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Structural Barriers to Women's Participation in Development Programmes in Sri Lanka: The Roles of Education, Labour Market Dynamics, Social Norms, Culture, Religion, Economic Power, and Institutional Change

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Abstract: Sri Lanka presents a development paradox: women constitute the majority of the population and demonstrate high educational attainment, yet their participation in paid employment, economic decision-making, political institutions and development programmes remains limited. In 2024, women represented 51.7% of the population. However, the female labour-force participation rate was only 32.4% in 2025, compared with 69.1% for men, highlighting the gap between educational achievement and economic inclusion.This article examines how social, cultural, economic, religious, legal, political, spatial, technological and institutional barriers shape women's participation in development programmes in Sri Lanka. It argues that meaningful participation extends beyond attendance or beneficiary status to include decision-making authority, access to information and resources, mobility, safety, leadership and influence over programme outcomes. The analysis considers how household norms, unpaid care responsibilities, labour-market structures, public services and institutional practices interact with disadvantages associated with poverty, rural residence, disability, age and other forms of social inequality.The article argues that Sri Lanka's central gender challenge is translating women's educational achievements into economic agency and decision-making power. It recommends gender-responsive programme design, accessible childcare, safe mobility, financial inclusion, flexible participation, effective grievance mechanisms, women's leadership and sex-disaggregated monitoring. These measures can strengthen gender equality, economic resilience, poverty reduction and the effectiveness of development investments.

Keywords: Women, Gender equality, Development Programmes, Social norms, Education

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1. Introduction

Sri Lanka has long been recognised for comparatively strong human-development outcomes in South Asia. Universal access to education, high literacy, extensive public health provision and a long history of women's political participation have produced a social environment in which many conventional measures of gender disadvantage appear less severe than in neighbouring countries. Sri Lanka elected the world's first woman prime minister in 1960 and has subsequently had women in the highest levels of political office. The country also performs strongly in basic education: the 2024 population census reports a national language-literacy rate of 97.4%, with female literacy at 97.0% and male literacy at 97.9%. The World Bank's Gender Data Portal, using UNESCO data and a different definition, reports adult literacy in 2023 at 93.4% for women and 92.0% for men. These figures demonstrate that the historical gender gap in literacy has largely closed.

However, a high level of educational attainment should not be mistaken for equality of opportunity. The most persistent contradiction in Sri Lanka is the gap between women's human capital and their participation in economic and public life. According to the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS), the female labour-force participation rate was 32.4% in 2025, compared with 69.1% for men. Thus, fewer than one in three women aged 15 years and above were economically active, while approximately seven in ten men were. The female unemployment rate was also higher. The World Bank's ILO-modelled estimate places the 2025 female participation rate at around 31%, indicating that the precise level varies by statistical series, but the gender gap is unequivocally large.

The development implications are substantial. Development programmes increasingly depend on community participation, local institutions, livelihood improvement, infrastructure use, skills development, agricultural value chains, entrepreneurship, climate resilience, social protection, digital services and local decision-making. If women are unable to attend meetings, travel safely to training, control household resources, access finance, speak in mixed-gender forums, participate in producer organisations, obtain technical employment or influence local decisions, a programme may be formally inclusive while remaining substantively gender unequal.

This distinction is especially important for programmes financed by multilateral development banks and other development partners. Contemporary development practice increasingly recognises that women must not merely be listed as beneficiaries. Gender-responsive programmes should address constraints that prevent women from exercising agency and benefiting equitably. The Asian Development Bank's current gender approach explicitly identifies discrimination, gender norms, restrictions on mobility, unpaid household responsibilities and exclusion from male-dominated sectors as barriers to women's participation. Similarly, World Bank research emphasises that successful women's empowerment programmes combine resources and opportunities with agency and changes in the enabling environment.

The central proposition of this article is therefore that women's participation in Sri Lankan development programmes is determined by an interconnected system of structural conditions. These conditions include household gender norms; expectations about appropriate female and male roles; unequal responsibility for unpaid care; limited access to safe and affordable transport; labour-market discrimination; occupational segregation; limited access to productive assets and finance; political exclusion; gender-based violence and harassment; digital inequalities; institutional practices; and, in some contexts, personal and customary laws. Religion itself should not be treated as a causal explanation or as a homogeneous barrier. Rather, religious institutions, interpretations, customary practices and community norms can interact with gender relations in ways that either constrain or support women's agency. A rigorous analysis must therefore distinguish faith from the social and institutional practices conducted in its name.

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The article addresses five principal questions, as follows;

1. What do current demographic, educational, labour and political indicators reveal about women's position in Sri Lanka?
2. What structural barriers prevent women from converting education and skills into participation and influence?
3. How do social, cultural, economic and religious factors interact rather than operate independently?
4. How do these barriers affect women's participation specifically in development programmes?
5. What reforms can make development programming more genuinely gender transformative?

2. Methodological and Conceptual Approach

This is a desk-based analytical article drawing primarily on official Sri Lankan statistics and recent publications of international development institutions. The principal statistical sources are the Department of Census and Statistics' Census of Population and Housing 2024, the Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey, the Economic Statistics of Sri Lanka 2026, and the 2024 Government School Census. International comparisons and gender indicators are drawn from UNESCO/UIS, the World Bank Gender Data Portal, the International Labour Organization, UN Women, UNFPA, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Asian Development Bank. Legal and socio-cultural issues are considered using recent scholarly and institutional literature.

The analysis uses a broad definition of participation. Participation includes at least six dimensions:
(1) Presence or access
(2) Voice and consultation
(3) Influence over decisions
(4) Access to resources and benefits
(5) Leadership and representation
(6) Sustained control over outcomes

This distinction matters because a woman can be physically present in a project meeting without being able to speak, influence decisions, control compensation or resources, or participate in implementation.

