

Plantation Women: From Labor to Citizen

Policy Review on the Status of Plantation Women on Land Rights, Higher Education and Employable Skills for Livelihood

What is it about?



The estate population of Sri Lanka are the descendants of Indian migrants brought by the British Colonials in the 19th century and now they form as a minority community constituting (Estate Sector) about 4.4 percent of the Country's population. Estate population working contribute to the economy of the country by earning nearly 24% of the foreign revenue and, sharing nearly 10% of the total labour force and 4.0% the GDP of the country. They identify also as Indian origin Tamils and Malaiyaga Tamils. They are defined as labour community living in the plantations under a regimented system of labour management and they had been denied the right to mobility and labour rights. The plantation management made responsible for their welfare, including health and education and for the supply of goods needed until nationalization of the British owned plantations in 1972.

This system has gone through some changes with nationalization of the plantations, and the subsequent privatization in 1992. The emergence of Trade unions in 1940s and 1950s and CSOs in 1980s & 1990s resulted in changing the system of plantation management and rights of the labour force.

Women contribute more than 65% of the labour force for the plantation sector in Sri Lanka. Although, the plantation women, have been continuously discriminated than from male counterpart and also subjected to various kinds of oppression when concerning their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and the right to development. **This desk review and field research are attempted to highlight the Status of Plantation Women on Land Rights, Higher Education and Employable Skills for Livelihood situation of plantation women. However, available policies addressing the plantation women, challenges and action needed for women's participation for a sustainable economy growth.**

What are the Issues on Plantation Women?

Women have struggled for their right, livelihood, social status historically and they fight for equal treatment and social status all over the world. In the early part of this century, the right of the plantation women to receive an education, to obtain paid employment & skills, enter professions, access to ownership of land were highly contested issues in Sri Lanka. Thus, the employment options for plantation women were to either labour within the tea or rubber production system, or in the homes of others. The education they received in estate schools and guidance from parents, elders, and management prepared them for no other work.



Women are considered to be the main drivers of both household and the plantation economy. They are mainly engaged in labour tasks such as plucking tea leaves and tapping rubber. Some women in the estate sector working in the garment factories and migrated to Gulf countries mainly as domestic workers. However women tend to be supplementary earners and dependent wives. **They are affected from socio-cultural factors especially by the traditional restrictions of patriarchal gender relations, social norms, lack of health and nutrition, poverty, sexual harassment, poor education, severely limited employment prospect and restriction in land rights.**

What do existing policies say?

Provisions concerning women's access to economic rights and natural resources are embodied in the international human rights law and in international human rights instruments which are highly recognized at international and national levels. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 and International conventions on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Convention on Social Economic and Cultural Rights (ICSECR) of 1966 women have all the rights as their male counterpart enjoy without any discrimination. Article 2 and 17 of UDHR, Article 15 of Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Article 14 (2.g) of CEDAW equality in agrarian reform, Article 16 of CEDAW are ensures equal rights of women in the ownership, acquisition, management of property within the family. This review proposes to explore and analyse the status of the existing policies and policy gaps in the Sri Lanka on the aspects of land rights, access to higher education and skill development for livelihood for plantation sector Women in Sri Lanka.

What are the proposed solutions?

- a) Creating an environment where the plantation women can successfully face the challenges in relation to land rights, access to higher education, employable skills, and to integrate them into the decision making process.
- b) Establish a system and a mechanism to ensure human rights and sustainable development (SDGs) of plantation community particularly plantation women and girls.
- c) Establishing a society in which women attain their full potential and are able to participate as equal partners in all spheres of life and influence in the process of social change.
- d) Eliminating all forms of violence against women through strengthening of policies and legislation programs. It is necessary to reinforce the rights based approach for creating an environment in which women can enjoy their legal rights and equality by freedom from violence and discrimination on economic and social status.
- e) Empowering women in economic, social and political aspects at grass root level through trainings on leadership and decision making process.

