



Empowering Women: What Works?

Policy Brief

Life after formal employment: The long-term outcomes and achievements among working women in Sri Lanka

Historically, women have been placed as ‘the keepers’ of traditional culture in Sri Lanka. However, they are also increasingly essential to meeting (inter) national goals of sustainable development and to on-going processes of modernisation. Previous studies into gender development and equality have found that working women experience socio-economic empowerment while engaged in the Sri Lankan manufacturing industry. Although the benefits for females engaged in such spheres of formal employment have been extensively collated, gaps remain with regard to exploring the lives of these working women after leaving this type of work. Therefore, the objective of our current research has been to capture the post-employment experiences of over 2000 of Sri Lanka’s female, former factory workers; and ascertain whether they successfully retained and (or) built upon these foundations of financial and social capital after returning home to their villages and communities across the country.

Going Beyond the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

The year 2015 marked the end of the *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs) launched in 2000 by the United Nations (UN). At the time, all 189 UN member states and some 22 international organisations committed to galvanising efforts to achieve 8 development goals. The UN 2015 MDG report showed that while the world has made progress on most of the MDGs, achievements are uneven across the different regions of the world (UN, 2015b; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2003).

The final Sri Lanka Country MDG report is yet to be released. However, it was reported in 2014 that at the national level, Sri Lanka had achieved 13 of the 27 indicators that contained specific targets relevant to the country (UN, 2015a). The report also showed that Sri Lanka was ‘on track’ to achieving 12 of the targets, and was ‘off track’ on only two of the indicators, pertaining to MDGs 1 and 6 respectively (Commonwealth Foundation, 2015; Nanayakkara, 2016; UN, 2015a).

The interim MDG report on Sri Lanka raises two key policy issues that need addressing. First, income and regional inequality still exist in Sri Lanka and women bear the brunt of the variations. For example, although the report indicated that poverty levels in Sri Lanka had been lowered (to 7%), there was still a high incidence of poverty in the Monaragala and Mullaitivu districts, both of which experienced an increase in poverty, to a rate of almost 20%. The country’s policy makers and development partners may have to consider creating employment opportunities in regional areas to bridge the gaps. A social protection initiative that specifically targets women and other vulnerable groups’ economic development in regional localities would also be desirable (Nanayakkara, 2016; UN, 2015a).

Second, while Sri Lanka has successfully bridged educational attainment gaps between males and females in all three levels of education, the country only boasts a parliamentary representation of women of less than 7%. Currently, Sri Lanka ranks 140 out of 153 countries in terms of female representation in parliament, one of the lowest in South Asia and the world (Nanayakkara, 2016; Nandy, 2015; UN, 2015a). Improving the quality of education for females, the implementation of electoral reforms and affirmative action policies to increase their

KEY MESSAGES

- **Policy-makers in Sri Lanka, other developing nations & the world need to...**
 - Go beyond the *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs), with a particular focus on creating affirmative, gender inclusive & representative education/political spheres.
 - Meet the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) by acknowledging the role of formal employment, skill development & gender research in women’s empowerment.
 - Continue moving towards achieving universal gender equality through greater female, formal labour force participation
 - Support women’s economic engagement, educational & skill attainment in order to achieve a strong foundation for economic & social capital among working women.
 - Facilitate women’s access to formal banking to increase their long-term economic independence post-employment.
 - Ensure women are aware of – & receive – the pensions & benefits they are eligible for.
 - Invest in gender research that involves local women directly & is thus, relevant.
 - Incorporate cross-cutting, female-oriented policies that do not unintentionally perpetuate patriarchy or gender disparity.

representation in politics is critical as the country braces itself to implement the recently launched *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs).

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS (MDGs)	
Goal 1.	Eradicate extreme poverty & hunger.
Goal 2.	Achieve universal primary education.
Goal 3.	Promote gender equality & empower women.
Goal 4.	Reduce child mortality.
Goal 5.	Improve maternal health.
Goal 6.	Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria & other diseases.
Goal 7.	Ensure environmental sustainability.
Goal 8.	Develop a global partnership for development.
Source: UN, 2015b; UNDP, 2003	

Meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The SDGs succeed, and build upon, the MDGs. The SDGs consist of a set of 17 goals and 169 targets, to be achieved by 2030. The SDGs or the global goals, relate to 'five Ps', namely: **People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership**. This incorporates economic development, social inclusion and environmental sustainability (Nanayakkara, 2016; UN, 2015b). Based on their specific contexts, participating countries are expected to select SDG targets that apply to their circumstances and delineate comprehensive implementation and monitoring strategies over the following 15 years. Some have criticised the SDGs for being vague and inherently contradictory to growth and for setting targets that cannot possibly be achieved in 15 years. Others have argued that unless proper mechanisms are established, implementing and monitoring the 17 goals will be challenging for many developing countries (Hazelton, 2015; Hickel, 2015; Jack, 2015; Nanayakkara, 2016).