The conceptual framework combines gender-and-development thinking with an institutional and intersectional perspective. At the household level, gender norms determine the allocation of time, mobility and decision-making authority. At the market level, employment institutions determine whether education can be converted into paid work. At the community level, social expectations influence women's participation in organisations and public meetings. At the state level, laws, budgets, transport, childcare, social protection and political institutions determine the enabling environment. At the programme level, project design determines whether these structural constraints are recognised or ignored.

This approach also avoids a common methodological mistake: treating women as a homogeneous category. Women in Colombo do not necessarily face the same constraints as those in rural or estate communities. Young, unmarried women may encounter different mobility restrictions from married women with children. Women with disabilities may encounter accessibility barriers. Women in female-headed households may experience both greater economic responsibility and greater decision-making autonomy. Ethnic, linguistic and conflict-affected contexts can alter access to services and institutions. The objective is therefore not to claim that every Sri Lankan woman experiences every barrier, but to identify the structures that systematically increase the likelihood of exclusion.

3. Sri Lanka's Gender Profile: Strong Human Capital and Weak Economic Conversion

3.1 Demographic position

The 2024 Census of Population and Housing provides a crucial starting point. Sri Lanka's population was 21,781,800, with females accounting for 51.7% and males 48.3%. In absolute terms, there were approximately 11.27 million

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females and 10.51 million males. The sex ratio was therefore about 93 males per 100 females. Females outnumbered males in every district.

This demographic reality has an important policy implication: women are not a small minority whose participation can be treated as a niche social issue. Women are a majority of the population and a majority in the adult population. Their underrepresentation in employment, leadership and programme decision-making therefore represents a major underutilisation of national human resources.

3.2 Education: the paradox of success

Education is one of Sri Lanka's strongest gender-equality achievements. The 2024 Government School Census recorded 3,816,234 students: 1,927,614 females and 1,888,620 males. Female students therefore represented approximately 50.5% of government-school enrolment. Female participation was not limited to primary education. The 2024 Census states that the percentage of females receiving school education was higher than that of males across all principal age groups.

The Census also reports a substantial improvement in higher educational attainment. Among people aged 25 and above, 26.2% reported tertiary education as their highest qualification in 2024, compared with 18.2% in 2012, and the increase was more pronounced among females. The World Bank Gender Data Portal, drawing on UNESCO, reports a 2023 tertiary gross enrolment rate of approximately 26% for females and a tertiary gender-parity index of about 1.4. In other words, women are not systematically excluded from tertiary education; in several measures they are more represented than men.

Literacy figures reinforce this picture. The 2024 Census records 97.0% female language literacy compared with 97.9% male literacy among persons aged 10 years and above. The World Bank/UNESCO series reports 93.4% adult female literacy and 92.0% adult male literacy for 2023. The difference between the figures reflects different definitions and reference populations, not necessarily contradictory trends.

Yet educational success has not generated proportional economic participation. This is one of the most important findings for development policy. The problem is no longer simply getting girls into school. It is ensuring that educated women can move from education to employment, entrepreneurship, professional advancement, leadership and control over economic resources.

3.3 Labour-force participation

DCS Economic Statistics of Sri Lanka 2026 reports labour-force participation rates for 2025 of 49.4% overall, 69.1% for males and 32.4% for females. The female rate had been 31.8% in 2021, 32.1% in 2022, 31.3% in 2023 and 29.8% in 2024 before recovering to 32.4% in 2025. The male rate remained substantially higher throughout the period.

The gap cannot be explained by educational deficits alone. Indeed, Sri Lanka presents a classic case in which improvements in female education coexist with low female labour-force participation. The problem involves the transition from education into work and the retention of women in employment after marriage and childbirth.

Female unemployment also remains higher. In the fourth quarter of 2025, DCS reported unemployment of 5.7% for women compared with 2.7% for men. Among 15–24-year-olds, unemployment was 21.6% for females and 17.1% for males. These figures show that even among women who enter the labour market, access to suitable employment is more difficult.

3.4 Unpaid care work

The care economy provides one of the clearest explanations for the education-employment paradox. Sri Lanka's national Time Use Survey and subsequent ILO analysis show that women spend substantially more time on unpaid household and care activities than men. A recent ILO background report states that women perform 86% of all unpaid work in Sri Lanka and that Sri Lankans spend an average of 3.7 hours per day on unpaid domestic

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and care work. ILO analysis also reports that women spend nearly two and a half times as many hours as men on housework.

Unpaid care is economically productive but statistically and socially undervalued. It includes childcare, eldercare, cooking, cleaning, collecting water or fuel where relevant, household management and support for dependent family members. When women undertake most of these tasks, participation in a training course, community meeting or livelihood activity has an opportunity cost. A two-hour meeting may require several additional hours of preparation, travel and substitute care.

Consequently, development programmes that schedule consultations during working or care hours, require repeated travel to district centres, or assume that beneficiaries can freely allocate time may unintentionally exclude women.

4. Social and Cultural Barriers

4.1 Gender norms and the gendered division of labour

Social norms are among the most persistent structural barriers. In many households, women remain primarily responsible for domestic work and care while men are socially positioned as income earners and public decision-makers. These expectations influence whether women are encouraged to work, travel, speak publicly, manage money, join producer organisations or hold leadership positions.

Norms can operate without explicit coercion. A woman may technically be free to attend a training session, but may nevertheless decide not to attend because she is expected to care for children or older relatives. A family may not formally prohibit employment, but may consider certain occupations inappropriate for women. A woman may have the legal right to own land but still lack practical control over it because land is registered in a husband's or male relative's name.

World Bank and ADB research identifies restrictive gender norms and mobility constraints as significant contributors to low female labour-force participation in South Asia. World Bank analysis shows that marriage itself can create a substantial participation penalty for women in the region, even before children are born.

