

Gender Disparities in Labour Force Participation in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Gender disparity is a common feature in the Sri Lankan labour force as in many other Asian countries due to various reasons. In Sri Lanka, females show a low labour force participation than males as majority of females still follow the traditional norms as housewives even though there are many policies to increase female labour force participation. Therefore it is important to investigate the factors influencing the gender disparities in Sri Lankan labour force. This paper attempts to investigate gender disparities in the formal sector employment; in the government, semi government and private sector according to age, sector of employment, education, marital status and ethnicity using the data collected for the Population and Housing Census which was conducted in 2012.

Keywords: Labour force; Employed population; Gender disparities

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Being employed is central to people's wellbeing as it provides an income, social and economic advancement, strengthening individuals, their families and communities. Employment sector has been changed with more organized characteristics such as fixed salary and working time etc. (Akram& Hassan (2013)) with the industrialization in the Western counties in 16th century. In the early stages mainly men were absorbed into the labour market while females were engaged in household duties (Namayandesh, Juhari&Yaacob (2011)). Females were absorbed into the labour market at lower rates compared to males (Gunawardhana (2015)). However in the present world, female labour participation is considered as an important contribution to socio-economic development. However, there are positive and negative outcomes to families and to the societies with the females' entrance to the labour market (Sanaz& et al (2013)). Gender disparities among employees depicts even after years of equality policies in education. However, practices in labour market do not provide a level playing field for men and women in Sri Lanka yet. For instance among the employed population the most striking feature is low labour force participation of women (29 %) as against that of men (71 %) (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). This trend has been observed during the last 3 decades even though gender gap in education has been narrowed down. Gunawardhana (2015) also argued this situation as puzzling questioning, "why Sri Lanka has been unable to translate high girl's education into female labour force participation?".

Does this reflect the fact that benefits of free education do not bring equal results for men and women in the labour market or is it due to the preference among females to be traditional housewives? Or is it due to lack of soft skills accepted from workers in the labour market? Or aren't there suitable jobs around their place of residences expected by women? Or is it due to some other factors such as lack of child protection while they are in the work places? It would be pertinent to do research at the national level to ascertain the real reasons for this situation because these statistics imply a state of national backwardness of females compared to developed countries in the world. Even though there are number of policies implemented to minimize gender inequality in the labour market, females have to bear the large portion of work in the home environment compared to men even in modern society. Therefore, there may be additional factors which affect this situation such as personal attitudes and power relationships in both home and work domains. Some married women quit employment only to takeover household duties after marriage but the issue is to what extent do they enjoy autonomy and dignity in their family? Therefore it is important to examine the possibilities to implement more innovative labor market forces for females including options such as flexi hours and proximity to their homes or work from home. Recently, Ministry of Women and Child Affairs has implemented various workshops to bring awareness of job opportunities available to women while performing their family responsibilities. However, these opportunities are not from organized or the formal sector characterized by fixed working hours and lack of childcare

facilities. Therefore this paper attempts to analyze recent gender disparities among formal sector employment in Sri Lanka.

The Problem and Objectives

Female labour force participation in Sri Lanka is low and stagnate compared to that of males during the past few decades. Is this true for formal sector employment in Sri Lanka? It is interesting to compare gender disparities in government, semi-government and private sector in Sri Lanka using most recent information provided by the Population and Housing Census conducted in 2012. In addition, it is important to investigate this disparity with background characteristics such as age, marital status, education and ethnicity of the formal sector workers.

Objective of this paper is to attempt to understand the gender disparities in the formal sector employment using the above factors.

Data Source and Methods

This study used the information derived from the Census of Population and Housing which was conducted in 2012. This was the 14th Census conducted in Sri Lanka and it is very important as this covers the entire country after 30 years from 1981 onwards.

Gender disparities will be descriptively analysed by using tables and graphs.

Information Collected in Census of Population and Housing 2012 on Employed Population in Sri Lanka

Census of Population and Housing 2012 collected characteristics of usually employed persons aged 15 years and above according to the activities they have involved in 52 weeks prior to the Census date. In addition to that, information was gathered to record the sector of employment under 6 categories namely, government employee, semi-government employee, private sector employee, employer, own account worker and contributing to family enterprise (or unpaid family worker). In addition their background information such as sex, education level, age, marital status, district of usual residence of the employee was also collected. This provided more information to analyze the characteristics of employed persons among different sectors. The article first describes the characteristics of whole employed population together and then analyses main features for employees in government sector, semi government sector and private sector employees separately.