Researchers and Sri Lankan civil society organisations have proposed measures the country needs to put in place, to successfully implement and monitor the SDGs (Commonwealth Foundation, 2015; Nanayakkara, 2016, Ratnayake, 2016). Aside from the general consensus that Sri Lanka's government requires the cooperation of all stakeholders to manage the global goals, it has been suggested that the country:

- Establish an effective coordinating body, as activities related to SDGs cut across many ministries, departments and a number of other state agencies;
- Develop an awareness-raising programme, as the SDGs are still new to many people and are too complex to be easily understood, mainly because of the cross-cutting issues between goals;
- Develop an efficient monitoring and evaluation mechanism, and a proper plan for implementation;
- Facilitate inclusive and sustainable economic growth;
- Improve formal education and vocational training opportunities;

- Provide opportunities for productive employment and 'decent' work for all Sri Lankans; and
- Develop infrastructure that will support the SDGs.

In addition to the suggestions above, in our view, rigorous research that provides relevant evidence will also be critical for the development Sri Lanka's SDG policy and implementation frameworks, expected to be embedded in the country's development agenda over the next 15 years. Discussed below are excerpts from our recent research findings on Sri Lanka, which provide insights into the relationship between skill acquisition, formal employment and female empowerment. These findings are particularly useful for Sri Lanka's planning and implementation of ***SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*** (see United Nations [UN] Women, 2016).

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs)	
Goal 1.	End poverty in all its forms, everywhere.
Goal 2.	End hunger, achieve food security & improved nutrition & promote sustainable agriculture.
Goal 3.	Ensure healthy lives & promote well-being for all at all ages.
Goal 4.	Ensure inclusive & equitable quality education & promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
Goal 5.	Achieve gender equality & empower all women & girls.
Goal 6.	Ensure the availability & sustainable management of water & sanitation for all.
Goal 7.	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable & modern energy for all.
Goal 8.	Promote sustained, inclusive & sustainable economic growth, full & productive employment & decent work for all.
Goal 9.	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation & foster innovation.
Goal 10.	Reduce inequality within & among countries.
Goal 11.	Make cities & human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient & sustainable.
Goal 12.	Ensure sustainable consumption & production patterns.
Goal 13.	Take urgent action to combat climate change & its impacts.
Goal 14.	Conserve & sustainably use the oceans, seas & marine resources for sustainable development.
Goal 15.	Protect, restore & promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems; sustainably manage forests; combat desertification; & halt/reverse land degradation; & halt biodiversity loss.
Goal 16.	Promote peaceful & inclusive societies for sustainable development; provide access to justice for all & build effective, accountable & inclusive institutions at all levels.
Goal 17.	Strengthen the means of implementation & revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.
Source: UN, 2015b; 2015c; UN Women, (2016)	

Towards reducing gender inequality in Sri Lanka through formal employment

Sri Lanka has long embraced export-oriented economic development. Despite the global movement towards gender equality, Lynch (2007) and Thennakoon and Rajapaske (2007) argued that the shift to more neo-liberal economic philosophies in Sri Lanka – coupled with institutionalised colonial structures and historical patriarchal norms – has truncated Sri Lankan women's progress towards achieving parity with men across socio-economic and political spheres; thereby limiting their 'place'. Females have been positioned as 'the keepers' of traditional culture, rather than viewed as essential to the nation's continued economic modernisation (Lynch, 2007; Thennakoon & Rajaraske, 2007).