4.2 Marriage and the life-course effect

Women's participation is strongly shaped by the life course. The transition from school to higher education may be relatively gender-equal, while the transition from education to marriage and family formation can produce a sharp divergence. Marriage increases domestic responsibilities and can change women's perceived obligations, mobility and bargaining power.

This matters for development programmes because many interventions target women at precisely the stage when they are expected to undertake more unpaid care. Skills programmes may train young women but fail to provide employment pathways. Entrepreneurship programmes may offer training but not childcare, finance or market access. Agricultural projects may invite women to participate in farmer organisations but schedule activities at times that conflict with domestic responsibilities.

4.3 Mobility and safety

Mobility is both a physical and social issue. Women may have access to roads and public transport but still face constraints arising from cost, safety, harassment, family concerns or expectations about travelling alone. Poorly designed transport systems can therefore create gender exclusion even where infrastructure is technically available.

Safe mobility affects participation in vocational training, employment, markets, health services, agricultural extension, project meetings and political institutions. The World Bank has identified mobility and safety as major supply-side barriers to women's labour-market participation in South Asia.

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ADB likewise highlights restrictions on mobility as an important gender constraint.

Development programmes should therefore treat transport and safety as participation infrastructure. The question is not simply whether a road, bus service or project facility exists; it is whether women can safely and affordably use it.

4.4 Gender stereotypes and occupational segregation

Women remain concentrated in sectors and occupations traditionally considered compatible with female roles, while men are more visible in construction, transport, technical trades, engineering and some agricultural and industrial activities. This occupational segregation reduces women's access to higher-paid jobs and leadership pathways.

ADB research on gender in the ICT/BPM sector in Sri Lanka has previously identified socio-cultural barriers, patriarchal expectations and gender stereotypes as factors discouraging women from entering and remaining in male-dominated fields. Similar mechanisms can operate in infrastructure, transport, construction, energy, agriculture and technology programmes.

If a development programme assumes that women will naturally choose traditionally female occupations, it can reinforce rather than challenge existing segregation.

5. Economic Barriers

5.1 The resource gap

Participation requires resources. Women need time, transport, working capital, land, equipment, information, digital connectivity and access to markets. Education alone cannot overcome the absence of these resources.

Financial inclusion has improved. The World Bank Gender Data Portal reports that in 2024, approximately 80.2% of Sri Lankan women aged 15 and above had an account with a financial institution or mobile-money provider, compared with 83.4% of men. This is comparatively high. However, account ownership should not be equated with economic autonomy. A woman may have a bank account but limited control over household savings, credit, collateral or investment decisions.

5.2 Land and productive assets

Land and property ownership influence bargaining power. Women with secure control over land or housing have greater ability to obtain credit, invest, withstand economic shocks and negotiate within households. Conversely, insecure tenure can limit participation in agricultural or livelihood programmes.

Sri Lanka's plural legal system includes general law and customary regimes, including Kandyan law, Thesavalamai and Muslim personal law. The interaction between statutory law, customary rules and social practice can affect women's property, inheritance and family rights. The issue should be approached carefully: customary and religious systems are not uniform, and their practical effects differ across communities and circumstances. Nevertheless, legal pluralism can create complexity for women seeking to understand and enforce rights.

5.3 Access to finance and entrepreneurship

Women entrepreneurs can face constraints in collateral, financial literacy, market networks, technology, business registration, procurement opportunities and confidence in dealing with institutions. Programmes that provide entrepreneurship training without addressing access to finance and markets may generate certificates rather than sustainable enterprises.

Development finance should therefore be designed around the full business ecosystem: finance, mentoring, market access, digital tools, procurement, childcare, transport, networking and legal support.

5.4 Wage inequality and quality of employment

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Participation rates alone do not capture the quality of work. Women may enter employment but remain concentrated in lower-paid, insecure or informal jobs. Historical ILO research on Sri Lanka has identified gender differences in wages and occupational outcomes. The existence of a gender pay gap reduces the expected return to education and can reinforce household decisions favouring men's employment.

For development programmes, this means that counting the number of women trained or employed is insufficient. Indicators should measure job quality, earnings, retention, promotion, social protection, occupational safety and decision-making.

6. Religious, Customary and Legal Dimensions

Religion requires careful treatment in gender analysis. Sri Lanka is religiously plural, and Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity are all important components of the country's social fabric. Religious belief can provide ethical resources supporting dignity, social responsibility, education and women's wellbeing. Therefore, it would be analytically incorrect to describe religion itself as a barrier to women's participation.

The more precise issue is the interaction between religious interpretation, customary practice, family structures, community authority and gender norms. In some settings, interpretations of appropriate gender roles can influence women's mobility, work, leadership and family decision-making. These effects are not uniform and can vary by locality, socioeconomic status, education and individual family practice.

Sri Lanka's legal pluralism adds another layer. Muslim personal law governs marriage and divorce for Muslims through the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, while other customary systems such as Kandyan law and Thesavalamai apply in defined circumstances. Scholarly and human-rights literature has raised concerns about gender equality within aspects of these frameworks. At the same time, reforms should be developed through inclusive dialogue with affected communities and with attention to constitutional equality, human rights and women's agency.

For development programming, the practical lesson is not to label religious communities as resistant to gender equality. Rather, programmes should undertake context-specific social analysis. They should identify who controls household decisions, who influences women's mobility, which community institutions women trust, what religious or customary authorities exist, and how women can safely participate.

Faith leaders and community leaders can become allies. Where they support girls' education, women's economic activity, prevention of violence and participation in public decision-making, they can help shift norms. Gender-responsive programmes should therefore engage progressive community and religious leaders without transferring decision-making authority away from women themselves.

7. Political and Institutional Barriers

7.1 Women's political representation

Women's demographic majority contrasts sharply with their political representation. The current Parliament has reached a historic high of approximately 22 women members, or about 9.8% of seats. Although this is an important improvement, it remains far below parity and below women's share of the population.

