



## FACT SHEET SRI LANKA

# Women in Agriculture, Environment and Rural Production



### KEY FACTS

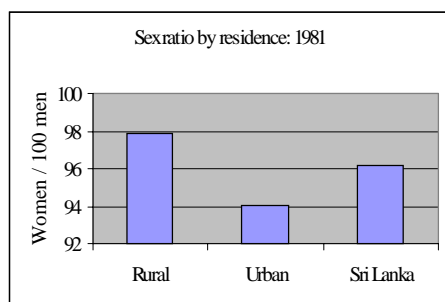
- Sri Lanka's population is of 49% female and 51% male
- The literacy rate for women is 83.8%. This compares favourably with the 90% literacy rate for men
- The labour force participation rate for women is 33.5%. This is nearly half the rate for men (65.3%)
- 41.5% of the employed women and 35.4% of employed men are engaged in agriculture and allied sectors.
- Women have extensive workloads with dual responsibility for farm and household production
- Women's responsibilities for home maintenance and household crop production increased due to the men's heightened involvement in cash crop production
- Nearly 68% of the women in agriculture, work in plantations and more than 70% of rural women are involved in subsistence production
- Women have an active role and are heavily involved in livestock production, forest resource use and fishery processing
- Women contribute considerably to household income through farm and non-farm activities as well as by taking employment overseas, most often in the service sector
- Women's work as family labour is underestimated

## GENERAL PROFILE

### Population

In mid-1995, Sri Lanka's population was estimated at 18.1 million. Among this 35% of the population are below 15 years of age and 55% above 54 years. The population growth rate is 1.4%, and is expected to reach replacement level by the turn of the century (EIU, 1997). The population density in 1995 was 218 persons per square kilometre and the total fertility rate in 1988-93 was 2.3% (ESCAP, 1997). About 70% of the people live in the south-western area (wet zone) which accounts for about three-quarters of all cultivated land. In 1991, 89% of the population lived in rural areas (EIU, 1997).

Sri Lanka is a multi-racial and multi-religious country. Nearly three-quarters of the population are Sinhalese who speak Sinhala and are mainly Buddhist. Sri Lankan Tamils account for 13% of the population. The majority of them are Hindus with a substantial Christian minority. They are traditionally concentrated in the North and East of the country. The Indian Tamils constitute 5-6% of the population. The Muslim or Moors form about 7% of the population. They are concentrated in the Eastern province and Colombo. There are also small groups of Burghers (Eurasians of mixed descent), Malays and Veddahs (descendants of the original inhabitants before Sinhalese settlement) (EIU, 1997). Women accounted for 49% of the total population (1981 census). The Demographic Survey of 1994 revealed that there existed a significant proportion (18.6%) of female-headed households in Sri Lanka (ESCAP, 1997).

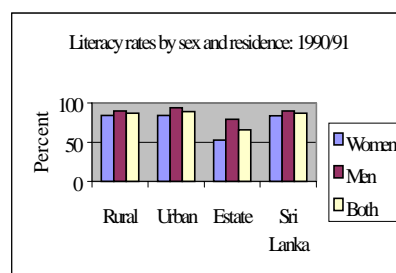


Source: ESCAP, 1997

According to the last census of 1981, there were 96.2 women per 100 men. This phenomenon of gender imbalance is attributed to male-predominated civil war attrition and internal migration, etc. In the pre-independence past, Sri Lanka had been receiving particularly South Indian Tamils to work in the plantation sector. Men outnumber women both in rural and urban areas. However, the predominance of men is considerably greater in urban areas (94.04 women per 100 men) as compared to rural areas (97.9 women per 100 men) (ESCAP, 1997).

### Education

In Sri Lanka, the literacy rate for the population of 10 years and above was 86.9% in 1990/91. The sex difference in literacy is minimal. Men have a literacy rate of 90% and women of 83.8%, among the highest in the world. Moreover, the rural/urban differential in the female literacy rate is non-existent, both the rural and urban women have the same literacy rate. However, the literacy rate for women in estate communities is only 52.8%. In the case of the male population, the urban sector has the highest literacy rate (94%) compared to the rural (89.9%) and the estate (79%) sectors (ESCAP, 1997).



Source: ESCAP, 1997

Note: Northern and eastern provinces have been excluded.

