

# My time! My work!

## My value?

### Recognizing women's contributions in the care & informal economies



This briefing note is intended for government officials, development workers and others concerned with poverty, women and development in Sri Lanka. It explains how the informal and care economies are critically important to the formally recognized economy at a local and national level. It highlights the circumstances of women in this 'invisible' backbone of the overall economy and draws attention to social security measures that are needed to ensure that these women's labour is acknowledged, supported and protected.

#### *What are the care and informal economies?*

The **formal economy** is where economic activities have a money turn over, and economic value is given only in monetary terms. The care economy forms the basis of human well-being. Ensures the productivity of the labour force, which is essential to the formal economy. The **care economy** is the work done to feed, care and ensure the well-being of families and neighbours. This is an important economic concept that feminists have put forward and is now globally accepted<sup>1</sup>. The work in the care economy has also been conceptualized as reproductive labour.

#### *The care economy*

- Unpaid care work supports the market economy by producing a healthy and productive work force.
- Unpaid care work supports the public sector by providing care for the sick, care for the elderly, child care, sanitation, reducing expenditures of the state.
- Unpaid care work contributes to economic growth by providing a labour force that is fit, productive, and capable of learning and creativity.
- Unpaid care work constantly tries to protect families from the risks of extreme poverty and war.

The unpaid and unrecognised work of women in the care economy means that women cannot use their full potential to engage productively in the formal market economy. The work required for the 'reproduction of persons' is invisible. The impact of this work on the women who are doing the caring is unaccounted for. Development policy makers may consider the work in the care economy as a 'burden' and not as a contribution to be valued.

The UNDP estimates that globally women's work can contribute \$ 11 trillion compared to a global GDP of \$ 23 trillion. A recent UNDP study shows that unpaid reproductive labour constitutes 66% of women's work compared to 24-34% of men's work.

This work is not recorded in national statistics or in the UN system of National Accounts, but it is often what prevents households from slipping into extreme poverty<sup>2</sup>.

According to the ILO, the informal economy is a continuum with people moving in and out of, and closely interacting with, the formal economy. Being in the informal economy is not a choice for most people who are in poverty. The informal economy is comprised of all forms of 'informal employment' - that is, employment without labour or social protection - both inside and outside informal enterprises, including both self-employment in small unregistered enterprises and wage employment in unprotected jobs<sup>3</sup>. Women's work in the informal economy is portrayed as having very small economic value in monetary terms.

### *The informal economy*

- Informal work environments are not protected by health and safety legislation
- Informal workers do not receive over time payment, a minimum wage, worker benefits such as paid vacation and sick leave, health insurance, unemployment insurance, maternity benefits, and parental leave
- They have little or no formal means of managing risk, as they are not covered with pension benefits or access to child care
- They have little access to mortgage loans or scholarships to help finance housing and education
- They are vulnerable to various forms of exploitation by employers or business associates as they often work without written contracts.

### *Gunaletchumi - Thaandiyadi*

*I have five children. I don't have paddy land. I grow some vegetables at home. I do labour work in other people's paddy lands. When my children were small I took them to work with me and kept them in a cradle hung from a tree while I worked. I had no child care support. I couldn't also stop working or we would have starved.*

*Water is a big problem for the women in my area. Doing home gardening is difficult due to scarcity of water. I travel many kilometres (2-3) to collect water. I wake up at 3a.m. to go to collect water, have my bath and bring water for home use (cooking and cleaning).*

*I go for hard labour in road construction, collecting firewood for selling, pounding paddy into rice, also pounding rice into flour. I also cook vadai for selling. My husband has been ill for a long time and does not work. I look after him also. Sometimes I come to the town to work in houses - pounding flour, chilli and coffee. I also collect palmyrah seeds, I plant them, when the roots come, I dig it out, I have to continuously water the plants for which I bring water from a great distance. I have to dig very hard to get the roots out to sell. When I do a full day's work - sometimes I make 1000 rupees. Generally I survive on one meal a day.*

Poor women often engage in the informal economy, working under conditions of extreme vulnerability. They also bear most of the responsibilities in the care economy.

They have to constantly juggle the demands on their time, which narrows their options and pushes them into poorly paid informal work. When crises such as wars take place, women become even more vulnerable.

### *Global and national context*

Informal employment is rising rapidly in all regions of the world and in many developing countries it has long been a way of life. Taking agriculture into account, informal employment accounted for **50% of the working population in the Philippines, more than 70% in Indonesia and more than 90 % in India.**

The old economic picture of place of work was the shop, the office or the factory. The new reality of workplace is often the street, the side-walk or the home.