Sri Lanka's local-government system introduced a 25% quota for women. Experience shows, however, that quotas alone do not automatically produce substantive influence. UNFPA's 2025 brief on women's political participation concluded that legislation alone is insufficient and that structural, institutional and social barriers continue to affect women's entry into political decision-making.

Political participation matters for development programmes because local elected representatives influence budgets, infrastructure priorities, service delivery and community development. When women are underrepresented, women's priorities

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can receive less institutional attention, particularly where gender-responsive planning systems are weak.

7.2 Participation in project governance

Development programmes frequently establish committees, community organisations, beneficiary groups, grievance mechanisms and stakeholder platforms. Women may be included nominally while decision-making remains dominated by men.

Common mechanisms of exclusion include:

- Meetings scheduled at inconvenient times;
- Lack of childcare;
- Male-dominated facilitation;
- Technical language that discourages participation;
- Insufficient notice;
- Reliance on household heads rather than individual women;
- Selection of male representatives for community committees;
- Failure to provide safe transport;
- Treating women as beneficiaries rather than decision-makers;
- Failure to establish confidential mechanisms for complaints.
- Meaningful participation therefore requires institutional redesign.

7.3 Gendered organisational cultures

Government agencies, contractors, consulting firms and development partners can themselves reproduce gender inequalities. Women may be underrepresented in technical positions, senior management and field-based roles. Gender specialists can be isolated from core technical decision-making rather than integrated into programme management.

ADB's current gender framework emphasises moving toward more transformative approaches. This implies that gender cannot remain a specialist annex. It must be embedded in project management, procurement, budgets, monitoring, safeguards, stakeholder engagement and results frameworks.

8. Violence, Harassment and Safeguarding

Gender-based violence and sexual harassment constrain women's public and economic participation. Women who fear harassment on public transport, at workplaces, training centres or community meetings may avoid opportunities even when programmes are formally open to them.

Safeguarding is therefore not a peripheral compliance issue. It is central to participation. Development programmes should incorporate prevention and response mechanisms for sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH), gender-based violence and workplace harassment. Codes of conduct, confidential reporting channels, survivor-centred referral systems, awareness training and clear accountability are essential.

The design of grievance redress mechanisms is especially important. A project grievance mechanism that requires women to complain publicly to a male committee member may technically exist but remain inaccessible. Women need multiple reporting channels, confidentiality and assurance that complaints will not result in retaliation.

9. Digital Information Barriers

Digitalisation creates opportunities but can also reproduce inequality. Women may have lower access to devices, digital skills, independent internet use or information about government and development programmes. Even where account ownership is high, the ability to use digital services independently is not guaranteed.

Digital exclusion affects access to e-government, online training, agricultural information, financial services, job platforms, markets and programme announcements. Development programmes that shift registration or communication entirely online risk excluding women with lower digital access.

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Digital gender inclusion should therefore address affordability, device access, skills, language, safety and independent use. Digital platforms should complement rather than replace accessible community-based communication.

10. Intersectionality: (not all women face the same barriers)

A central weakness of generic gender programming is the assumption that "women" constitute one homogeneous beneficiary group. Structural barriers interact.

Poor rural women may experience transport and childcare constraints more severely than urban professional women. Estate women may face distinctive geographic and socioeconomic disadvantages. Women with disabilities may face physical accessibility barriers and stigma. Female-headed households may have greater economic responsibility but sometimes greater control over household decisions. Women in conflict-affected areas may experience displacement, documentation problems, livelihood insecurity and trauma. Older women may have different digital and mobility constraints. Young women may have high educational attainment but limited employment opportunities.

Language also matters. Development consultations that rely exclusively on one language can exclude women who are less comfortable participating in that language. Technical information should be provided in appropriate Sinhala and Tamil forms, with English used where necessary for technical communication.

Intersectional analysis therefore requires disaggregated data by sex and, where ethically and operationally appropriate, age, disability, location, socioeconomic status and other relevant characteristics.

11. How Structural Barriers Translate into Programme Exclusion

The structural barriers described above operate through a predictable chain. First, women may be excluded from information. Programme staff may communicate through male household heads, local political leaders or existing male-dominated organisations. Second, women may receive information but lack time to participate. Care responsibilities prevent attendance. Third, women may attend but have limited voice. Social norms discourage speaking in mixed-gender settings or challenging male leaders. Fourth, women may participate but lack control over resources. A grant, land title, compensation payment or productive asset may be formally allocated to a woman but controlled by another household member. Fifth, women may gain skills but lack market access. Training therefore fails to translate into employment or income. Sixth, women may obtain employment but face harassment, wage discrimination or unsafe transport and Seventh, women may enter leadership roles but remain isolated without institutional support.

This demonstrates why programme participation should be viewed as a continuum rather than a single indicator.

12. Implications for Development Programme Design

12.1 From participation numbers to meaningful participation

- The first reform is conceptual. Programmes should distinguish between:
- percentage of beneficiaries who are women;
- percentage of participants attending meetings;
- percentage of women who speak;
- percentage whose recommendations are adopted;
- percentage controlling project resources;
- percentage in leadership positions;
- percentage receiving income or assets;
- Percentage reporting that participation was safe and meaningful.

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- This creates a hierarchy from presence to power.

12.2 Gender-responsive social analysis

Every major development programme should conduct gender and social analysis before finalising design. The analysis should identify gender division of labour, mobility constraints, care responsibilities, access to land and assets, access to finance, social norms, safety risks, barriers affecting women with disabilities, language and information barriers, women's organisations and trusted institutions, decision-making structures, risks of SEAH and gender-based violence.The analysis should lead directly to programme actions and budget allocations.

12.3 Care-sensitive programme scheduling

Care responsibilities should be treated as a design parameter. Practical measures include scheduling meetings outside peak care periods, providing childcare at training venues, supporting community-based childcare, allowing flexible participation, combining in-person and accessible remote options, reducing unnecessary travel; ensuring women are not penalised for care-related absence.