Despite the long-held negative perceptions of female participation in factory-based employment, inherent in Sri Lankan women's formal work experience is 'empowerment' (Gunawardana, 2014; Hancock, Middleton, Moore, & Edirisinghe, 2011a; 2011b; Heyzer, 1986; Lynch, 2007). Past research has found that:

- Female factory workers gain new technical knowledge and social experiences as a consequence of their exposure to formal work processes. For instance, they receive training in the use of machinery, acquire organisational skills, learn to operate within a team and (some) even attain leadership positions. They also develop an urban (modern) lifestyle – typified by bargaining and an awareness of other cultures – and hence, are able to undertake financial planning; risk management; and use modern whitegoods.
- Having acquired wider social (bargaining) skills, Sri Lankan working women learn to express their (collective) 'voice' by navigating or confronting corporate processes; build networks of worker cohorts by developing rapport between factory-level staff and management; and have increased awareness of (and access to) worker advocacy groups.
- Although many choose to work for only a short period, these women invariably achieve greater decision-making power, particularly at the familial level, but also within their community (society). They are able to set and attain personal short-term goals, such as:
 - Investing in their future *via* access to a regular income (generally higher than other family members), which allows them to save periodically in 'formal' banking institutions, seek loans or use 'informal' savings schemes (such as Cheetus¹ or microfinance, see "Kiva Q and A", 2007; "Micro Finance more popular", 2009;

Ratwatte, 2012) and purchase jewellery – as such, employment offers (financial) solutions to daily problems;

- Accumulating funds for marriage dowries and house/land development, thereby enhancing their long-term social standing;
- Working long enough to be eligible to collect the Employees' Provident Fund² (EPF), Employees' Trust Fund³ (ETF) and Gratuity⁴ benefits, thus ensuring their long-term economic independence.

Despite these clear socio-economic benefits, it is unclear whether the situations for these women may in fact be negatively affected by the pervasive patriarchal norms evident in Sri Lanka and (or) a lack of overall familial (community) support, post-employment (Hancock et al., 2011a; 2011b). Consequently, our current research explores the ability of Sri Lankan women to continue turning fiscal wealth into social capital, capturing the experiences of former factory workers subsequent to their leaving the nation's manufacturing industry.

Financial and social outcomes: Women's time in formal employment, their educational attainment and the use of skills acquired from factory work

Education was a cross-cutting issue that impacted on women's achievements. With regard to prior factory-based work, those with higher Advanced Level (A-Level) or above qualifications had been more frequently employed in skilled-labour occupations. More highly educated women were also more likely to report receiving pension benefits, indicating they may have been aware of their rights and (or) able to navigate financial procedures (discussed in more detail below). Qualitative data also showed that respondents equated further education and being involved in more 'professional' spheres of employment with achieving greater social status in Sri Lanka.

Several women argued that those in the more professional disciplines, such as business owners, bank officers, doctors or teachers, had better sources of income and pension schemes; evident was the belief that they would have been better off had they continued in their education. At first glance, such data indicates the relevance of Human Capital Theory (HCT) in relation to achieving greater social capital. HCT argues that investment in education increases individuals' skills, as well as their ability to perform complex tasks, thereby facilitating their access to senior-level positions, leading to

¹ Bari (2012), Fernando (1986a; 1986b) and Ratwatte (2012) described Cheetus as a rotating savings and credit association, whereby local groups contribute periodically to a central fund that is managed and shared among Cheetu members as a source of 'informal savings'.

² A private-sector social security scheme in Sri Lanka, the EPF is available while employed (Employees' Provident Fund, n.d.; Salary.lk, 2015b).

³ A private-sector 'retirement benefit', the ETF is accessible at any age after leaving formal employment and administered by the Employees' Trust Fund Board in Sri Lanka (Employees' Trust Fund Board, 2009; Salary.lk, 2015b).

⁴ Gratuities are private-sector benefits for staff members that remained employed with a single employer for five years in the Sri Lankan labour force (Salary.lk, 2015b).

higher levels of income (Dobbs, Sun, & Roberts, 2008; Hoyman & Faricy, 2009; Tan, 2014). Moreover, education enhances an individual's awareness about opportunities for self-improvement in both work and social contexts, regarding career choice, location, health and wellbeing and control over family decisions (Dobbs et al., 2008; Sweetland, 1996).

Statistically, although education was positively related to women reporting greater community-level decision making power, in most cases educational attainment was actually inversely related with other societal (familial) outcomes. Contrary to HCT, subsequent to leaving formal employment, women with a lower (Ordinary-Level or O-Level) education often felt greater familial-level acceptance and participated more in community activities than respondents with A-Level credentials or above. Analyses also indicated that a greater proportion of individuals without O-Levels had more say in family matters and achieved higher social status than the cohorts of women with higher levels of secondary or tertiary education in our survey.