### Labour

The 1996 Labour Force Survey of Sri Lanka, records an overall labour force participation rate of 49.1% for the population aged 10 years and above. However, the female participation rate of 33.5% is nearly half the rate for men (65.3%). Based on the 1995 Labour Force Survey, the largest proportions among employed women (41.5%) as well as employed men (35.4%) are engaged

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in agriculture and allied sectors. The second largest proportion among employed men (15.7%) is concentrated in the service sector. However, in the case of employed women, the manufacturing sector absorbs the second largest proportion (27.1%). This has largely been due to the establishment of export promotion zones in the country which employ a higher proportion of women than men. In 1992, about 91% of semi-skilled workers, 73% of the unskilled ones and 89% of trainees in three export promotion zones were women. Moreover, 90% of the workers in the garment industry are women (ESCAP, 1997).

Sri Lanka has only a brief history of labour migration outside the country. Starting in the late 1960s, the country experienced the out-migration of its highly qualified professionals, then largely men. However, in the recent decades, migration of middle-level skilled and unskilled labourers, predominantly by women, is on a dramatic increase. Between 1988 and 1995, 422,416 Sri Lankans migrated from the country out of which 70% were women. A vast majority of these migrant women work as housemaids in the Middle East (ESCAP, 1997).

Sri Lanka's human development indicators are among the highest in the developing world. The **Human Development Index (HDI)** rank of Sri Lanka is 77th of 146 countries. Its **Gender-Related Development Index (GDI)** rank is 70th of 146 countries. This illustrates that appropriate progress has been achieved both in human development and gender equality. The difference between **HDI** and **GDI** ranks is 7, indicating that the country performs relatively better on gender equality than on average achievements alone (UNDP, 1997).

### AGRICULTURE

In Sri Lanka, agriculture is the mainstay of the economy though its share in GDP is declining. Area under agriculture represents nearly 30% of the total land surface (ESCAP, 1997).

Despite their routine domestic work, women are very actively involved in agricultural production. Women's contribution to subsistence production (farm and income-generating activities) is counted as unpaid family work. In fact, 56% of the women work as unpaid family workers (UNDP, 1997). Rural women's participation in post-harvest operations is very high. They constitute more than 50% of the total work force involved in post-harvest operations. They perform various tasks, for ex-

ample harvesting, cleaning, drying, grain storage, etc. Parboiling of paddy is exclusively women's work. Rural women are also significantly involved in post-harvest operations in maize and pulse grains (Sayeed, 1992).

Despite women's important role in agriculture, customary laws and traditional social norms are generally biased in favour of men. They constitute a barrier to women's equitable access to productive resources.

### Crop production

Sri Lankan agriculture is differentiated by 24 agro-ecological regions (Kumar, 1998). However, the country has two major agro-ecological zones — a wet and a dry zone. Agriculture is characterised by a sectoral dualism — plantation and non-plantation. Spices, tea, rubber, coconut, vegetables and potatoes are grown in the wet zone. Rice and other field crops are predominantly grown in the dry zone under irrigation. The non-plantation sector is dominated by small farmers with holdings up to two hectares (FAO, 1997).

Women constitute the major labour force in plantations. After the repatriation of Indian workers, the entire increase in the Sinhalese tea estate work force was made up of women. As many as 350,000 of them work in plantations. They represent 42% of the total female work force in the country forming the largest labour group in Sri Lanka (Matsui, 1989). In the plantation sector, it has been found that when men collect the family's estate income and find it getting larger, they feel less need to work and so they labour less on the estate. But women, on the other hand, continue to be engaged in plantations. (Kurian, 1982). Nearly 68% of the women in agriculture are involved in plantations and more than 70% of rural women in subsistence production (Wickramasinghe, 1994).



The growth of Sri Lanka's plantation agriculture has increased the women's workload. A study in the intermediate-zone villages of Central Highlands has re-

vealed that with the expansion of tea plantation, men's traditional roles related to paddy cultivation and dryland farming on the hill slopes have changed. Presently, they are involved in cash crop production on their own farm if they have adequate land. Alternatively, they opt for wage labour. Subsequently, women's responsibilities for home maintenance and household crop production have increased (Wickramasinghe, 1994). In general, men assume responsibility for more strenuous types of tasks such as ploughing, hoeing and preparing the land for cultivation, while women are entrusted with weeding, transplanting, harvesting, food processing and meal preparation.