These measures are not "special treatment." They compensate for an unequal distribution of unpaid work.

12.4 Safe mobility

Projects should assess women's mobility during feasibility and design. This includes lighting, safe access routes, transport availability, gender-sensitive facilities, sanitation, waiting areas and harassment risks. Where field activities require travel, transport arrangements should consider women's safety and affordability.

12.5 Women's leadership

Programmes should set meaningful targets for women's representation in project committees, beneficiary organisations, producer groups, training-of-trainers schemes and local decision-making bodies. However, quotas should be combined with leadership training, mentoring, confidence-building, meeting facilitation and institutional accountability.

12.6 Economic empowerment beyond training

Training should be linked to real economic opportunities. A programme supporting women entrepreneurs should provide a pathway from skills to finance, registration, procurement, technology, market access and business growth. Agricultural projects should examine women's control over land, inputs, extension services, production decisions and income.

12.7 Gender-responsive procurement and employment

Development projects spend significant resources through contractors and suppliers. Procurement requirements can promote women's employment, apprenticeships, safe workplaces, equal opportunity and prevention of harassment. Employment targets should focus on quality and retention, not only recruitment.

12.8 Stronger grievance mechanisms

Project GRMs should be designed for accessibility and confidentiality. Women should be able to submit complaints through multiple channels, including trusted female focal points where appropriate. Information about the GRM should be provided in local languages. Cases involving violence, harassment or SEAH require specialised referral and confidentiality arrangements.

13. Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

A gender-responsive programme should establish indicators across four levels.

Input indicators: Including gender budget allocation, number of gender specialists/focal

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points, childcare and safe transport resources and safeguarding systems established.

Output indicators: Including women trained, women participating in committees, women receiving assets, finance or services and women attending consultations,

Outcome indicators: Including increase in women's income, increase in women's employment, increase in control over productive resources, increased participation in decision-making, reduction in reported mobility barriers and improved perceptions of safety.

Transformative indicators: Including changes in gender norms, redistribution of unpaid care, sustained women's leadership, institutional adoption of gender-responsive procedures, and reduction in occupational segregation and women's influence over project decisions.

Monitoring should include qualitative evidence. A project can achieve a 50% female participation target while women remain silent and men retain all decision-making power. Quantitative targets must therefore be supplemented by interviews, focus groups, outcome harvesting and beneficiary feedback.

14. Policy Recommendations

Sri Lanka should treat the low female labour-force participation rate as a national productivity issue rather than exclusively a women's issue. The economic opportunity cost of excluding educated women is substantial.

Childcare and care services should be expanded as economic infrastructure. Public, community and workplace-based care can reduce the unpaid care burden that restricts women's employment.

Safe and affordable transport should be integrated into gender policy. Mobility is a prerequisite for employment and programme participation.

Women's access to land, finance, technology and markets should be strengthened. Financial inclusion should move beyond account ownership toward meaningful control over productive finance.

Labour-market policies should support flexible work, safe workplaces, equal pay and re-entry after career interruptions.

Gender-responsive budgeting should be strengthened across national and subnational institutions. A gender budget is not simply a budget for women; it is a systematic assessment of how public expenditure affects women and men differently.

Women's political representation should be increased at national and subnational levels. Quotas can help, but they must be combined with institutional reforms, party-level commitments, leadership development and measures to reduce political harassment.

Legal pluralism should be reviewed from the perspective of equality, agency and human rights while respecting constitutional and community processes. Reform should be evidence-based and participatory.

Religious and community leaders should be engaged as partners in transforming restrictive social norms. Engagement should promote women's agency rather than substitute community authority for women's own decisions

Development partners should require sex-disaggregated indicators and gender-responsive risk management in all major programmes. Gender should be incorporated into procurement, stakeholder engagement, safeguards, GRMs, monitoring and evaluation.

15. A Gender - Transformative Model for Sri Lankan Development Programmes

The evidence supports a shift from a "women as beneficiaries" model toward a "women as agents of development" model. The shift from a **“women as**

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beneficiaries" model to a **"women as agents of development"** model is increasingly important to Sri Lanka's current development process because women constitute more than half of the population and have achieved high levels of education, yet their participation in employment, economic decision-making, leadership and development planning remains comparatively limited. Treating women merely as recipients of project benefits can reinforce existing dependency and gender inequalities, whereas recognising women as active decision-makers, entrepreneurs, workers, leaders and community change agents enables development programmes to harness their knowledge, skills and capabilities. This requires moving beyond numerical targets for female participation toward meaningful voice, control over resources, leadership opportunities and influence over project decisions. Such a transformation is particularly relevant to Sri Lanka's economic recovery and inclusive-growth agenda, as greater women's economic and institutional participation can strengthen household resilience, productivity, poverty reduction and the overall sustainability of development investments.

The first pillar is Resources: (Education, finance, assets, technology, transport and services). The first pillar, access to and control over resources**,** is fundamental to the meaningful inclusion of women in Sri Lanka's development process. Resources such as education, finance, land and other productive assets, technology, transport, information, childcare, health and other essential services determine women's capacity to participate in economic activities, access employment opportunities, influence household and community decisions, and benefit from development investments. Although Sri Lankan women have achieved relatively high levels of educational attainment, gaps in access to productive assets, affordable finance, digital technologies, safe and reliable transport, and supportive services can continue to constrain their participation, particularly among poor, rural and socially disadvantaged women. Therefore, development programmes should move beyond simply providing benefits to women and ensure that women have equitable access to, and greater control over, the resources and services required to exercise economic agency and participate effectively as active partners in development**.**

The second is Agency (Confidence, information, bargaining power, decision-making and control over resources). This refers to women's ability to make meaningful choices, exercise voice, influence decisions, and act upon those choices individually and collectively. In Sri Lanka, women's meaningful participation in development requires more than access to project benefits; it requires their active involvement in planning, implementation, monitoring and decision-making at household, community, institutional and policy levels. Development programmes should therefore create opportunities for women to participate in consultations, community organisations, producer groups, livelihood activities and leadership structures, while strengthening their confidence, skills, access to information and ability to influence decisions. Strengthening women's agency is particularly important for ensuring that development interventions respond to women's priorities and that women become active decision-makers, leaders and agents of change rather than passive recipients of development assistance.