Given the seemingly inverse relationship between education across most dimensions of social standing and familial or communal engagement, this weakens some of the former, more positive links to HCT made above. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that very few respondents put their earnings (savings) towards further education for themselves (2.8% of funds while employed and 1.2% after employment) or into personal skill development (only 2.1% of earnings while employed and 0.9% after employment). Despite this, other quantitative data showed a somewhat paradoxical trend, whereby respondents continued to prioritise allocating a substantial proportion of their financial resources into educating other family members, both while employed (25.5% of earnings) and after returning home (8.7% of earnings). Further qualitative responses indicated that loans were often used to pay for such familial-level investment – where taking responsibility for (financing) the education of others was described as a point of pride; and the belief that children or siblings would benefit from educational opportunities was a common one among respondents.

There was near consensus that the skills and knowledge women brought back from their time in formal employment were useful on returning home (94.2%). This finding indicated that women made a distinction between the definitive value of 'on-the-job' training or experience and the seemingly more 'variable' worth they placed on 'formal education'. As argued by Folbre (2012), knowledge acquisition is a collective process, involving personal education, but also encompassing knowledge transfer between individuals and others.

Indeed, qualitative responses reveal that, while at work in the manufacturing industry, women supported each other and shared technical skills; with many respondents also using their exposure to modern life and work processes in their communities, family units and for their own business development; endeavouring to pass on their wisdom to other villagers post-employment. However, knowledge transfer also requires the support of

government institutions, in terms of provision of social, health and education related services. Education and skill development are a source of personal and national economic development and thus important in a modernising Sri Lanka (Folbre, 2012; Tan, 2014).

Independence post-employment: Working women's access to formal savings accounts and loans

As indicated by previous research, while in formal employment, a large proportion of the women we surveyed had saved their earnings in a bank (or placed income into a fixed deposit account). Almost half created this account for their own use (47.6%), as opposed to transferring money into a family account (4.7%). This ability to save in a bank showed an increasing level of economic independence among our sample, coupled with a desire for personal control over finances. Although using earnings (savings) to invest in formal institutions increased in priority among women post-employment, the actual proportion of respondents choosing to continue to save a portion of their earnings in a bank on returning home, actually decreased by more than half (to 21.8%).

In fact, all patterns of spending and investment decreased subsequent to leaving the manufacturing industry. This may be due to the fact that less than half of our sample had remained engaged in some form of economic activity post-employment (48.6%). Therefore, it may be assumed that without the same level of income from factory work – or with over half, not participating in any kind of paid work – they were simply unable to continue saving or spending as before.

However, it should be noted that the women we surveyed had been earning an average of 12,539 Sri Lankan Rupee (LKR) per month at the time of data collection, still substantially higher than the monthly average earned by (other) plantation, industrial and service sector employees nationally – as of 2013 (see Salary.lk, 2015a). Regardless, those that held lower skilled occupations during their time in former factory work were 1.26 times more likely to have taken out loans than their higher skilled contemporaries. Thus, it could be inferred that a lower status – and therefore a potentially poorer paying job – was linked to having less economic capital upon returning home, leading them to seek additional financial assistance.

There also appeared to be an urban–rural divide with regard to fiscal behaviour. A significantly higher number of the women lived in rural locales across Sri Lanka (95.8%), with the remaining respondents living in urban or town settings (4.2%). Overall, the rural women were 1.4 times more likely to report lower current earnings than their urban counterparts at the time of data collection.

Perhaps linked to this was the fact that a greater proportion of the urban sub-sample invested their accumulated funds into formal institutions compared to their rural counterparts, both during and after their time in formal employment, whether saving in a personal account

or for family members. Such trends might be indicative of rural women earning lower incomes, and therefore, having less money to invest (save). However, rural dwellers were also less likely to have taken out a loan than urban women, this is despite it being a reasonable inference that, given their lower economic standing, they may need additional financial assistance (those with loans representing 30.6% of urban women, compared to only 24% of the rural cohort).

In fact, women living in rural locales have limited access to (formal) economic resources worldwide (Diagne & Zeller, 2001; Fletschner, 2009). As such, rather than relating to respondents' current financial status, our findings support the supposition that female rural populations might face a disproportionate number of barriers to formal saving or loan activity. Historically, 'informal' savings mechanisms have encompassed money lending and Cheetus in Sri Lanka; with more 'formal' variants of this taking the form of micro-finance programmes developed by the Sanasa Development Bank (SBD) ("Micro Finance More Popular", 2009). Micro-finance opportunities are becoming increasingly common, encouraging bottom-up development and building communities through local leadership. Historically, less than a quarter of the SBD's Micro-finance customers have been male, with the priority of such initiatives set to empower women and improve their life chances ("Micro Finance More Popular", 2009).