Women dominate the informal economy. Within informal employment, their wages are lower than men's.

The types of informal work women do as market or street vendors, hawkers or home workers, expose them to risks to their physical safety and health<sup>4</sup>.

According to the ILO Global Employment Report of 2008<sup>5</sup>, even though South Asia had the largest number of jobs created in 2007, it also had the largest share of vulnerable employment as a proportion of total employment. Seven out of every ten workers were unprotected, with no access labour rights or security in times of economic crisis.

Not only does women's employment remain low in South Asia, with only 42 women per every 100 men in work or looking for work they remain concentrated in the informal economy. This report also notes that only 15.5 %of South Asian women get a wage or salary.

A high proportion of Sri Lankan workers are in the informal sector. In 2010, for example, about 62.6% of employed people worked in the informal sector, which operates outside state regulation. They included 86.5% of the agricultural labour force and 51% of non-agricultural workers in all districts<sup>6</sup>

According to the CEDAW/Shadow report 2010 prepared by 61 women's organisations in Sri Lanka, one of the key reasons for women's low participation in the labour force is that they are contributing to care work of children<sup>7</sup>.

Another serious issue in the care economy is related to the recognition of women as domestic workers (in Sri Lanka and abroad). One reason for the vulnerability of domestic workers is the devaluation of women's care work.

Although there is a wage paid for domestic workers, there are very few labour rights or social protections for these women. There is no legal guarantee of a minimum wage. Global discussion on the basic entitlements of domestic workers is ongoing, such as through the 2012 ILO Convention 189 on decent work for domestic workers - which the Sri Lankan government has yet to sign.

"The non-enumeration of women's economic contributions within the home, and women's role in provision of economically valued food items through home gardening and household based small scale activities; non-enumeration of women's work within the home and homesteads results in under estimation of actual economic contributions of women to the national economy"  
CEDAW Shadow Report 2010.

### *Batticaloa context*

#### *Selvarani -Vakarai*

*I am a fisher woman. I started working when I was 10 years old and I continued this work for my whole life. I couldn't stop working when I was pregnant, and even after the babies were born I started work after one month. Even when we are sick we have to go. Now I am also looking after my grand children. If I don't work we don't eat. Now I am old, if I had a pension I can manage, but we have no such support.*



## *Development, poverty and women's status in Batticaloa*

Data on per capita incomes as well as health and education indicators show a consistently lower level in the north and east when compared to other regions<sup>8</sup>. According to the Sri Lanka Human Development Report 2012, Batticaloa District is among the lowest three districts with regard to the Human Development Index and the Gender Inequality Index. Income Poverty had increased from 10.7% in 2006/7 to 20.3% in 2009-2010.

According to the Gender Inequality Index - Inequality is highest in the Batticaloa District (0.807) compared to all other districts. This is due to zero representation of women in Parliament and a low labour force participation rate 24.4%.

Both the maternal mortality ratio (77.4 deaths per 100,000 live births) and adolescent fertility rate (34.4 per 1000 women aged 15-19) are high compared to most other districts.

The Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) notes that "the main thrust of the government's reconstruction agenda is on economic development, narrowly construed as the delivery of hardware, particularly infrastructure. With considerable assistance from bilateral donors such as China and India, and multi-laterals such as the Asian Development Bank, the Neganahira Navodaya (Eastern Revival) and Uthuru Wasanthaya (Northern Spring) programmes in the Eastern and Northern provinces, respectively, have focused on building roads and bridges, as well as rehabilitating irrigation works"<sup>9</sup>.

The macro level development programmes do not address the vulnerabilities of marginalised women.

The poor depend heavily upon agriculture, including livestock and fisheries for their livelihoods. Small landholders dominate agriculture. Batticaloa has 11% small land holders (smaller than 1 hectare).

Agriculture and fisheries are the main sources of livelihoods in the Northern and Eastern provinces, including the cultivation of paddy and highland crops.

The end of conflict has increased the competition for natural resources, which has forced many households to abandon traditional occupations and become unskilled daily wage labourers in agriculture and fisheries. These occupations are now the main sources of income in the Eastern and Northern provinces (Sri Lanka Human Development Report 2012).