The third is enabling institutions (laws, policies, childcare, labour standards, safe transport, social protection and responsive public services). The third pillar, enabling institutions, recognises that women's meaningful inclusion in development depends on an institutional environment that protects their rights, reduces practical barriers and provides appropriate support throughout their life cycle. In Sri Lanka, gender-responsive laws and policies, adequate childcare and care services, decent labour standards, safe and accessible transport, social protection, health and education services, and responsive public institutions are essential for enabling women to participate fully in employment, entrepreneurship, community activities and development programmes. Such institutions can reduce the constraints arising from unpaid care responsibilities, unsafe mobility, discrimination, economic insecurity and limited access to public services. Development programmes

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should therefore strengthen institutional accountability and ensure that public services and project systems are accessible, safe, inclusive and responsive to women's different needs**,** particularly those of low-income, rural and socially disadvantaged women. Ultimately, enabling institutions provide the structural conditions that allow women to convert access to resources and agency into sustained and meaningful participation in development**.**

The fourth pillar is social norms (changing expectations about men's and women's roles, unpaid care and women's leadership). Social norms recognise that women's inclusion in development is strongly influenced by prevailing expectations about the roles and responsibilities of women and men within households, communities, workplaces and institutions.

In Sri Lanka, traditional perceptions that women should bear primary responsibility for unpaid domestic and care work, while men are expected to be the primary earners and decision-makers, can restrict women's mobility, employment opportunities, economic participation, and involvement in leadership roles.Changing these expectations is therefore essential to enable women to participate more equally in development programmes. This requires promoting shared household and care responsibilities, greater acceptance of women's employment and entrepreneurship, women's participation in community and institutional decision-making, and recognition of women as leaders and agents of development. Transforming restrictive social norms can help ensure that improvements in resources, agency and institutional support translate into sustained and meaningful participation by women in Sri Lanka's development process**.**

The fifth is accountability (measurable targets, gender-responsive budgets, grievance systems, safeguarding and institutional responsibility). The fifth pillar, accountability**,** is critical to ensuring that commitments to women's inclusion in development in Sri Lanka are translated into concrete and measurable results.

Development programmes should establish measurable gender targets, gender-responsive budgets, accessible grievance redress mechanisms, and effective safeguarding systems and clearly defined institutional responsibilities to ensure that gender commitments are implemented and monitored throughout the project cycle. Accountability should go beyond counting the number of women participating and assess whether women have meaningful influence in decision-making, equitable access to resources, leadership opportunities, protection from discrimination and harassment, and tangible improvements in their livelihoods and wellbeing**.**

Regular gender-disaggregated monitoring, transparent reporting and timely corrective action can strengthen the responsibility of government institutions, implementing agencies and development partners. In this way, accountability ensures that the other four pillars resources, agencies, enabling institutions and positive social norms result in sustained and meaningful inclusion of women in Sri Lanka's development process**.**

These pillars are mutually reinforcing. A woman who receives vocational training but has no childcare or safe transport may not enter employment. A woman who receives finance but lacks control over household decisions may not be able to invest it. A woman who is elected to a committee but cannot speak may not influence the project. A woman who is economically active but faces harassment may leave employment. Transformative programming therefore requires multiple interventions operating together.

Table.1 Selected current gender indicators

Indicator	Female	Male
Population, 2024	51.7%	48.3%

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Government-school students, 2024	1,927,614 (50.5%)	1,888,620 (49.5%)
Labour-force participation rate, 2025	32.4%	69.1%
Unemployment rate, Q4 2025	5.7%	2.7%
Adult literacy rate, 2023	92.0%	93.4%
Language literacy rate, 2024 (age 10+)	97.0%	97.9%
Tertiary education gender parity index, 2023	1.40 female-to-male ratio	—
Bank account ownership, 2024 (age 15+)	80.2%	83.4%
Parliamentary representation, 2026	9.8%	90.2%

Sources: Department of Census and Statistics, Census of Population and Housing 2024; Ministry of Education, Annual School Census 2024; Department of Census and Statistics, Labour Force Survey 2025; World Bank/UNESCO literacy data; World Bank Global Findex 2025 (2024 observations); UNESCO tertiary education indicator data; and Inter-Parliamentary Union parliamentary data.

Statistics in this article use the latest official or internationally harmonised figures located during the September 2026 evidence review. Where figures differ because definitions or reference years differ, the article identifies the source and does not treat the series as interchangeable.

16. Sector-Specific Implications for Development Programming

The structural barriers become particularly visible when development programmes are examined by sector. In agriculture, women frequently contribute substantially to production and post-harvest activities but may be recorded administratively as spouses or household members rather than as farmers in their own right. This can affect access to extension, inputs, credit, producer organisations and market information. Agricultural programmes should therefore identify women individually as economic actors and collect sex-disaggregated data on land access, production, income and decision-making. Where women do not hold land titles, programmes should consider alternative mechanisms for ensuring access to inputs, finance and training rather than assuming that land ownership is a prerequisite for participation.

In infrastructure programmes, the gender question extends beyond whether women are consulted about a road, water system, irrigation scheme or public facility. Women often experience infrastructure differently because they combine paid and unpaid work and may have different mobility patterns. Water and sanitation investments can reduce domestic workloads; transport can increase access to employment and markets; safe lighting can improve mobility after dark; and accessible public facilities can reduce safety and dignity risks. Infrastructure projects should therefore assess gendered use patterns and not simply measure the number of women attending consultation meetings.