Conclusion:

It is an important task and a responsibility for the state's policy makers to eradicate all forms of discrimination against women and empower them in all aspects that make them equal citizens of the country. Developing and empowering of women belong to vulnerable, marginalized and excluded groups (like plantation women, Dalit women, rural women...) and improving their family living standards will lead to overall economic prosperity of the country and social harmony in the world

Land is a source of livelihood and the land rights are increasingly recognized as fundamental factor to social and economic well-being of the people. Nowadays, land issues are of particular concern when population growth, high food prices, impact on climate change and very high pressures on tenure. Moreover women's land rights tend to be restricted. Women traditionally are at a distinct disadvantage in terms of economic affluence because they earn less than men and tend to own fewer assets. Empowering a woman to help her reach financial independency is important. It is also essential to Improve women's land security.



Specific Recommendations on Land Rights :

- ◆ Wife / women name should be registered as Co-owner in the land title deed so she could secure her right to land and assets.
- ◆ Policy should be implemented that men should not be allowed to sell land without his wife's consent.
- ◆ Women should be made aware and trained on land and property rights.
- ◆ Women should empower to make their own decision about land use priorities to escape conflicts.
- ◆ Each plantation worker family should be provided with minimum of 2 acres of land and resource support for livelihood purpose, as mentioned in the 2012 budget speech. So plantation women should incorporate into decision making on land use, production and marketing of the product as individuals or as collective partner.



Education:

Until the recent times, education for women was considered unnecessary and undesirable for female children in plantations, because the girl's future was seen to be limited to plantation work as either tea plucker or rubber tapper.

Education is a key to change the women's lifestyle. It is important to provide girls with the quality education and equal economic opportunities which men gains. Health and nutrition are also to be considered as an important factors which affect the education of plantation women.

Recommendation on Plantation Education.

- The Government should take steps forward to wider the Plantation educations units in the Ministry and provide adequate resources, to develop infrastructure, libraries and science laboratories.
- A policy should be implemented that primary education as compulsory and, secondary and higher education by providing financial incentives in order escape from poverty incidence and improve education in the plantation community.
- Policies to be reinforced at national and community level in the decision making process in order to ending discrimination exist in the forms of gender, ethnicity, class and culture and to address issues physical & mental health issues among plantation children.
- Increasing intake of women students in vocational training/ technical courses in order to overcome critical inputs such as technology skills and entering into formal employment sector such as driving, vehicle repairing, building construction and electrical wiring.



- The vocational trainings should be provided to plantation women in Tamil language.
- Transportation facilities should be expanded in order to higher studies in the urban areas, which is an important factor that impacts the school enrolment rate of girls in plantations.
- Efforts should be made to provide a supportive environment in schools and colleges.
- Effective communication systems should be introduced in order to reach relevant information among plantation women. (Government institutions implement various employment trainings through Divisional Secretariats to raise the livelihood standards of women. Information relating to such programs do not reach the plantation people nor does women.)
- Steps to be taken to appoint well qualified and trained teachers to improve the quality of the plantation education
- Women should be encouraged to follow job oriented educational courses and streams.



Recommendations on Employment:

- Delimitation should be undertaken of the existing Divisional Secretariats and new divisional secretariats should be created for the convenience of the plantation community giving preference to educated women of the plantation workers in filling managerial and field/ factory/ office grade vacancies.
- Provide equal access, participation & opportunity in all careers for vulnerable plantation women.
- Specific budgetary allocations to ensure education, employment and capacity building for employable skills.
- Governments should develop tools for gender analysis and develop necessary policies and programs by the officials.
- Labour law should include, safety and hygiene, trade union rights, protective legislation and prohibiting women from working certain occupation.
- Implement policies to avoid sexual and verbal harassment on women at work places.
- Women should be empowered and liberated from traditional restrictions of patriarchal gender relations and give equal opportunities with men.
- Awareness on communication modes/means to plantation women should be given.
- Policies and working arrangements be established to balancing their career with family responsibilities, ensuring their nutritional needs and physical safety in workplace as well as in their home.

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