying causes might have been influenced by COVID-19. Prevalent gender roles that condition women's unpaid care work often exclude women from the formal labor force at a large cost to the economy. Therefore, it is important to recognize the invisibility of women in Sri Lanka's formal economy, especially at a time when the country is facing an economic crisis. Discussed below are some of the leading constraints for women to enter and retain professional positions within the formal workplace.

1. Limited Financial Support

Inadequate financial support is a key hurdle faced by women in the labor force, particularly by women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka. Falling into debt through irregular microfinance loans and thereafter receiving poor support from local banks were cited as a hindrance towards business development and financial security, particularly within the nation's current economic crisis. There is also a dearth of financial facilities easily available for women with a clear indication of poor overall financial literacy. More often than not, women require their spouse or a male family member to intervene in activities related to banking, financing, and budgeting, often at the expense of their autonomy in decision-making and profit generation (ILO, 2020; Meegaswatte, 2021).

2. Inability to Compete in Competitive Markets

Despite prior training and traditional expertise, new and improved marketing skills are an area that requires rapid development in Sri Lanka. The inability to keep up with evolving markets, both nationally and internationally, is seen as a deterrent for women's potential to

engage with competitors while also developing their businesses. This includes the lack of adequate participation in new market opportunities and the inability for women to market products and services alongside other competitors at a local level (ILO, 2020).

3. Limited Access to Resources

Acquiring raw materials and other resources is a challenge for women entrepreneurs, due to issues in mobility, knowledge of services, and increase in prices. This is further hindered by supply and value chains being largely male-dominated. Additionally, given the dearth of women's representation in managerial positions, women are unable to take part in determining market prices (ILO, 2020), which in turn impedes them from creating and sustaining key networks in value chains. To this end, there is a strong requirement for inclusive value chains and supply mechanisms that are favorable to the needs of women.

4. Challenges to Mobility

The lack of safe roads and public transport facilities act as mobility barriers for most women, especially for those who do not own a mode of transportation. Due to fewer transport routes, most women are held back from their outreach, thus limiting the expansion of their economic activities. A UNFPA study conducted in 2015 indicated that 90% of women utilizing public transport in Sri Lanka experience sexual harassment, which often discourages women from traveling long distances to work. Moreover, public transport services in the country are not accessible for persons with disabilities, and as a result, women with disabilities are required to spend additional funds on private transport services. The need for safe and accessible public transport is paramount when supporting women's active contribution to the economy (ILO, 2020).

5. Care-related Burdens

As discussed extensively, women are held back from economic participation due to care-related burdens. Studies underline the unequal distribution of unpaid care work with women always carrying out a larger share than men (Dorji et. al, 2020). Care work is not quantified as a contributor to the economy, and hence is a leading cause for women's invisibility in the labor force. While the implications of unpaid care work for well-being, gender equality, and women's empowerment are important, such work remains statistically invisible to many policymakers, economists, and national statisticians as it falls outside the conventional definitions of labor. Given that it is a non-market activity, care work is excluded from conventional national income accounts such as gross domestic product (GDP). This invisibility has detrimental consequences for women, as it perpetuates the imbalances in economic relations and earnings that underlie gender inequality (Dorji et. al, 2020).

6. Access to Skills and Services

Language barriers and poor communication channels have resulted in women having limited access to the information needed to develop their businesses. Women with disabilities have an added barrier, as it prevents them from improving their interpersonal skills and other specialized skills required for the job. In most cases, policies within institutions are not conducive to persons with disabilities. For example, there are limited learning materials available in braille for vision-impaired employees or entrepreneurs and inadequate picture books or sign language practices to communicate with hearing impaired persons (ILO, 2020). Ensuring intersectionality and inclusivity are key contributors towards retaining women in the formal workplace.