Theoretical Considerations and Eempirical Evidence

Immerging Formal and Informal Sector Employment

New dimensions have been developed in the labour market with more organized way with the forward march of civilization of human beings. Today there are two main sectors in the labour market namely formal and informal sector employment. Any employment could be considered as a contract between two parties namely employee and employer. Employee will be paid for the service rendered by the employer.

In Sri Lanka, employment opportunities are distributed between the formal and informal sectors. A formal sector institution is defined if the institution owns one of the following characteristics.

1. If the institution is registered in the Employment Provident Fund or in the Department of Inland Revenue or
2. If the institute keeps formal accounts or
3. If the number of employees is greater than or equal to 10.

All the other institutions which do not satisfy one of the above conditions are considered as informal. Formal sector institutions comprised with government and semi government sector institutions and private sector institutions which have one of the above conditions. In the Population and Housing Census conducted in 2012, data were collected from individuals about their occupation. The employed persons were asked to report their sector of work under government, semi government, private sector, employer, own account and unpaid family worker categories. Government sector and semi government sector workers belongs to formal sector while there may be some private sector institutions which do not belongs to the definition of the formal sector.

Even though the formal sector is functioning under a rigid set of rules and regulations, workers have to face many challenges in balancing their day to day life due to high demands in the work domain and family domain. As a result, life becomes more stressful and unhealthy if institutional policies do not pay much attention to address them.

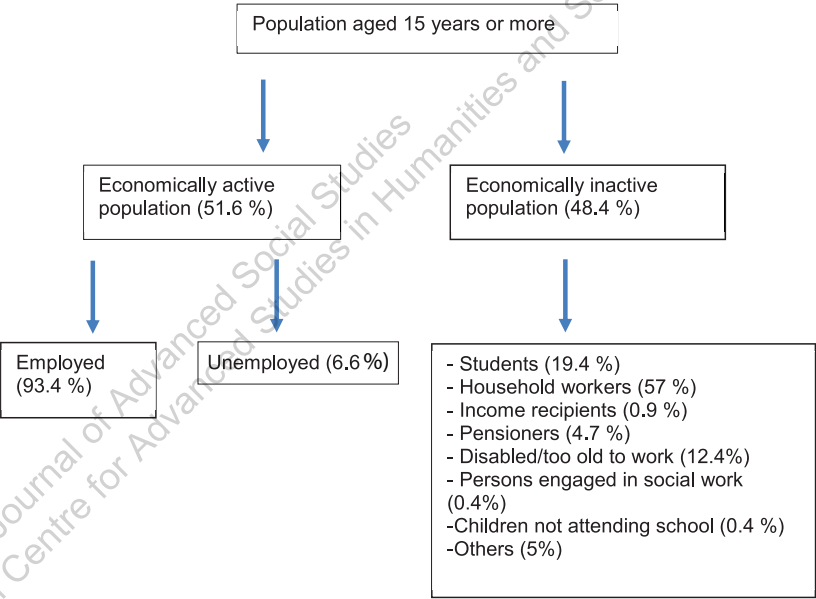
It is important to look at the distribution of the work force initially to understand the background of Sri Lankan labour force. This article attempts to analyze the gender disparities among employed persons using data collected from the Census of Population and Housing which was conducted in 2012 in three formal sector labour markets namely government, semi government and the private sector.

Analysis and Results

Labour Force or economically active population

Labour force or economically active population is comprised of employed and unemployed populations. Census of Population and Housing (2012) revealed that there were 15,227,773 (or 74.8%) people aged 15 years or more living in the country. Of this population 7,857,370 (or 51.6 %) were economically active based on usual employment. Out of the economically active population, 7,335,432 (93.4 %) were employed and 521,938 (or 6.6 %) were unemployed. Following Figure 1 shows the distribution of the population according to economic status clearly.