An example of gender division of labour in rice paddy production in Sri Lanka is presented below:

Gender Division of Labour in Rice Paddy Production in Sri Lanka		
Activities	W	M
Land preparation		X
Seed sowing		X
Puddling	X	
Transplanting	X	
Weeding (if weedicides have not been used)	X	
Applying weedicides, pesticides and fertilizer		X
Carrying meals, tea, etc. to the field for male member of the family and labourer	X	
Arranging female labour on exchange or payment basis	X	
Threshing		X
Winnowing (mechanical)		X
Carrying harvest home		X
Marketing	X	X

Source: Kumar, V. 1998. *Gender Dimensions in Agro-Biodiversity Management: Country Profile, Sri Lanka*.

Women also play a key role in the management of home gardens, which are characterised by the diversity of economically important plants. (Kumar, 1998).

### Forestry

As a tropical country, Sri Lanka is endowed with forests and other natural resources. However, forest resources in the country are deteriorating with the reduction of the tree cover from an estimated 24% of the total land area in 1989 to 20% in 1992 (EIU, 1997).

Rural women are heavily dependent on forests for the subsistence, consumption and maintenance of their family. Data on farm and village forestry practices in Sri Lanka reveal that among 10 categories of products gathered from the forests, food, fuelwood and fodder are the most widely

used ones. These three products constitute women's priority targets as gatherers. Men mainly collect items such as timber, construction materials, and products for other uses (Wickramasinghe, 1994). In Sri Lanka, out of the 23 types of forest products gathered by peripheral dwellers of the Adams' Peak wilderness, women are the primary gatherers of 21 products (Wickramasinghe, 1994). Women also predominantly collect various non-wood forest products such as wild fruits, flowers, seeds, condiments, medicinal plants, plant ingredients for natural dyes, grasses to thatch house as well as to make household items. Apart from household consumption, they also sell these products in the market to earn cash income (Kumar, 1998).

A study of the villages in the intermediate zone of the central highlands revealed that under the increasing economic pressure, single income from the husband's earning alone is not adequate to cover the cost of food. So women must supplement family food requirements with forest and tree-borne food. In 68% of all total households surveyed, food from the forests and household production are the major contributors to the family food basket. The reduction in food expenditure through utilizing forest products has been well recognized as a mark of women's efficiency in household management (Wickramasinghe, 1994). For women, jack and bread fruits are the best substitutes for rice. If they do not use forest food, not only let go the product to waste, but family food consumption is also adversely affected (Wickramasinghe, 1994).

### Fisheries

In Sri Lanka, marine fisheries are carried out all around the island. The population considerably depends on coastal fisheries as currently one-third of it lives in the coastal areas (Dyaratne, 1996).

Women actively participate in the small-scale fishery industry in Sri Lanka. On the southern coast, they are the main managers of income. Women in the migrant fishing communities have a crucial role in fish sorting, cutting, processing and dragging the boats ashore. Women in the northern, north-western and eastern coast also undertake similar activities. About 75% of women in the fishing communities of Mannar (North-West), Trincomalee and Batticaloa (East), and 25% of all women in Negombo, Chilaw and Kalpitiya on the West coast are estimated to be engaged in fishing-related activities. In one fishing village in the Puttalam area, women take part in fishing with beach-seines and in marketing (wholesale as well as retail). A few women also

own beach-seines and boats (FAO, 1980). Women from the North-West and West coast are involved in post-harvest activities of small pelagic fisheries. They undertake the sorting the catch, and drying and marketing.

### Livestock

Livestock is an integral component of farming systems in Sri Lanka. Women have the major responsibility for raising livestock and poultry. Cattle are raised mostly for draft power, goats and poultry primarily as a source of cash income. In Sri Lanka, goat-raising projects have proved to be successful income generating activities for poor rural women. With regard to milk production, there are several female-headed family groups very keen to take up cow rearing for milk production as a self-employment activity. This not only earns a regular income, but also provides improved nutrition to the children in the families (Pillai, 1995).

### ENVIRONMENT

More than a century ago, large-scale clearance of forests in Sri Lanka started with the introduction of plantation agriculture. Increasing pressure on land for food and settlement for the growing population accelerated the rate of deforestation. Along with forest denudation, change in land-use practices caused by commercial mass agricultural production aggravated environmental condition.