7. Climate Shocks, COVID-19, and the Economic Crisis

Climate change and poor mitigation endeavors mean that many companies and businesses are threatened by natural disasters and related consequences. Climate change is a threat multiplier, meaning it escalates social, political, and economic tensions in fragile and conflict-affected settings (UN Women, February 2022). When disasters strike, women are less likely to survive and more likely to be injured due to longstanding gender inequalities that have created disparities in information, mobility, decision-making, and access to resources and training (UN Women, February 2022). When such circumstances converge with COVID-19 and the ensuing economic calamity in Sri Lanka, women and girls have limited opportunities to access relief and assistance, thereby further threatening their livelihoods and creating a vicious cycle of vulnerability to future crises.

8. Traditional Gender Norms

Social norms and constructs shape acceptable roles, opportunities, and behaviors for women and men in private and public spheres. Deeply entrenched gender stereotypes confine men to breadwinning roles, whilst unpaid care work is viewed as women's prerogative. Across the world, one in three men would prefer their wife to stay at home, take care of the family, and carry out unpaid housework rather than engage in paid work (Ranaraja et. al, 2016). As a result of such gendered social norms, over time certain gender patterns devoted to unpaid care work are perpetuated across generations, often by older women, to the detriment of younger women (Dorji et. al, 2020). This is symptomatic of systemic patriarchy and unequal power relations that continue to impact women at work.

It is therefore identified that these constraints or challenges appear in different forms and can be categorized into three major components:

- Individual barriers refer to the attitudinal and behavioral issues that prevent women from actively participating in economic activities. This is also related to self-confidence, self-determination, and self-realization at an individual level, and how women perceive themselves by understanding their own value and believing in their abilities.
- Social barriers refer to archaic gender norms, social perceptions, constructs, and cultural values that impede women from active economic participation. Patriarchal systems, gender roles, gender segregated occupations, and related cultural factors fall within this category.
- Institutional barriers exist at either the individual level or societal level. They can be rectified through continued lobbying and advocacy aimed at holistic law and policy reform and inclusive infrastructure enhancement (ILO, 2018).

Addressing the Cost of Exclusion: The Need for a Transformative Vision

It is evident that an intersectional and a multi-pronged approach inclusive of attitudinal changes, policy and legislative reform, and infrastructure development is required to effectively integrate women from diverse backgrounds within the formal labor force. This is particularly applicable when reducing the widening gender gap prompted by COVID-19 and the economic crisis in Sri Lanka.

Renowned feminist economists Dianne Elson (2017), Claudia Goldin (2006; 2012), and Nancy Folbre (2007) have drawn attention to the gendered dimensions of care-related work, and how care should be defined and measured in ways that enhance our understanding of the impact of economic development on women. They call for a universal bid to value care work through a dedicated "care economy," as unpaid care work is a crucial dimension of social reproduction, i.e., the process of enabling individuals, families, and society to continue thriving

(Arudpragasam, 2022). Unpaid care work involves time and energy devoted to supporting human wellbeing. Despite its importance, unpaid care work is undervalued as it is performed outside of market transactions, comprising a so-called “missing market.” Yet, the benefits of unpaid care work extend beyond market transactions as they represent a commodity of “public goods” for public wellbeing (Folbre, 2007). Unpaid care work is clearly work, although there is a general lack of consensus as to how to define it.

Goldin and Elson also justify the instrumental and intrinsic benefits of women’s economic participation. Goldin (2006) has shown that women's earnings tend to lag behind men's, due to factors such as occupational segregation and discrimination that lead to differences in work experiences. She also highlights the role of motherhood in exacerbating these disparities, with mothers often facing reduced hours, lower pay, and fewer opportunities for career advancement. In her research, Goldin (2012) emphasizes the need to address these disparities through policies that promote wage transparency, encourage flexible work arrangements, and support affordable childcare. Similarly, Diane Elson (2017) demonstrates the importance of recognizing gender inequality as a macroeconomic issue, rather than just a microeconomic one. Elson (2017) shows that gender inequalities in areas such as employment, education, and health have significant macroeconomic consequences, including reduced economic growth and increased poverty. In her work, Elson (2016) reiterates the need for both instrumental and intrinsic benefits through policies that address gender inequalities and promote inclusive economic growth. Nancy Folbre (2007) determines that care work, which includes both paid and unpaid caregiving, is undervalued and often performed by women. She has highlighted the impact of neoliberal economic policies on the care economy, which lead to the privatization and commercialization of care services. In her work, Folbre emphasizes the importance of recognizing or valuing care work as an essential part of the economy and promotes policies that support the provision of high-quality care services.

