

Unemployment Among Educated Sri Lankan Women and Underlying Reasons

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Figure 1 – A Sri Lankan university lecture room where female student representation is noteworthy
Source: Author

Sri Lanka is a nation that has historically set numerous examples in terms of women’s preeminence – from its ruling queens to the first ever democratically-elected woman prime-minister of the world. From neoliberal turn in 1977 to contemporary times, it can be claimed that the progressive disposition of the Sri Lankan working woman has reversed. The unemployment rate of a nation, by definition, is the proportion of the unemployed population to the total labour force. In Sri Lanka the overall unemployment rate reported for females in 2013 was 7%, and 3.3% for males. For all considered age groups, the female unemployment rate was considerably more than that of men (Figure 2). The statistics of 2015 did not yield better results (Figure 3).

Age group (Years)	Sri Lanka	Gender	
		Male	Female
Sri Lanka	4.6	3.3	7.0
15–24	20.1	16.4	26.3
25–29	7.5	5.0	12.0
Over 30	1.7	1.0	2.9

Figure 2 – Table Extracted from Sri Lanka Labour Force Statistics Quarterly Bulletin (Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey – 2013)
Unemployment rate by age group and gender – First quarter 2013, Compiled by Department of Census and Statistics

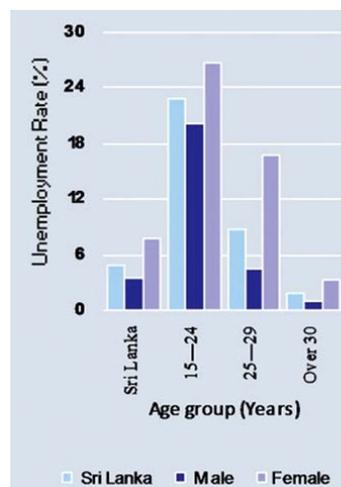


Figure 3 – Chart Extracted from Sri Lanka Labour Force Statistics Quarterly Bulletin (Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey – 2015)
Unemployment rate by age group and gender – Third quarter 2015, Compiled by Department of Census and Statistics

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In Sri Lanka, General Certificate of Education (G.C.E.) Ordinary Level (O/L) is a qualifying examination for the highly-competitive General Certificate of Education (G.C.E.) Advance Level (A/L) examination that helps one to earn a place in one of the few state-sponsored tertiary education institutions. Against this backdrop, according to statistics, the highest unemployment rate was reported from the A/L and above group, which was 9.2% in 2013 (accounting for 6.1% and 12.5% for males and females respectively) (Figure 4). In 2015, the overall rate had risen to 10.1% (where males and females accounted for 6% and 14.1% respectively) (Figure 5). This affirms that the problem of unemployment is more acute in the case of educated females, and the fact that this gap is rapidly widening is alarming.

Level of Education	Unemployment Rate (%)		
	Sri Lanka	Male	Female
Sri Lanka	4.6	3.3	7.0
Below GCE O/L	2.9	2.2	4.4
GCE O/L	6.0	5.4	7.0
GCE A/L & above	9.2	6.1	12.5

Figure 4 – Table extracted from Sri Lanka Labour Force Statistics Quarterly Bulletin (Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey – 2013)

Unemployment rate by level of education – First quarter 2013,
Compiled by Department of Census and Statistics

Level of Education	Unemployment Rate (%)		
	Sri Lanka	Male	Female
Sri Lanka	5.0	3.5	7.8
Below GCE O/L	3.0	2.3	4.5
GCE O/L	6.7	6.0	8.1
GCE A/L & above	10.1	6.0	14.1

Figure 5 – Table extracted from Sri Lanka Labour Force Statistics Quarterly Bulletin (Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey – 2015)

Unemployment rate by level of education – Third quarter 2015,
Compiled by Department of Census and Statistics

The National Human Development Report (NDHR) 2014 on Sri Lanka mentions the still-prevailing stereotypical notions about the ‘right’ place of women in its society. Thus, even the educated women – irrespective of the level of education – have been unable to escape the traditional role of being the ‘home-maker’ in a patriarchal society. Educated and employed women often complain of prejudice against them at the workplace as well as at home.

While contributing to the nation’s workforce, it has been established by numerous sources that, in many cases, females are deprived of equal access to jobs, and receive lesser wages. Moreover, institutional restrictions on access to credit and properties deteriorate the situation.

In terms of university attendees in Sri Lanka, the bulk of them are beneficiaries of free tertiary education, and represent poverty-stricken rural areas. Against this backdrop, when there are two or three unemployed people in a given family while only one person is earning, their per-capita income turns out to be very low, according to a recent survey conducted by University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. This scenario, in fact, deteriorates when one or two members seek higher education instead of employment. Although spending on education is an investment, if graduates remain unemployed, the family runs the risk of falling into deeper poverty; since it has already spent considerably on education. Moreover, the same research yielded other interesting results. Although numerous employment opportunities are advertised in newspapers or on the internet, not enough efforts are generally made by job-seekers to gain the needed qualifications relevant to the prevailing job market. The female graduates, especially, have the negative attitude of looking only for white collar jobs, government jobs, jobs in a preferred field, or those available in the immediate vicinity they live in.

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Underemployment by definition occurs under three circumstances: when a highly-skilled person works for a low salary, works in a low-skilled job, or a part-time worker prefers a full-time opportunity. This phenomenon is a burning issue the world over, where female underemployment is comparatively higher. This, in fact, is one of the reasons why women tend to leave the workforce, or remain unemployed voluntarily. Hence, it has become customary in Sri Lanka that educated females take longer to seek for jobs.

Rural to urban migration, too, plays a vital role in this issue. Although young and single women in the island opt to migrate to urban areas, married women are content to work closer to their households. On the other hand, when people lack job satisfaction due to underutilization of their skills, many try to engage in 'shadow economic activities'. This phenomenon most educated Sri Lankan women partake is not counted as the nation's economy, as it lies outside the tax system. Consequently, even the work contribution these women actually make is omitted in vain.