

Multidimensional Poverty and Women: Insights from Sri Lanka

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Demographic Highlights

- In 2021 the total population was estimated to be 22.256 million; comprising 10,727 million men and 11,429 women. The population above 60 years of age comprised 16.4%, between 0-4 years was 15.9% and between 15-24 was 14.8%.

Women and Men in and out of the Labour Force

- Labour force participation of men in 2022 was 70.5 (5.5 million) and of women was 32.1 (2.9 million).
- The Economically Active or labour force participation of men was 65.3% for men and 34.7% for women.
- In the category 'Economically Inactive' it was 27.1 for men and 72.6% for women. Looking further into the disproportionately high representation of women here, it is found that 58% of these women are categorized a 'Engaged in Housework' as against 4.1% of men.

Sri Lanka Social Development Policies

- Government healthcare services have, with the exception of the period of the ethnic conflict/war, been extensive and accessible to the population. Our literacy levels, especially of women (at 92.3), has been on par or better than some developed countries.

Poverty Allevation by Policy

- We moved from universal ration cards in the 1960s to targeted economic support or Poverty Alleviation programmes in the 1980s with successive governments 'improving' such programmes. Social safety nets also include state supported pensions, payment to the elderly. These measures were, for the most part, relatively effective.

Economic Crisis 2021

- In 2023, 100,000 households had their electricity connections cut due to households' inability to pay electricity bills that went up by almost 300% in a few months.
- Very rapid rise in transport, food, school books etc
- Children are dropping out or not attending school regularly.
- Women's access to paid work – greater numbers pushed in to informal sector or not able to obtain work for decent wages

Population in Poverty

- Poverty which had been 11.3 in 2019 went up to 12.7 in 2020, adding 300,000 new poor. In 2022, poverty was at 25% which was an additional 2.5 million to the population in poverty.

Nutrition – women and children

- The economic crisis has also had serious impact on access to nutrition by pregnant and lactating women. Due to the escalation of prices of food along with cooking fuel (gas, kerosene), many poor and even middle-class households have reduced their food intake, especially protein rich food such as eggs, fish and meat.

- UNICEF found that 2.8 million children and women require nutrition services, and 480,187 lactating mothers were in need of cash assistance.
- UNICEF “Humanitarian Action for Children” 2023.
[unicef.org/media/131556/file/2023-HAC-Sri-Lanka.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/131556/file/2023-HAC-Sri-Lanka.pdf)

Multidimensional Poverty – Sri Lanka

- One in every six (16%) persons in Sri Lanka are multidimensionally poor.
- People aged 65 and older are the poorest age group
- Deprivations in health facilities, cooking fuel, drinking water and based facilities have the highest levels of deprivation.
- The Child MPI shows that more than four out of every ten (42.2%) children under the age of five are multidimensionally poor.
- One third (33.4%) of children aged 0-4 years are multidimensionally and either underweight or stunted.
- One sixth (16.4%) of children aged 0-4 years are multidimensionally poor and deprived in early child development.

Snapshots from the ground

- Moneragala – Uva Province, South West Sri Lanka (1)
- Nandani is a 35 year old mother of one child. She has a disability in her leg. Her husband is a carpenter who had been unemployed for three months, but had found work a few days before. He travels around looking for daily work. Nandani sews cloth bags and does home gardening. Before the covid pandemic, she earned a living through selling vegetables from her garden. But after covid and the economic crisis, she finds it difficult to grow vegetables and to sell what she harvests. Her electricity bill which used to be around Rs. 750 per month is now around Rs. 3000.

Moneragala - Rural

- Her child is in a pre-school nearby. She takes him to the monthly clinic run by the government. They have told her that he is underweight. She says, because of economic hardship, she had stopped giving the child milk. They do not buy meat, on occasion, they buy river fish. They used to give the child an egg every few days, but these days, it might be once a week. The family used to get a food supplement 'Thriposha' from the clinic for the child, but had not received it for a year. The clinic had started distributing this a few months ago. Her son has been included in the clinic records of undernourished children.

Moneragala – Rural (2)

- Damayanthi is 40 years old. Her husband is 42. They have three daughters aged 15, 13 and 8. All are in school. The youngest daughter is included in the government programme of providing one meal for children up to 10 years. The school meal has a cup of rice, some greens, one vegetable and sometimes a dry fish gravy. A slice of boiled egg used to be given several times a week instead of dry fish, but not now. For the older girls, she would cook rice and a vegetable for them to take to school, fish would only be cooked in the night, if at all.

- Their economic hardship started with the Covid pandemic. Now, they have cut down on their meals to the point that any protein, such as dry fish is bought mainly for the youngest child. If they cook a sprats head curry or a fish curry, the two older daughters would only eat from the gravy, they leave any pieces for the youngest sister. They used to buy fresh milk from a nearby farm at low cost, but now the price is higher and they can have milk only about twice a week.

Colombo - Urban

- Naya Bibi is a 68 year old woman living in low and middle income settlement in Colombo. She is unemployed. Her husband passed away 9 years after they got married. She has two children, a daughter and a son. The daughter is married and has four children (three boys, one girl). The daughter and son both live with her. The daughter's husband drives a three wheeler/auto rickshaw. There are three families in the same house—Naya Bibi, her daughter's family; Naya Bibi's sister and her husband. The daughter's children are all in the school-going age. Her grandchildren are 7, 14, 10, the youngest goes to a montessori.

Urban

- She gets Rs. 1000 every month as 'pin padi'/social protection handout from government.
- She noted that the entire family ate breadfruit with coconut sambol as a meal the day before. That was the only meal they had the entire day. She said that sometimes she feels terribly hungry, but that she tries to stifle it with some water or plain tea. It is quite difficult in the morning, the children would only get some biscuits and tea before they leave for school. Lunch would be rice and whatever else they can find at home.

Multisectoral Poverty and Women

- The experiences of women in times of economic hardship need to be also recognized and recorded. It might be more useful to add some dimensions and indicators to the Multidimensional poverty index to capture a closer picture of the specific types of deprivation that women undergo. The MPI has been able to bring out the poverty levels of children under four years of age, of the elderly over 60 years of age. It should be similarly expanded to estimate the poverty dimensions of women as well.

- THANK YOU.