Against the backdrop of such theoretical considerations, an intersectional approach that evaluates the diverse experiences of women and girls is essential. Within the context of Sri Lanka’s converging crises, this approach would continue to benefit future research processes and policy interventions. The below proposed recommendations further outline this premise:

1. Valuing Care Work While Promoting Equity in Wage Determination

Women everywhere, in particular marginalized women, contribute massively to the economy and society through the essential care work they provide. Yet, existing economic systems value the wealth of the privileged few, mostly men, more than that of the billions of hours of unpaid care work initiated by women and girls. Governments must prioritize care as being as important as all other sectors in order to build inclusive and humane economies that work for everyone. Additionally, it is essential to initiate productivity enhancement programs through time-use surveys in an effort to value care work across sectoral and sub-sectoral tiers. Similarly, government and private sector research and development (R&D) processes must encourage performance and productivity-based wage fixing mechanisms for women.

2. Equitable Employment Generation

Within the context of Sri Lanka’s converging crises, a transformative vision is required to promote employment with an emphasis on addressing intersectional discrimination. This could be achieved, for instance, through the reallocation of labor towards more productive sectors for women from diverse backgrounds, whilst encouraging decent work practices to ensure the safety and protection of women. In doing so, organizations can promote non-discriminatory recruitment practices that do not work against women of reproductive age or young mothers reentering the workplace.

3. Supporting Women Entrepreneurs, and Micro, Small, and Medium-scale Enterprises (MSMEs)

The MSME sector in Sri Lanka was completely disintegrated by multiple converging crises, and women in the sector were severely impacted. It is paramount to strengthen business development, financial, and administrative services of MSMEs run by women, especially in semi-urban and rural areas. This can be done through the provision of credit facilities, improvement of ICT facilities, and conducting holistic skills development programs for women entrepreneurs and MSME employers.

4. Equity in Digitalization

Sri Lanka has a noticeable digital gender gap. While the country reported a digital literacy rate of 57.2% in 2020, the computer literacy rate was only 34.3%, with women falling behind in both aspects (International Finance Corporation, 2020). Women-led and women-run MSMEs were impacted due to this digital gender gap and the lack of knowledge and resources to digitize businesses, preventing them from capitalizing on the e-commerce wave during prolonged lockdowns. Such gaps can be addressed through the application of modern information and communications technologies, while providing incentives to engage women through bottom-up interventions that can ensure access to internet facilities for all enterprises and small businesses irrespective of location and size.

5. Developing Safe and Inclusive Systems, Processes, and Infrastructure

As discussed extensively, potent factors such as limited financial facilities, limited access to resources, patriarchal systems and institutions, and the unavailability of safe and inclusive infrastructure facilities continue to hinder women's meaningful engagement in the formal workforce. Policymakers must explore innovative solutions that promote accessibility for women. For instance, the implementation of trade and industry policies through an intersectional lens can create inclusive value chains and market development processes that generate more opportunities for women.

6. Holistic Skills Development

The segregation of jobs and the pertinent gendered skill gap deems it necessary for reforms aimed at increasing the capacity to learn interpersonal skills, decision-making, effective communication, strategic thinking, and problem-solving skills. Similarly, there is a need to encourage vocational training providers to introduce comprehensive curricula aimed at integrating women in high-growth sectors. Vocational training across public and private sectors must be supported by designing new courses and outreach programs with a focus on enhancing the employability of women. Given the inherent gender segregation of jobs, affirmative action is essential through the provision of scholarships for young girls to attend vocational training courses in non-traditional and gender-segregated fields such as science, technology, engineering, and medicine (STEM). This in turn leads to the expansion of industry-linked internships and intensive business incubator programs.