Women in Sri Lanka have an intrinsic relationship with the environment. Women gave local Sinhala and Tamil names to different plants and species for day-to-day use. They were the ones who not only discovered *Gotukola*, a wild plant used as vegetable and medicine, but also domesticated it in their home gardens (Kumar, 1998).

The environmental degradation has a severe impact on rural livelihoods in general and on women's lives in particular. Forest destruction has limited the non-wood forest product collection by women thereby minimizing their income-generating opportunities through the sale of these products (Kumar, 1998). Due to fuelwood scarcity, rural people are forced to abandon their traditional time- and energy-consuming diets. In Sri Lanka, women now avoid the parboiling of rice (Wickramasinghe, 1990). A study of villages in the intermediate zone of the Central Highland reveals that because of the non-availability of substitutes for forest products, seasonal scarcities in food, fodder and fuelwood are acute. Land deg-

radation has affected the distribution of perennial vegetation. Most of the barren slopes are now free of perennial crops. Women are heavily dependent on riverine vegetation, hedges and isolated forests for fuelwood, fodder and some food products (Wickramasinghe, 1994).

### RURAL PRODUCTION

Apart from their extensive involvement in household chores and subsistence farming, women in Sri Lanka are engaged in non-farm income-generating activities to supplement farm income. They mostly enter home-based cottage industries using the local materials collected from the forests. For example, in the wet zone, women boil the treacle and produce jaggery, while men tap the inflorescence and collect the sap from *Kitul* (a multi-purpose tree species) and earn cash income in the family. *Kitul* products account for more than 70% of the total income from non-wood forest products.

Though the male member in the family does the marketing of home garden produce, the selling of surplus (over household consumption) of various items such as coconut, papaya, banana, cashewnut, etc. in roadside stalls and weekly markets is mainly done by women. These stalls are also used to sell pillows and mattresses with attractive designs made by women at home (Kumar, 1998). Women also earn cash income as agricultural wage labourers. In low-income families, women are often the primary bread-winners (ESCAP, 1997).

### FOOD SECURITY

Food imports in Sri Lanka have decreased from 47% to 16% in the last two decades, reflecting greater food self-sufficiency. However, about 30% of the households in the country live in absolute poverty (ESCAP, 1997). In this poverty nexus, the women's situation is more precarious. The female share of earned income is only half that of the male share (UNDP, 1997). Many of the women on plantations are anaemic due to chronic malnutrition (Matsui, 1989).

Rural women make a significant contribution to the household food security. Women play a key role in determining seed combinations for the short duration and of drought-resistant crops like coarse grains, grain legumes, oil crops and vegetables grown in the highlands for *Chena* (shifting) cultivation. As the success of crop depends upon the vagaries of nature, in order to minimize

food shortages, women take complete charge of cultivating coarse grains, especially *Kurakkan*, right from the seed sowing to harvesting, threshing and storing. Even a modest harvest of coarse grains during a bad year would ensure minimal food and nutrient requirements for the survival. Coarse grains have always been women's crops as they are of high nutritional value; rich in protein and mineral content, and their intake prevents malnutrition. In the tribal society, women are the master conductors of the entire operation in *Chena* cultivation (Kumar, 1998).

Rural women's knowledge of about food values of different plants available in the forests, their collection and processing has been of great importance to meet food requirements in the family during drought. Women's crucial involvement in home gardening is very important, not only for meeting family needs but also to earn cash income in the farm household.

## POLICY AND PLANNING FOCUS

In order to support effective and equitable agricultural and rural development, policy makers and planners in Sri Lanka need to:

- ✓ collect and analyze additional data in certain areas of women's concern;
- ✓ formulate policies and plans to provide both rural women and men with access to and control over resources, particularly land; and
- ✓ make policy and planning participatory as well as gender-sensitive.

## PROGRAMME FOCUS

Agricultural and rural development programmes in Sri Lanka need to include the following areas of intervention in order to address both rural women's and men's priorities:

- ✓ train field staff in gender-sensitive and participatory planning and programmes implementation;
- ✓ acknowledge women's crucial role in home garden management and initiate supportive measures to make it beneficial for them;
- ✓ support women with appropriate technology, marketing, and credit facilities for the production of various crops, particularly coarse grains; and
- ✓ introduce post-harvest technology for non-wood forest products such as *Kitul* and help women to develop as entrepreneurs.

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