Although opportunities for micro-finance and more 'female-friendly' services are emerging in developing nations like Sri Lanka, in general, female clients remain subject to 'biased' lending practices (Fletschner & Kenney, 2011; Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2013; Pasricha, 2013). Banks may not recognise the identification provided by (rural) women as meeting their stringent criteria (Pasricha, 2013). Financial institutions may also perceive females as less 'attractive' clientele, often lacking insight into their expectations and unable (unwilling) to tailor services to suit women's needs (Fletschner & Kenney, 2011; Fletschner & Mesbah, 2011; Hewlett et al., 2013).

In contrast, more informal savings mechanisms (such as Cheetus) have long been perceived to be more culturally sensitive and able to be tailored to suit individual's socio-economic capacities and needs (Fernando, 1986a; 1986b). For example, wealth may be transferred into social capital, with informal savings used for personal investment (such as marriage dowries or protection against future downturns); as well as purchasing goods or services to improve their own (familial) living standards (Fernando, 1986a; 1986b). In fact, a high proportion of respondents purchased jewellery with their savings (earnings), which is sometimes viewed as an asset or source of informal investment in developing nations (Pasricha, 2013).

Schemes such as Cheetus also better reflect the collective culture evident across Sri Lanka, facilitating mutually beneficial relationships (Fernando, 1986a; 1986b). Despite the emergence of a (competing) neo-

liberal agenda and alternative formal banking opportunities, Cheetus represent cultural values such as 'good faith'. As such, it has long been argued that this needs to be better reflected in services offered by financial institution across Sri Lanka, but particularly in rural settings (Fernando, 1986a, p. 29; 1986b, p. 262; Ratwatte, 2012).

Access and autonomy of choice: Receiving pensions while working and after returning to villages or communities

In recognition of having participated in Sri Lanka's manufacturing industry, the women surveyed were eligible to receive one or more pensions. The data indicated a mixed success rate in this regard. Approximately one-third of respondents cited issues in receiving any of these monetary sources – statistically, this is a small number. Indeed, over half of our sample reported having accessed their EPF, almost two-thirds had received the ETF on leaving formal employment and two-fifths had been able to access a Gratuity payment. Of those that did not encounter any problems (69.6%), qualitative responses showed that they received their pensions within a short time-frame. This is encouraging, as it suggests that these organisations had complied with Sri Lankan legislation, following through with their obligations to (female) staff.

However, statistically significant associations were found between our sample's education level and whether individuals received the EPF, ETF or their gratuities. Specifically, quantitative data showed that women who had attained at least an Advanced Level (A-Level) qualification were more likely to have accessed one or more of these benefits. Further, qualitative data reveal that of those women who had experienced 'issues', many appeared 'ignorant' of their right to a pension. Moreover, a Research Assistant (RA) observed that 'lack of education' was the reason one participant had not known about the existence of funds, supporting the notion that women's education or understanding of certain matters influences their awareness of (and access to) such benefits – in line with HCT frameworks (see above).

In some cases, disreputable employers did not inform workers of the options available to them; other respondents were simply unaware such fiscal benefits existed; or they were uncertain of how to claim what was 'owed'. One respondent thought that because her factory had closed down, she was no longer eligible to receive a pension; in another case, factory closure meant that another woman's pension had not been transferred to a financial institution and was effectively lost. Although others cited similar 'technical' or 'paper work' issues, these respondents had rectified the situation or were in the process of filing for Gratuity at the time of survey dissemination.

Family, age and 'autonomy of choice' appeared to be additional confounding factors. For example, having worked at a factory owned by a family member, one

former worker did not even receive a pension. Another respondent was yet to receive her pension because she had been 'too busy' caring for her young children and was unable to prioritise the time to request it through formal channels. In one extreme case, a respondent stated that she simply had not been 'interested' in any of the pensions and so did not seek them. Another elected to transfer her EPF and ETF to her children on their coming of age. These findings suggest that a mixture of objective and subjective elements underlie women's decisions and (or) ability to access pensions that are ostensibly owed to them by right under Sri Lankan legislation.