Figure 1: Distribution of Population (15 Years or more) According to Economic Status



Economically Inactive Population

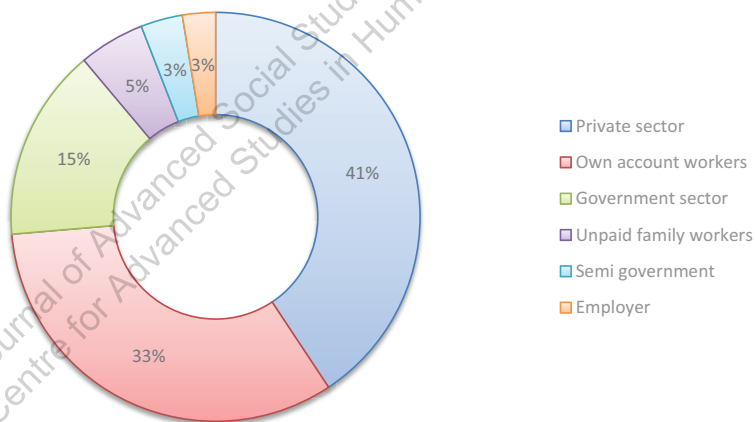
The balance 7,370,403 (or 48.4 %) represents the economically inactive population which includes students, persons engaged in household work, income recipients, pensioners, people who are unable/too old to work, persons engaged in social work, children not attending school and persons engaged in other economic activities.

Characteristics of the Employed Population According to the Status and Sector of Employment

It is interesting to look at the characteristics of employed population according to the status and sector of employment which divide the employed population in to six categories namely government employees, semi government employees, private sector employees, employers, own account workers and unpaid family workers.

Majority of the employed population in Sri Lanka were private sector employees (2,980,361 or 40.6 %) followed by own account workers (2,414,258 or 32.9 %) category followed by, government employees (1,122,734 or 15.2 %), unpaid family worker or contributing to family enterprise (382,410 or 5.2 %), semi government employee (244,989 or 3.3 %) and employer (190,680 or 2.6 %). Following Figure 2 shows the distribution of employed population by sector of employment.

Figure 2: Distribution of Employed Population by Sector of Employment



Source: Department of Census and Statistics,

Let us now look at the gender disparities of the employed population among sectors.

Majority of male and female employees are working in private sector (3 million) followed by own account workers (2.4 million).

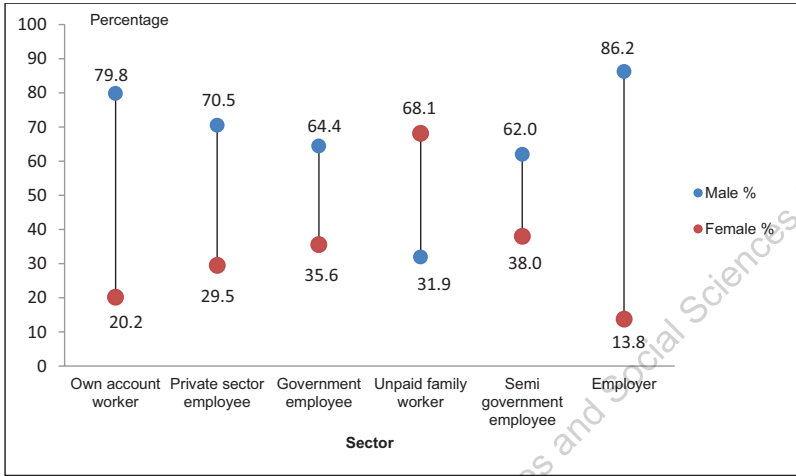
Table 1: Gender Disparities of the Employed Population among Sectors, 2012

Sector	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%	% Difference in Gender Gap (M-F)
Own account worker	1927228	79.8	487030	20.2	2414258	100.0	59.6
Private sector employee	2101865	70.5	878496	29.5	2980361	100.0	41.0
Government employee	723457	64.4	399277	35.6	1122734	100.0	28.8
Unpaid family worker	121879	31.9	260531	68.1	382410	100.0	-36.2
Semi government employee	151992	62.0	92997	38.0	244989	100.0	24.0
Employer	164276	86.2	26404	13.8	190680	100.0	72.4
Total	5190697	70.8	2144735	29.2	7335432	100.0	41.6

Source: Department of Census and Statistics,

Above table shows the gender gap is positive for all sectors, except for 'unpaid family worker' category (-36.2). This implies that the majority of female are engaged as unpaid family worker. Lowest gender gap is reported among the semi government employees (24.0) Census 2012 shows that out of a total employed population, aged 15 years or more, 15.2 percent (or 1.1 million) were Government sector workers. Of these workers, 64.5 percent are male and 35.6 percent are female. Nearly 68 percent of females have reported that they contribute to the labor force as unpaid family workers. This is three times higher than that of male's unpaid family workers. This is one of the striking features that could be observed from the above table. Even though there are number of policies to protect worker's benefits in government sector compared to other sectors, still there is a huge gender gap. Following Figure 3 shows this disparity clearly.

