



# Is the eco-system of Sri Lankan economy unfriendly to women?

**INSIGHTS**  
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Singapore's Ex-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yu is a controversial figure. He is praised for having guided the grand economic transition of Singapore, and is still questioned for undemocratic practices in safeguarding his vote bank over a long period.

His success in the former is often attributed to the latter. But that is a mistake. There is neither a theoretical nor empirical link between coercive government and competent government. If Sri Lanka is to emulate Singapore, as spoken of in policy circles, it would do well to focus on the competency aspect.

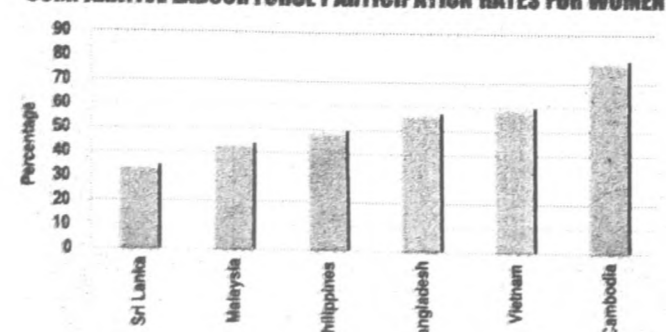
One of Lee Kuan Yu's early moves was to insist that Singapore's public transport and streets should be safe for women. The competent Lee Kuan Yu realised that unlocking the contribution of women in the economy would require an eco-system



in which women found it easier and safer to move about and participate in various economic opportunities. It is a lesson that Sri Lanka would do well to learn.

But the interventions in Sri Lanka will need to go further, and the data points to three further problems facing women in the Sri Lankan economy. The insight, in short, is that women are being pushed-out, pushed-down, and pushed-aside by the Sri Lankan economy.

COMPARATIVE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES FOR WOMEN



## Women pushed-out

In Singapore, 56.5% of the women population participate in the labour force, working outside of their homes. In Sri Lanka it is only 31.2%. It is not that Sri Lankans in general stay out of the labour force, but that the participation of men is more

than double, at 66.2%.

But it also clear that women DO want to work. They just don't want to work IN Sri Lanka. The Central Bank and the Department of Census provides data estimate; out of the almost two million Sri Lankans working abroad, about 52% are women. That is, when it comes to working abroad there is no disparity in the participation of women.

Choices tend to reveal preferences. As a revelation of preferences for working in Sri Lanka vs. working abroad, the numbers show that of every five women choosing to work in Sri Lanka, two choose to work abroad; and these preferences are in stark contrast to men: for every two men working abroad, 11 choose to work in Sri Lanka.

Despite the fact that a large proportion of women working abroad do so in not-so-attractive jobs such as being house-maids in the middle-

east, they still seem to choose that over employment opportunities in Sri Lanka. There are clearly serious factors in the eco-system of a women's domestic social and economic life in Sri Lanka that is pushing her out of the country when she seeks employment. Legislation such as the Prevention of Domestic Violence act of 2005 (the implementation of which seems to have been put in cold storage at present) may have more to contribute to economic outcomes than Sri Lankan policy makers have realised.

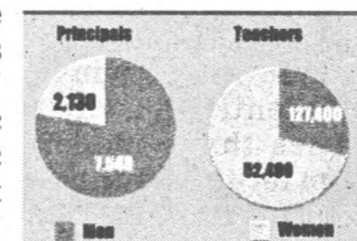
## Pushed-Down

The data shows that when women DO work in Sri Lanka, they are pushed down, and are significantly disadvantaged in reaching the higher leadership and decision making positions.

This is true both in the public sector and in the private sector. A previous Verité Research Insight called "Do Women and Minorities Face Glass Ceilings in Employment?" found that the economy-wide employment ratio of 2:1 in favour of men increased dramatically in the top tiers of the public sector. In the top tier of the public sector it becomes 6:1. In the second tier of the public sector it is still 5:1. The private sector reflected even more serious disparities.

Recent analysis by Verité Research on employment in the education sector underscores the point. The employment intake into the teaching profession is domi-

nated by women: 70.8%. However, when it comes to principals of schools, where experienced teachers are the most natural selection, women get only 22% of the positions. In other words, a man who enters the teaching profession is almost 9 times more likely to advance to the position of a principal than a woman. That is a very serious disparity and teachers' unions must arrest this trend.



## Pushed aside

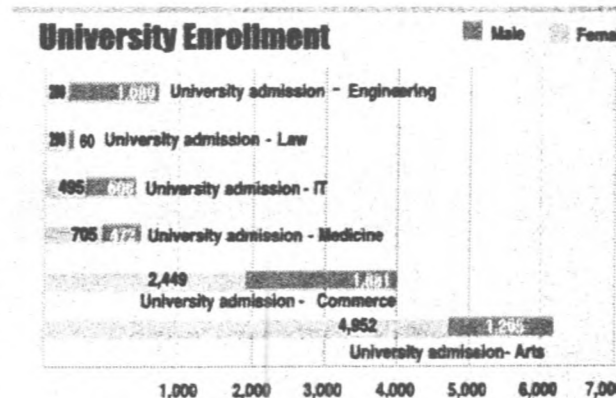
Not only are women pushed down, they are also pushed aside, as they seek employment in Sri Lanka. Women make up only one third of the job seekers and the unemployment rate amongst women is much higher. In 2012, unemployment rate among men were 2.8% while for women it was 6.2%.

Similar statistics identify higher under-employment for women than for men. Discrimination structures are also indicated by wage differences. For instance, the average daily wage for a female worker in the informal sector is 20% less than what is paid for a male worker.

This is despite the fact that women are on par with men in Sri Lanka in terms of both literacy rates and rates of enrolment in secondary education. In fact, when it comes to tertiary education, women have a higher enrolment rate overall: women accounted for over 58% of university students in Sri Lanka

in 2011.

But even in secondary and tertiary education, cultural and other factors could be pushing women sideways towards educational streams that are less likely to result in economic opportunities, for example, women are overwhelmingly represented in the "Arts" stream in universities, which is the stream that is relatively less successful in translating into attractive employment opportunities.



Women were given the right to vote in Sri Lanka as early as 1931. The country also boasts the world's first female head of government. Women in Sri Lanka also have good access to health care and education in comparison to its neighbours. Despite these significant achievements, women are participating too little, and benefiting even less from the Sri Lankan economy. It would be a good policy to proactively engage the eco-system of the Sri Lankan economy and make it more attractive for women.

(Verité Research provides strategic analysis and advice to government and the private sector in Asia.)