However, there were many complicating factors that could not be circumvented and (or) were out of these women's control. Problematic was the improper or incorrect paper work and their age, with some pensions only available after reaching a certain age. As such, some women were required to show proof of age, identity or marital status before being granted access to their funds. Statistical data confirm that age was indeed positively related to receipt of EPF, ETF and Gratuity, with women aged 40 years or above more likely to have received their pension payments.

At first glance, location did not impact on access to pensions, with statistical analyses indicating that there were no significant differences between urban and rural women with regard to having received the EPF, ETF or Gratuity. However, dealing with bureaucratic structures and obtaining official documentation has historically been difficult among cohorts living in largely rural settings (Egwu & Nwibo, 2014; Pasricha, 2013). Therefore, given that rural dwellers represented 95.8% of our sample, it could be inferred that the bulk of women that reported experiencing issues were probably unfamiliar with or unable to meet formal criteria. Consequently, this may be an area in need of improvement in Sri Lanka.

Research outcomes and impact: The benefits for female former factory workers and female Research Assistants (RAs) involved in Gender Development and Equality projects

Participation in our study was mutually beneficial to the largely young, female RAs. Not only did they assist with data analysis, but by surveying (interviewing) and working with other local women, our RAs potentially received insight into their own situation. They would have gained greater insights into potentially 'hidden' gender or societal issues that appear 'normal' in Sri Lanka and the ability to compare their lives and experiences in terms of any similarities or differences.

Although also Sri Lankan women, they effectively offered an 'outsider's' perspective on these former factory workers' lives, sometimes at odds with how respondents presented themselves. In fact, the RAs were encouraged to make field notes and offer observations that informed data collection and analysis processes. They provided further explanations where closed items prevented open-

ended clarification, or highlighted character traits and attitudes that set certain individuals apart from other women in our sample.

Although data might have indicated that one respondent was ostensibly economically well off, it was revealed by an RA that in reality this individual was poor, lived in poverty and had minimal education. Some individuals were identified as trustworthy sources or examples of best practice, with one individual described as highly perceptive and having showed a great level of understanding about societal matters. Some RAs explained respondents' answers or filled in missing details, as in the case discussed above, where it was posited that a dearth in education led to a lack of awareness about pension funds. Although this objective-subjective paradox and interpretation of data did not lead us to either discount or favour certain survey (interview or focus group) responses, it did help to contextualise the findings and highlight potential areas of self-reporting bias.

RAs also provided contextual information not captured in the surveys. Further to the finding that just over half of women were not participating in an economic activity post-employment, just under one-third of respondents left formal employment in order to meet family commitments, with little apparent interest in engaging in further education, finding better employment or starting a business. From the quantitative data alone, it could be assumed that child bearing and care or domestic duties simply took precedence over paid employment, which would be in line with Sri Lanka's patriarchal society. This assumption would perpetuate the notion that women must act as the 'keepers' of traditional culture.

However, respondents' qualitative responses and the additional insight offered by our RAs indicate that such decisions were perhaps far more complex. For example, one RA noted the case of a widow who found it extremely difficult to balance work and familial commitments. Others described examples of socio-economic empowerment – where women found work to be intrinsically satisfying or a source of strength, but ultimately left their jobs to support their husbands; or felt pride in helping to improve their (family's) socio-economic standing, with their finances and experience integral to initiating entrepreneurial pursuits upon returning home.

Generally, having worked in Sri Lanka's manufacturing industry many women reported feeling more confident (97.5% of our sample). Moreover, they perceived themselves as 'economically stronger' and with a higher 'social status' than women of their own generation who had not been employed in factory work (87.8% and 74.7%, respectively). The bulk of respondents also felt more accepted by their family (79.5%) and the community (55.7%), with most also having taken on greater familial-level decision-making (59.5%).

Despite the overall positive quantitative results relating to the achievements and experiences of female former factory workers in their lives after factory employment, the RAs helped to frame such results (with these field notes somewhat supported by other qualitative findings).

Such data indicated that cases of increased recognition or engagement in family (community) contexts were not necessarily universal among the sample. For instance, although some respondents were appreciated by their community, they may not have felt accepted by their family; and in one instance, it was clear that an individual had been treated well by their village because the community respected her family, rather than them individually.

Interestingly, comments made by RAs pointed to incidences of cognitive dissonance among some respondents. This was particularly true of individuals who had reportedly enjoyed working in the manufacturing industry, but now felt duty-bound to undertake domestic and care-related work. This suggests that although Sri Lankan women might 'do' what is expected of them and even succeed in achieving personal short-term goals (see above), they may hold aspirations beyond the home and improving their socio-economic status.