In skills and employment programmes, the central problem is the transition from training to decent work. Women may successfully complete training but encounter barriers when seeking employment in male-dominated sectors, travelling to workplaces, managing childcare or negotiating wages. Programmes should therefore track employment placement, retention, earnings and promotion, not merely training completion. Employer engagement is essential because demand-side discrimination can negate supply-side investment in skills.

In digital and innovation programmes, women should be included in technology design, digital-skills training, entrepreneurship ecosystems and online employment. Digital services should be designed for varying levels of literacy, language proficiency, disability and digital confidence.

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Where women share devices with other household members, privacy and independent access become important. Cyber harassment and technology-facilitated gender-based violence should also be incorporated into safeguarding assessments.

In climate adaptation and disaster-risk programmes, women's participation is particularly important because women may have distinctive knowledge of household water, food security, care, health and local coping strategies. However, women can be excluded from formal disaster committees or land and infrastructure decisions. Climate programmes should therefore integrate women into risk assessment, preparedness, early-warning communication, livelihood diversification and recovery planning. Female-headed households and women in vulnerable livelihoods require particular attention.

In health and social protection programmes, women can be both service users and unpaid care providers. A health programme that increases access to services but does not reduce women's care burden may leave the underlying constraint unchanged. Social protection systems should also recognise informal and unpaid work and consider how benefit design affects women's control over income. The objective should be to strengthen women's agency rather than simply directing benefits to women without adequate control mechanisms.

17. From Gender Mainstreaming To Gender Transformation

Gender mainstreaming has been an important policy achievement, but implementation often becomes procedural. A project may include a gender action plan, a gender specialist, a few female participation indicators and a statement of commitment to equality while leaving the underlying power relations untouched. A transformative approach asks a different set of questions: Who controls resources? Who decides? Who carries the unpaid work? Who is considered technically competent? Who is safe to speak? Whose knowledge counts? What changes in household and institutional behaviour are expected?

A gender-transformative programme therefore seeks changes in structures and relationships as well as improvements in individual women's access. It can combine practical measures such as childcare, transport, training and finance with strategic measures such as leadership, norm change, institutional reform and accountability.
This distinction is especially important in Sri Lanka because many basic gender outcomes are already relatively strong. If programme objectives remain focused only on access, they may repeatedly invest in problems that are no longer the principal constraint. Girls already have high school participation; the policy question is how education translates into economic and political agency. Women increasingly have bank accounts; the question is whether they control finance and productive investment. Women participate in community organisations; the question is whether they influence decisions. A transformative framework therefore targets the conversion of human capital into power and opportunity.

Social norm interventions should also be evidence-based. Rather than assuming that communities are uniformly conservative, programmes should identify the specific norms affecting the intervention. For example, the relevant norm may be that mothers should not travel for work, that men should control major financial decisions, that technical occupations are unsuitable for women, or that public leadership is incompatible with family responsibilities. Each requires a different intervention. Community dialogue, male engagement, role models, media, school curricula and engagement with employers and local leaders can complement direct services to women.

18. A Proposed Analytical Model and Hypotheses for Doctoral Research

For future empirical research, the article proposes a five-level model of women's participation in development programmes. Level one is structural

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opportunity, consisting of laws, public services, infrastructure, labour-market conditions and social protection. Level two is household capability, consisting of time, income, mobility, care arrangements and bargaining power. Level three is individual capability, consisting of education, skills, information, digital literacy, confidence and health. Level four is programme accessibility, consisting of meeting arrangements, information channels, childcare, transport, safety, language and grievance systems. Level five is substantive influence, consisting of voice, leadership, control over resources and changes in wellbeing.

The model implies that programme participation is not determined by individual motivation alone. A highly educated woman can still be unable to participate when household care responsibilities, unsafe transport or programme scheduling create high participation costs. Conversely, relatively modest interventions such as childcare, safe transport or flexible scheduling can substantially increase participation where skills and motivation already exist.

The model generates several hypotheses suitable for quantitative and mixed-methods testing.
H1: Women with greater control over household income and productive assets are more likely to participate actively in development programme decision-making.
H2: Higher unpaid care responsibilities are negatively associated with participation frequency and leadership.
H3: Perceived safety and transport accessibility are positively associated with women's participation in training, employment and community meetings.
H4: The effect of education on programme participation is mediated by labour-market access, household bargaining power and programme accessibility.
H5: Women's participation targets have stronger effects on substantive influence when accompanied by childcare, leadership development and institutional accountability.
H6: Gender-transformative interventions that engage men, employers and institutions produce more sustained changes than interventions directed solely at women.

A mixed-methods design would be particularly appropriate. Household surveys could measure participation, time use, assets, mobility, employment and decision-making. Programme-level administrative data could measure attendance and outcomes. Qualitative interviews could examine why women do or do not participate. Focus groups could explore social norms, safety and perceptions of leadership. Process tracing could identify how specific programme interventions change participation over time. Such research would move the discussion from descriptive gender statistics toward causal explanations of programme effectiveness.

19. Practical Implementation Matrix for Development Agencies

A practical gender-responsive implementation matrix can translate the analysis into programme management.

At the design stage, agencies should complete gender and social analysis, establish a sex-disaggregated baseline, identify barriers by subgroup, assess SEAH and GBV risks, map women's organisations and determine whether programme benefits require land, collateral, mobility or household consent. The design should then specify actions, responsible institutions, budgets and measurable outcomes.

At the implementation stage, programme managers should monitor female participation monthly or quarterly, review whether women are attending at the intended rate, assess whether they speak and influence decisions, and investigate drop-out patterns. If women leave training or committees at higher rates than men, the project should treat this as a diagnostic signal rather than as individual non-compliance.