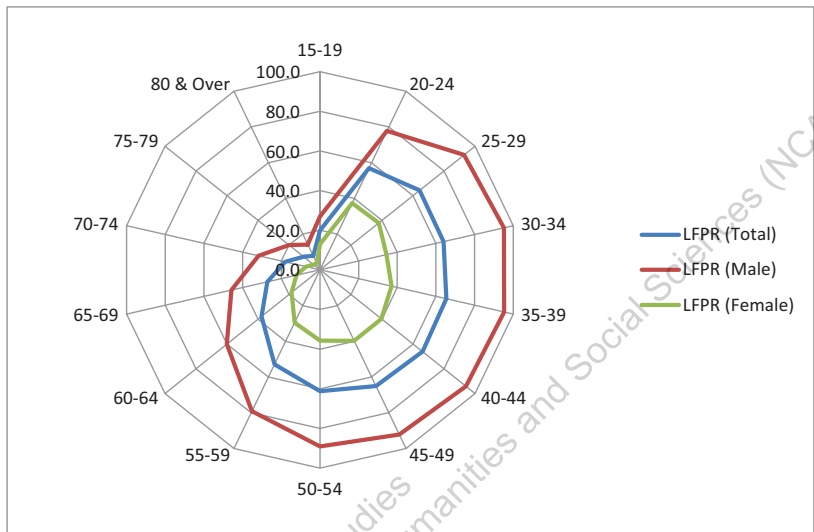
Figure 3: Gender Disparity of Employed Population by Sector 2012



Source: Department of Census and Statistics.

Public sector workers are guided by a set of common rules and regulations. Some of them are out dated for the present society. Attitudes of public sector workers are changing slowly mainly due to the prominent traditional practices which had been imposed during the colonial era by the British. Most apparent practice is maintaining the traditional hierarchical behavior between the staff levels. Due to the lack of cooperation and mismatch of ideas among staff members in the public sector in a country like Sri Lanka workers have to face various conflicts in day to day lives. This imbalance develops stress and strain and passes down to the family domain as fatigue, pain, and unhappiness at the end of the day. In addition due to the habit of postponing duties and slowness, there are always backlogs to clear for the future generation. When compared to the salary of the private sector worker, the salary paid to the public sector worker is low. Pension after retirement is an added benefit.

Figure 4: Age, Sex Specific Labour Force Participation Rates (15 Years and Over) , 2012



Source: Department of Census and Statistics

Above Figure 4 clearly indicates the gender disparity of the labour force participation rate by age is considerably high in all the age groups and it is very high for the working age groups. Special policies are needed to expand the labour market for women in Sri Lanka to improve the labour force participation among females as it improves the wellbeing of society ultimately.

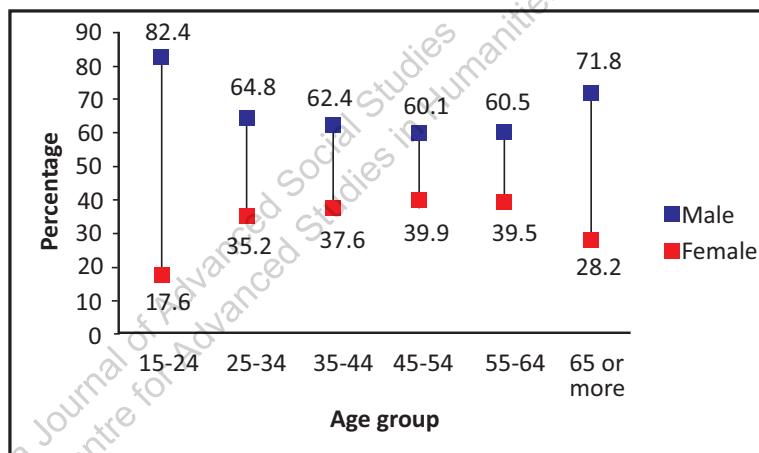
Employed Population by Age and Sex

Table 2 shows that male employees dominate the government sector employment at every age level. Majority of workers of both sexes are in the 35-44 age group. Common feature of the government and semi government sector is the compulsory retirement age while in the other three sectors there is no such age limit. In the semi-government sector the percentage of female labour is comparatively higher than that of the other two sectors. In the private sector female labour force participation is low compared to the other two sectors.