### *Krishnapillai Vallipillai - Thaandiyadi*

*I used to go as agriculture labour to Ampara. I went every year but now I am too old. We used to go in a group. Those days we were paid 500 rupees per day. The current rate is 800 rupees. Men and women got the same pay. We used to go for 10 days, sometimes one month, and came home with the money. Our work included removing weeds, planting, bundling the paddy seed after its cut (uppatikatuthal), collecting the left over rice (kathirporukkuthal), separating the good seeds out from the dust - threshing (kalamutharuthal). For this work we didn't get a cash payment but we collected paddy.*

*The land owner also distributed part of the harvest - the good seeds and what was collected from the floor, to all the women in the village.*

*The land owner didn't collect the left over paddy in the field. Women went and collected these paddy in the fields. The straw, we used to take for the livestock as feed. And also to put as roofing for sheds.*

*After the machine is used, these practices have stopped. After the harvesting machines came, there is no straw. The left over cannot be eaten by livestock, or used for roofing. Women's work has also reduced. There are no left over plants which re-grow. We cannot use it as natural fertilizer also. That's why it's called the tsunami machine! The machine does all the work and only about 5 people have work. Even though we may not have our own land, or own paddy, we saved the rice for our consumption during the year. We never had to buy rice. If there was extra, we sold it to buy other things. Now we can't do this.*

Fifteen women farmers shared their life stories for this briefing note. Most women owned their paddy lands which were small plots, but they also worked as labourers.

They were maintaining home gardens as well, where they grew vegetables, yams, corn and peanut. Most of these women run women headed households. Those who had their own land had the Paddy Land Registration and received certain subsidies offered by the state.

### Women in fisheries sector

Before the tsunami, women fishers lived close to the lagoon. Now they are resettled some distance away. Earlier when they were close to the lagoon fishing was easy, as they used to fish in the nights. Now it's harder as they have to come to the lagoon from some distance.

They go fishing at six in the evening and come home only at six in the morning. They stay in the boats until dawn.

From January to July they have a good season with fish, crabs, and prawns. February to May is the prawn season. August to October is the low season. During this time they do dry fish business. Some days they get 50 rupees and some days 1000 rupees. They get a good rate for crabs.

#### *Kandiah Thangam - Vakarai*

*I have three girls. My husband is dead. I keep the children next door and leave for fishing in the nights. Earlier my mother supported with child care but then she passed away. I come home in the early hours of the morning. When the boat lands the children are there on the shore waiting for me. They have put their uniforms and come to me to comb their hair before going to school. When I get home, I do the household work, cook the rice and rest for a bit. Then I give the lunch, have a bath, and get ready to go again in the evening.*

### Limited Progress

For this briefing note, key officials within the following departments and agencies were interviewed - Department of Agrarian Services, Department of Agriculture, Department of Animal Production and Health, Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, Department of Industries, Batticaloa Chamber of Commerce and Industry, as well as several bi-lateral and non-governmental organisations. Some departments had begun collecting sex-disaggregated data, for example, the Department of Agrarian Services provided data of women paddy land owners who were members of farmer societies.

Men and Women who own paddy land - selected farmer societies - 2012

	Famer Society	Female	Male	Percentage of women
1	Vellavali	1912	2687	42%
2	Mandapaththadi	2083	2749	43%
3	Valachenai	1147	3034	27%
4	Eravur	99	263	27%
5	Vantharamoolai	2014	2378	27%
6	Aythiyamalai	237	396	46%
7	Aryampathy	76	127	37%
8	Kiran	849	963	47%
9	Thanthamalai	448	633	41%
10	Mandur	477	786	38%
11	Kokkadicholai	616	897	41%
12	Palugamam	1054	1182	47%
14	Kattankudi	349	896	28%

Department of Agrarian Services - interview, December 2012

However, it was not possible to obtain concrete data on the number of women in each fisheries society, or percentage of women in agriculture extension services societies. In other words even though the government departments may have raw data on women's involvement in these sectors, often this information is not in any usable format for analysis to guide planning.

It has been very encouraging to note that both the agriculture and fisheries sectors have been setting up systems to organise women in the informal economy.

Even though they have been organising women working in these sectors, government officers note that women's involvement has been low, particularly in the decision - making levels. Through these societies there has been a focus on subsidies, training, seeds, and technical support.

However, there is a need to expand the role that should be played by these groups and government bodies to be more responsive to the gender concerns of women in the informal economy. **Improving the conditions of informal workers has to take a gendered approach.**

Organising women only to channel certain resources and technical assistance is grossly inadequate in meeting the real social protection needs of women in the informal economy. We need to move this discussion to a rights-based focus that responds to women's real concerns.

### *Rights of Women in the Informal and Care Economies*

This briefing note seeks to highlight the importance of social security for women in the informal and care economies. **Social security is a citizenship right** and it is a social responsibility of duty bearers to guarantee social security for the poorest and marginalized communities and individuals. As Indian scholar Amrita Chachchi<sup>10</sup> notes, in South Asia, to ensure gender equality for women in the informal economy, social security should not be minimal targeted programmes (for example widows) or should not be market-oriented, such as micro credit schemes. There should be employment security as well as citizenship based entitlements for women.