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At the supervision stage, development partners should ask gender-specific questions during missions:

- Are women receiving benefits?
- Are benefits controlled by women?
- Are consultations meaningful?
- Are women safe?
- Has unpaid care increased or decreased?
- Are women moving into higher-value occupations?
- Are female-led enterprises surviving?
- Are women represented in grievance committees?
- Are project contractors meeting workplace standards?

At the completion stage, evaluation should examine sustainability.

- Did women's income increase?
- Did household decision-making change?
- Did women retain assets?
- Did institutions adopt permanent gender-responsive practices?
- Did women's leadership continue after the project ended?

These questions distinguish temporary participation from lasting empowerment.

The matrix should also identify institutional responsibility. Gender outcomes cannot be assigned exclusively to a gender specialist. Project directors, engineers, procurement staff, safeguards specialists, financial officers, contractors, local authorities and monitoring teams all influence women's participation. Gender accountability must therefore be distributed across the project management system while retaining a clear focal point for coordination.

20. Limitation and Research Agenda

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the most recent indicators are not always from the same reference year. Population and school data are available from the 2024 Census and school census, while labour-force statistics extend to 2025 and internationally modelled indicators may use different reference years. These indicators should therefore not be treated as a single synchronized dataset.

Second, participation in development programmes is not routinely captured in national statistics. Labour-force participation and education indicators provide important contextual evidence but do not directly measure women's participation in every development intervention. Programme-specific administrative data and evaluations are needed to establish direct causal relationships.

Third, the categories of social, cultural and religious barriers are analytically interconnected. A restriction described as cultural may actually reflect household economics, safety, labour-market discrimination or institutional practice. Future research should avoid attributing outcomes to religion or culture without examining the specific mechanism involved.

Fourth, national averages conceal substantial geographic and socioeconomic variation. Future research should compare provinces, districts, rural and urban settings, estate communities, conflict-affected areas and different income groups. Intersectional research is particularly important for women with disabilities, female-headed households, migrant families and women working in informal employment.

Finally, more research is needed on what actually works. Sri Lanka has accumulated many gender policies and programmes, but systematic comparative evaluations of childcare, safe transport, women's leadership quotas, entrepreneurship finance, digital inclusion and social-norm interventions remain valuable. A doctoral research programme could therefore move beyond documenting barriers and estimate the relative effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of different interventions.

21. Discussion

Sri Lanka's experience challenges a simplistic linear model of development in which education

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automatically leads to empowerment. Education is necessary but not sufficient. The country has achieved near-universal basic literacy and strong female school participation, yet the labour-market gender gap remains large. This demonstrates that the constraints on women's participation increasingly lie outside the education system.

The evidence also challenges the assumption that economic growth automatically resolves gender inequality. Sri Lanka's historical development achievements have not eliminated unpaid care burdens, occupational segregation or political underrepresentation. Economic structures and social institutions interact.

The role of culture should also be understood dynamically. Culture is not a fixed obstacle. Social norms can change, and they have changed substantially in Sri Lanka. The rapid expansion of women's education itself transformed expectations about girls and professional roles. The same process can be applied to care work, leadership, technical employment and entrepreneurship.

Religion similarly should not be treated as a single explanatory variable. Religious communities contain diverse interpretations and practices. Some religious and community leaders may reinforce traditional gender roles, while others can become influential advocates for girls' education, women's economic activity and prevention of violence. Development programming should therefore move from stereotyping communities toward evidence-based social analysis.

The political dimension is equally important. Women cannot achieve full participation if decisions about public investment are overwhelmingly made by men. The increase to around 10% female representation in Parliament is a positive development, but the distance to parity remains large. Political representation should therefore be understood as an enabling condition for gender-responsive development.

Finally, the current economic context increases the urgency of women's participation. Sri Lanka's recovery from its recent economic crisis requires productivity, employment creation, entrepreneurship and resilience. Excluding or underutilising more than half the population is economically inefficient. Gender equality should therefore be positioned not only as a rights objective but as a central development strategy.

22. Conclusion

Sri Lanka demonstrates that impressive progress in education does not automatically produce equality in employment, economic power or decision-making. Women are 51.7% of the population; female students slightly outnumber male students in government schools; female literacy is almost equal to male literacy; and women have made important gains in tertiary education. Yet the female labour-force participation rate was only 32.4% in 2025 compared with 69.1% for men, and women continue to be underrepresented in political and institutional leadership.

The explanation lies in a complex architecture of structural barriers. Social expectations allocate disproportionate unpaid care work to women. Cultural norms influence mobility and occupational choices. Economic institutions constrain access to assets, finance and quality employment. Safety concerns and gender-based violence limit public participation. Legal and customary systems can create additional complexity. Political institutions remain male-dominated. Programme structures can unintentionally reinforce exclusion when they rely on male household heads, inconvenient meeting schedules, inadequate childcare, unsafe transport or weak grievance mechanisms.

The central policy conclusion is therefore clear: development programmes must move beyond counting women. Meaningful participation requires voice, influence, resources, safety, leadership and control over outcomes. Gender mainstreaming should not be reduced to a checklist or a numerical target. It should be integrated into project design, budgets,

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procurement, safeguards, stakeholder engagement, implementation and evaluation.

For Sri Lanka, the next stage of gender equality is not primarily about proving that girls and women can acquire education. The evidence already demonstrates that they can. The challenge is to remove the institutional and social barriers that prevent educated women from converting knowledge and skills into decent work, entrepreneurship, leadership, economic security and public influence.

The development opportunity is therefore substantial. If Sri Lanka can reduce unpaid care constraints, improve safe mobility, expand quality employment, strengthen women's control over assets and finance, increase political representation, prevent harassment and violence, and redesign development programmes around meaningful participation, women will not merely benefit from development. They will increasingly shape it. That shift from women as programme recipients to women as decision-makers and agents of change is essential for inclusive, resilient and sustainable development in Sri Lanka.

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