Table 2: Employed population by age and sex, 2012

Age	Government Sector			Semi Government Sector			Private Sector		
	Male	Female	Gender Gap	Male	Female	Gender Gap	Male	Female	Gender Gap
15-24	82.4	17.6	64.8	62.0	38.0	24.0	63.5	36.5	27.0
25-34	64.8	35.2	29.6	56.7	43.3	13.4	72.8	27.2	45.6
35-44	62.4	37.6	24.8	59.0	41.0	18.0	72.5	27.5	45.0
45-54	60.1	39.9	20.2	61.5	38.5	23.0	70.2	29.8	40.4
55-64	60.5	39.5	21.0	65.2	34.8	30.4	72.2	27.8	44.4
65 or more	71.8	28.2	43.6	68.1	31.9	36.2	72.8	27.2	45.6
Total	64.4	35.6	28.8	66.8	33.2	33.6	70.5	29.5	51.0

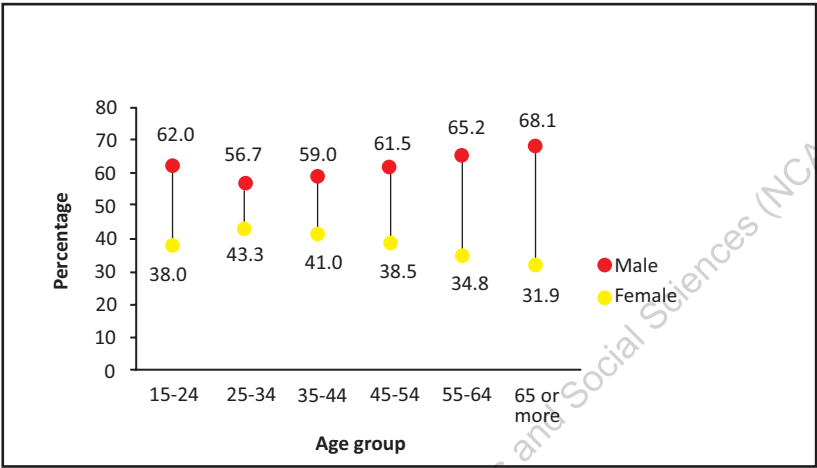
Source: Department of Census and Statistics,

Figure 5a : Gender Disparity in Employees of Government Sector

Source: Department of Census and Statistics,

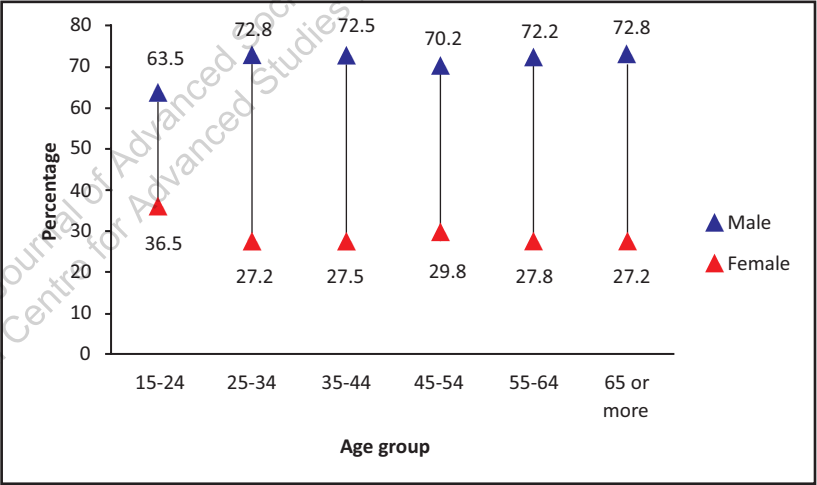
Figure 5a shows the gender disparity in the government sector by age. The gap is wide in the extreme age groups and narrows down in 45-54 age group

Figure 5b: Gender disparity in employees Semi Government sector



Gender disparity is high in the lowest age group and the gap is minimized in 25-34 age group. After that the gender gap is again starts to increase with increasing the age.