Furthermore, many respondents confided that despite feeling pride in their former work experiences and believing that such formal engagement leads to greater societal recognition, they remained highly cognisant of the fact that members of the public continued to insult factory workers and (or) that their family did not 'really' respect them. This was either because of the negative associations linked to factory work or because they were no longer formally employed and thus no longer able to contribute financially to others' wellbeing. Given that only a minority of respondents reported experiencing negative effects as a result of their work – only 12.2% reported having been exposed to public humiliation, with a further 10.3% subjected to negative social attitudes upon their return home – without the input of RAs and analysis of qualitative responses, such important contextual implications relating to the reality of life after formal employment might otherwise have been overlooked.

Moreover, in line with goals set out by the SDGs, statistical data indicate that there is still a need to better facilitate Sri Lankan women's engagement in community and political spheres. Around 40% participated more fully in community activities; less than one-fifth cited more decision-making power within these communities; and less than 10% took part in political activities subsequent to returning home. A recurring theme in the RA's observations and across qualitative data sets was that if women were able to achieve work–life balance, then they were less likely to experience conflict in their personal (social) lives overall, with many such individuals involved in various local societies, cultural events and (governmental) community development initiatives.

However, lack of time posed the most common barrier to female societal-level participation, with many citing work and (or) family commitments as taking priority. Open-ended data also reveal that these women either lacked an awareness of political processes, beyond their capacity to vote, or were simply disinterested in politics and disliked politicians. Therefore, national work-policies that facilitate formal employment opportunities and greater socio-political activity for Sri Lankan women, while also

building rapport between the citizenry and politicians – and allowing females to remain involved in traditional domestic work, family care and cultural activities – would be most beneficial for their personal empowerment and to the country's continued micro and macro socio-economic development.



Note: Female Research Assistant (RA) in a focus group discussion (FGD) at Galle, with family members of returned women factory workers.

Policy Issues for Consideration: Local, National and Global Frameworks

The recently launched SDGs present a golden opportunity for governments and international development organisations to complete the unfinished business of the MDGs. Our research has key policy implications for ***SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls***. We note that this global goal seeks to achieve the following targets:

- End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.
- Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.
- Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.
- Recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.
- Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.
- Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action

and the outcome documents of their review conferences.

- Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.
- Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular, information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.
- Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

The UN Women has unequivocally noted that women's empowerment is a pre-condition for achieving **SDG 5**. The organisation has argued consistently that advancing women's political participation, leadership and economic empowerment are critical 'recipes' for women's empowerment (UN Women, 2016). We seek to reiterate this view and argue that empowering women should start with providing opportunities for skill acquisition and paid employment. Our research shows that educational attainment and openings for paid work can be a game changer for women. For example, the study found that Sri Lanka women who had worked in the manufacturing sector viewed themselves as being economically stronger, with a better social standing. The research affirmatively found significant associations between women's education level and pension fund access, business ownership rates, land ownership, family acceptance and community-level decision-making power. Governments and international development organisations involved in female empowerment agendas are therefore encouraged to make girls' education a key policy priority, particularly within contexts where it is conspicuously lacking.

However, a clear barrier to full engagement and therefore empowerment appears to be the lack of ability of many women to balance work and non-work contexts. Our data showed a dichotomous relationship between female economic engagement and social participation; whereby many women were unable to remain involved in traditional cultural activities or community work while simultaneously working in paid employment, having domestic responsibilities as well. Also problematic is the apparent dearth in interest, awareness or understanding of several 'formal' socio-political processes, such as – rural women allocating fewer funds to banks; the substantial proportion of women who experienced issues accessing their pension funds (gratuities); and the minority of women who reported greater political engagement, post-employment. Therefore, it could be inferred that the implementation of more 'female-friendly' services across Sri Lanka would be most beneficial for women's personal empowerment; facilitating them to keep personal (familial) economic wealth secure, remain financially independent after leaving work and build social capital, community capacity and improve representation in local (national) political areas, thus

ensuring inclusion and enhanced autonomy of choice in civic matters.