**Firstly**, this means, recognition of unpaid care work as socially useful work and included in national accounts.

**Secondly** this means social security should be a universal right for all.

**Thirdly** this means better work conditions and labour rights for women in the informal economy, such as the following:

- Minimum wage
- Health insurance
- Pensions
- Maternity benefits
- Occupational safety
- Access to child care
- Informal workers' collective representation through organizations, alliances and networks

Much work remains to be done by all stakeholders, working together to ensure that women in the care and informal economies are able to enjoy their full rights as citizens of Sri Lanka.



Collecting scallops



எனது நேரம்! எனது உழைப்பு!  
எனது பெறுமதி?

My Time! My Work!  
My Value?

பராமரிப்பு, முறைசாராப் பொருளாதாரங்களில்  
பெண்களின் பங்கை அங்கீகரித்தல்

Recognizing women's contributions  
in the care & informal economies

Suriya Women's Development Centre  
சூரியா பெண்கள் அபிவிருத்தி நிலையம்

No.55, Lady Manning Drive, Batticaloa, Sri Lanka  
Digitized by Noolaham Foundation.  
Tel.:+94 65 222 3297, Fax.:+94 65 222 4657, E.mail : suriyaw@slt.lk

## References

- 1 Elson, Diane (2002), "Macroeconomics and Macroeconomic Policy from a Gender Perspective", Public Hearing of Study Commission, 'Globalisation of the World Economy-Challenges and Responses', Deutscher Bundestag, Monday 18 February 2002
- 2 Amrita Chachchi (2007), "Gender, Poverty, Livelihoods and Social Protection: Genealogy of a Theme in Women, Gender, Development", *DevIssues*, Vol: 9, No. 1, Institute of Social Studies, Netherlands [http://www.iss.nl/fileadmin/ASSETS/iss/Documents/DevISSues/DevISSues\\_Volume\\_9\\_number\\_1\\_June\\_2007.pdf](http://www.iss.nl/fileadmin/ASSETS/iss/Documents/DevISSues/DevISSues_Volume_9_number_1_June_2007.pdf)
- 3 Chen M.A (2007), Rethinking the Informal Economy: Linkages with the Formal Economy and the formal regulatory Environment, DESA Working Paper No. 46 ST/ESA/2007/DWP/46 [http://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2007/wp46\\_2007.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2007/wp46_2007.pdf)
- 4 Lota Bertulfo (2011), ausAID -Women and the informal economy , [www.ode.usaid.gov.au/.../women-informal-economy-lota-bertulfo](http://www.ode.usaid.gov.au/.../women-informal-economy-lota-bertulfo)
- 5 ILO (2008) Global Employment Trends, ILO Geneva, [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_090106.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_090106.pdf)
- 6 UNDP (2012), Sri Lanka Human Development Report, Bridging Regional Disparities for Human Development, UNDP Sri Lanka, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/national/asiathepacific/srilanka/Sri%20Lanka%20Human%20Development%20Report%202012.pdf>
- 7 Women and Media Collective (2010), Sri Lanka Shadow Report -CEDAW, Colombo, [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngo/WMD\\_SriLanka48.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngo/WMD_SriLanka48.pdf)
- 8 Sarvananthan. M (2007), Economy of the Conflict Regions of Sri Lanka, From Economic Embargo to Economic Repression, Washington DC East West Centre, quoted in Priyanthi Fernando and Sonali Moonesinghe (2012), Livelihoods, Basic Services and Social Protection in Sri Lanka, Working Paper No. 6, CEPA, Colombo, page 3.
- UNOPS ARU (2010), Literature Review Report of Existing Socio-Economic Data for the North, East and Adjacent Districts of Sri Lanka, 2006-2009 quoted in Priyanthi Fernando and Sonali Moonesinghe (2012) Ibid.
- 9 Fernando P. & Moonesinghe S (2012), Livelihoods, Basic Services and Social Protection in Sri Lanka, Working Paper 6, CEPA, Colombo, p.10
- 10 Chachchi, A (2012), "Democratic Citizenship or Market-Based Entitlements? A feminist Perspective on Social Protection in South Asia", Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, Saskia E. Wieringa (eds), **The Future of Asian Feminisms: Confronting Fundamentalisms, Conflicts and Neo-Liberalism**, Cambridge

© **Suriya Women's Development Centre**,  
No.55, Lady Manning Drive, Batticaloa, Sri Lanka  
Contact: +94652223297, Fax: +94652224657, Email: [suriyaw@slt.lk](mailto:suriyaw@slt.lk)

March 2013