Figure 5c: Gender Disparity in Private Sector



Gender disparity in private sector is high in all age groups except the lowest age group. However, compared to other two sectors, female's participation in the private sector is slightly low.

Employed Population by education and sex

Table 3: Employed Population by Educational Attainment and Sex, 2012

Educational attainment	Government Sector		Semi Government Sector		Private Sector	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Primary	2.4	1.5	12.9	23.9	18.2	22.4
Secondary	32.3	5.0	31.7	17.3	47.1	37.5
Tertiary	52.4	61.9	47.8	48.6	32.0	36.6
Degree	9.0	23.3	5.4	7.7	2.1	2.9
Masters and above	3.9	8.2	2.2	2.5	0.6	0.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

According to this table, male employees have low incidents of higher educational qualifications compared to the female employees in all 3 sectors. This shows that although female employees are less in number, they are better educated. Majority of the male employee domination in education is only up to the tertiary level in government and semi government sector while in private sector majority of males and females were educated up to secondary level.

Gender Disparities in Labour Force Employed Population by Marital Status

Table 4: Employed Population by Marital Status and Sex, 2012

Marital status	Government Sector		Semi Government Sector		Private Sector	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Single	23.3	18.1	16.8	19.2	25.1	32.7
Married	75.9	78.3	82.1	75.0	73.2	57.7
Widowed	0.2	2.4	0.5	4.0	0.6	6.3
Divorced or Separated	0.5	1.1	0.7	1.7	1.1	3.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

The above Table 4 shows the marital status among male and female employees in the three sectors. Majority of males and females are reported as married in all sectors. Such an analysis will require data on dual and single working families. It is also important to note that the number of widowed/divorced or separated females is higher than that of males. Percentage of divorced or separated female is higher in the private sector compared to other sectors.

Employed Population by Ethnicity and Sex**Table 5: Employed Population by Ethnicity and Sex, 2012**

Ethnicity	Government Sector		Semi Government Sector		Private Sector	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Sinhalese	89.2	84.7	73.5	62.6	73.3	76.5
Tamil	6.0	9.4	9.0	9.2	12.3	9.3
Moor	0.9	1.6	13.3	26.4	5.9	11.7
Burgher	3.7	4.1	3.7	1.5	7.7	2.0
Malay	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.3
Other	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.3	0.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Ethnically there is a significant variation in work life practices. The public sector work force in Sri Lanka is composed of all ethnicities. The above Table 5 shows that, among Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil communities, a higher percentage of females have secured public sector employment compared to males. The lowest percentage of female employees has been recorded from the SL moor community. Thus it would be interesting to observe how each community maintains work- family contentment with different degrees of female labour force participation.

Conclusion

Above findings show that there are enough evidences for the existence of gender disparity among formal sector workers in Sri Lanka. To minimize this gap, females should change their dependent attitudes. In addition, there should be quality day care facilities for young working mothers. Males should change their traditional attitudes towards household duties that household duties are not their responsibility. In the contemporary world, there are many ways to improve the quality of life by sharing household duties among married couples.

Semi Government sector shows the lowest gender disparity compared to the other two sectors. There may be more family friendly policies in this sector than other two sectors. It is interesting to notice that the females in the Government sector are more educated than males. This is an interesting finding which should be explored further. Females have more potential to develop their carrier which ultimately enhances their family wellbeing.

Since females have a huge responsibility in producing children for future generations, they should have opportunities to join the labour market at even later ages. However, the age limit is same for male and female in

many formal sector job opportunities. According to the latest life expectancy (Department of Census and Statistics, 2016), females (78.6 years) is higher than males (72.0 years). Hence, females should earn and save for their old age without being a burden on their children. Therefore, to minimize the gap, more female friendly employment opportunities should be created. In addition, employment policies should be revised in par with the 'decent work' concepts put forwarded by the International Labour Organization.

Even though women's household duties are imperative for the wellbeing of families and to the society, it is considered as unpaid work (Kaila, 2005). Census 2012 revealed that, of the total population aged 15 or more years, 48.4 percent are inactive. Out of this inactive population, 28 percent are engaged in household work. Only 3.1 percent of men aged 15 years and above are engaged in household work while the corresponding figure for women stands at 50 percent. For a developing country like Sri Lanka, one cannot ignore the difference that could be made by converting inactive people to active by using their contribution for the betterment of the society. Therefore, there should be more opportunities for females who like to work at home with their knowledge and capabilities.

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