7. Ensuring Decent Working Conditions

Above all, there is a need to ensure decent working conditions for women in the workforce. The significance of occupational health and safety (OSH) became prominent during the pandemic, whilst the subsequent shadow pandemic ushered in zero-tolerance for gender-based violence and harassment of all forms in the workplace. Such policies can be enabled through enforceable mandates on international gender-quality standards. For instance, the International Labour Organisation's Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No.

155), and the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) can be effectively implemented through localized mediating bodies with government backing.

8. Enabling Childcare Support and Family-sensitive Policies

Equitable access to the workforce is enabled through the provision of well-monitored, accessible, and affordable childcare across all tiers of employment. It is also important to facilitate equal parental leave policies, highlighting the importance for both maternal and paternal leave with pay. In addition, there is a need for accessible and affordable childcare, alongside the promotion of part-time work, flexible hours, and job sharing to encourage the participation and retention of married women and young mothers in the workforce. It is essential to re-employ and re-skill married women and young mothers across government and private sectors, while conducting awareness-raising programs on the social and economic benefits of inclusive employment. In turn, this would increase social acceptance and awareness of the benefits of paid childcare.

9. Breaking Biases

There is a strong requirement to reduce gender biases in recruitment and career development practices. This can be initiated by investing in the capacity of women employees to move up the management hierarchy on a merit-basis and take up positions of responsibility and decision-making. It is equally important to ensure the representation of women staff members on selection panels of recruitment, performance reviews, and wage determination. Above all, policymakers must ensure a holistic legislative environment through the amendment of laws that encourage flexible employment and night work in shops and offices, while subsidizing the costs of maternity benefits (UN Women, 2022; ILO, 2020).

Conclusion

This paper makes a compelling case about how prevalent gender norms and social constructs exclude women from the formal workforce at a greater cost to the economy, especially when faced with converging crises. It emphasizes that a transformative vision with a multi-faceted approach is required to address existing gaps and challenges. This can be achieved through inclusive and intersectional policy recommendations aimed at encouraging women's entry, active engagement, contribution, and retention in Sri Lanka's formal economy. The detailed analysis with reference to key theoretical foundations, alongside the proposition of comprehensive recommendations, responds to the precarity of current post-COVID times while promoting feasible steps and innovative solutions for transformative change with tangible social impacts.

In essence, by unveiling the invisibility of women there are winners across the board, starting from women and girls themselves at an individual level, to broader communities, and eventually the formal economy. Given the country's current economic crisis, Sri Lanka cannot dismiss the instrumental benefits of reducing barriers to FLFP. The wider intrinsic benefits—improving opportunities for children, freedoms for men and wellbeing for women—cannot be denied either. The most compelling justifications for eliminating barriers to FLFP rest on human rights principles, and the State has an obligation to address discrimination while promoting equality among its citizens (Arulpragasam, 2022).

In conclusion, the paper argues that there is a pressing need to create an enabling environment for women to participate in labor market activities and to expand the array of employment options available for them. An enabling environment complete with sustainable economic infrastructures can develop inclusive supply chains, strong partnerships, and representation across grassroots, sub-national, and national tiers. Within the framework of such sustainable employment creation, populations including women, women with disabilities and

other marginalized groups are more likely to achieve economic well-being, decision-making power, and social cohesion. Empowering communities through decent work and sustainable livelihoods helps to reduce the ongoing development gap in Sri Lanka, while addressing perceptions of inequality. Above all, the facilitation of women's employment and income generating opportunities allows Sri Lanka to build back better from COVID-19 and the economic crisis, which will lead to long-term economic prosperity and sustainable peace.

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