The need to 'empower women', as a concept, has a flipside that needs addressing. Although 'women's empowerment' has become an almost universally accepted goal, it should not be forgotten that gender is experienced contextually and that the situations of women in different parts of the world are not the same (see Sullivan & Nicoline, 2016). Questions have been raised about who defines women's empowerment and whether the concept has cultural imperialist undercurrents. Notwithstanding the need for an international framework, it is important that development brokers guard against 'one-size-fits-all' approaches in their efforts to better the lives of 'disempowered women'.

Part of the process of empowering 'disempowered women', in our view, should involve allowing the women in question to define what 'empowerment' means for themselves; rather than following culturally inappropriate international targets and indices. As the world readies itself to implement the SDGs, we recommend that international development organisations carry out context-specific and particularised analysis of the conditions of women and the meaning of empowerment for the women whose lives they seek to improve (see Sullivan & Nicoline, 2016). Moreover, such research should ideally be conducted by, with and (or, at least) involve local women directly. This might occur in the development of research designs and the collection of data, as well as in interpretation and ultimately, dissemination of results; thus allowing cultural understanding of the geographic location and specific socio-political context to help frame findings. It might even allow women an opportunity to propose and share recommendations for the benefit of other local women, their peers or family members and the country – working from the ground up.

Meanwhile, we also note that **SDG 5** appears to have been incorrectly framed. While the goal categorically seeks 'gender equality', its adjunct statement to 'empower all women and girls' seems conceptually discriminatory. Gender issues relate to males, females and transgender people. However, not a single target of the global goal refers to the other genders. In fact, the manner in which **SDG 5** has been framed suggests that gender issues are only about women and girls, thereby inferring that men and boys or people representing 'other' genders, either do not matter or have no issues, despite there being evidence to the contrary.

We find the potentially inadvertent tendency to 'womanise' the concept of gender and empowerment in the **SDG 5** and the development literature concerning and caution against it. In this instance, it would have been appropriate for the UN and the framers of this global goal to have specifically targeted women, rather than attempting to achieve the same ends under a 'gender mainstreaming' ideation. It is in this regard that we recommend that governments and international development organisations adopt women-specific programming as opposed to gender mainstreaming,

particularly in contexts where patriarchy is prevalent (see Adusei-Asante, Hancock & Soares Oliveira, 2015).

In conclusion, while acknowledging the importance of the SDGs as providing a uniform international development blueprint to guide policy planning and direction, we find the goals overly ambitious and unachievable within the 15-year timeframe. Logically, if 15 years was not sufficient to achieve 8 MDGs and 18 targets, another 15 years will not suffice to meet 17 goals and 169 targets. In our view, the expansive nature of the SDGs will make targeted implementation of the goals challenging for developing countries, many of whom could not achieve the MDGs. It is our recommendation therefore that governments and international development organisations identify areas of relative opportunity and strength and assist developing countries in setting and achieving specific goals. In doing so, it is important that mixed-methods research, such as the findings presented in this brief, is engaged to provide empirical grounds for policy planning, development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, thereby ensuring that data are contextually relevant to individuals potentially transferable to select member nations.

METHODOLOGY

- A total of 2061 survey questionnaires were completed with female, former factory workers from across Sri Lanka. Eligibility was restricted to working women employed for a minimum of three years in EPZs (including Industrial Sites), Industrial Parks (IPs) or any other factory established under Sri Lanka's Garment Factory Scheme.
- Prospective respondents were identified *via* snowballing methods & the utilisation of field knowledge held by local researchers; as well as other key individuals, stakeholders & service providers.
- Over 95% of our respondents lived in rural locations, with the rest representing urban settings.
- A cross-section of these survey respondents, their families, community members & other local officials also took part in 4 In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) & 14 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) – held concurrently & subsequent to survey dissemination.
- Data collection was conducted ethically & in secure environments; recorded in Sinhalese & translated to English by five female local Research Assistants (RAs) representing CENWOR. Data was managed & analysed by Australian RAs from ECU, using the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) Version 22.0 & also, N-Vivo Versions 9, 10 & 11.
- Quantitative data conveyed a clear encapsulation of the conditions they experienced while engaged in Sri Lankan's manufacturing industry; also offering a 'snap shot' of these working women's lives after formal employment – specifically, their personal achievements & socio-economic outcomes.
- Qualitative data captured perceptions of working women; their changes in relationships with others; & the challenges in female (self) empowerment.
- RAs made field notes & offered observations that informed data collection, assisted with 'immersion' & contextualised our statistical/thematic analyses. (see Hancock, Adusei-Asante & Georgiou, 2017 for a full description of the methodology & research findings)

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