



RURAL WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION
AND RECOGNITION IN SUSTAINABLE
AGRICULTURAL LIVELIHOODS
ACROSS THEIR LIFE-COURSE,
IN POST-WAR SRI LANKA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
MARCH 2018



Knuckles Mountains, Central Province, Sri Lanka.
Photo: Daniel Klein

Cover Image: Mrs K.H. Ranjane. Miniethiliya, Ambalantota, Hambantota District, Sri Lanka.
Photo: Pavithra Jovan de Mello/OxfamAUS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This exploratory study, carried out between 2014-2016, examined how rural women in the Hambantota, Polonnaruwa and Ampara districts of post-war Sri Lanka participated in agricultural livelihoods, and the barriers and facilitators they faced in doing so. The findings presented here are based on a survey of 2093 women and in-depth life narrative interviews with 66 women from all three districts. This research emphasised women's participation through their life course, contextualised against the social, political and institutional interactions within a broader political economy. Our purpose was to generate insight and evidence to inform policy and advocacy on the ground, and to promote more equitable participation and recognition of rural Sri Lankan women in agriculture.

The end of the war in 2009 has not eventuated in sustainable livelihoods for rural women in this study. Most women have tried several livelihood options, from agriculture to non-agricultural micro-business, not only in the 7 years since the end of the war, but throughout their life course. The everyday banality and daily challenge of poverty and the lack of sustainable livelihood choices are a source of insecurity for women, and their message to researchers, the state, NGOs and prospective employers is clear: rural women need livelihood opportunities that are ongoing and stable, and that take into account their roles and responsibilities in the household.

The findings show the enormous contribution made by rural Sri Lankan women from all ethnic and religious groups. The majority of women in the sample (aged in their late teens to over 60) were married with children. Women participated in almost all agricultural tasks however, there were no reports of women operating machinery such as tractors.

Women's labour contribution to agriculture was made up of:

- paid or compensated labour in the production of food as day labour or in commercial farms
- unpaid labour in food production in family-owned cultivations
- subsistence labour (e.g. home gardening)
- unpaid labour such as care work (cooking, cleaning, child rearing) alongside other social reproductive work such as community work and political canvassing.

Women's contribution to unpaid labour in agricultural livelihoods begins in their early teens. Many of these young women at the same time engaged in unpaid social reproductive labour that support adults to sustain livelihoods. However, engagement in agriculture declined sharply in the period when most women got married and began to have children; during the same period, participation in any other livelihood activity peaked. Women were responsible for almost all cooking and cleaning

within the household, as well as overseeing children's welfare, maintaining home gardens (thereby strengthening household food security), and 'helping' spouses with paddy cultivation, if not directly participating in waged cultivation. By their 40s, participation in agriculture began to increase exponentially over time, but engagement in other livelihood activities dropped overall.

Barriers/hindrances to participation and recognition included conflict (during and post), ill-health and disabilities, gender norms around social reproduction, domestic violence, climate factors such as drought and flood, disruptions from wildlife, unsustainable/unavailable markets, high costs of inputs or underpayment, political patronage and restricted mobility. All these factors prevented participation in agricultural livelihoods. Enablers included support for social reproductive tasks such as childcare, land and asset access, training, and participation in collectives. Some factors, such as access to financial capital, both enabled and hindered production. Below, key hindrances and enablers are discussed.

Prohibitive gender norms around involvement in agricultural activities had disappeared over time in Hambantota and Polonnaruwa as well as in the Tamil community in Ampara. Yet, in the Muslim community in Ampara, gender norms reinforced women's seclusion, where norms around mobility and public economic participation (e.g. in public markets) had tightened since the 1990s. Thus, these women were confined to the household, significantly limiting their ability to engage in agriculture, or indeed any livelihood beyond the household. Overall, these women felt an acute sense of deprivation from all potential sources of support.

Across the regions, ethnic groups, and religions, there was a set of widely accepted gender norms, including norms, expectations and duties around social reproduction and motherhood, which limited participation in agriculture in all communities. However, women who received support (e.g. childcare) were able to continue participation in the agricultural sector. Only a small proportion of women received such support.

Although women had the most independent influence over social reproductive tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and care of children, they lacked autonomous influence in their own households over factors related to agricultural production. Women did not have discretionary control over important assets within the family, especially over inputs to agriculture such as machinery. This correlated to patterns in asset ownership. Men owned factors of production such as land and capital resources. Some 30% of the women in the study owned land, much of it residential rather than agricultural. Landlessness prevented participation, an issue that was acute for second-generation settlers in areas such as Hambantota. Women were likely to own assets such as large consumer durables, small consumer durables and jewellery. However, many did report joint consultative power in use and selling of larger assets, although it is unclear how this plays out in day-to-day life.

Yet, even though women did not own land in large numbers, they still participated in agriculture through casual day-labour, commercial farming, or home-based gardening. The former two activities generally yielded low levels of monetary compensation, were seasonal and at times unsustainable owing to care responsibilities.

Asset boosters such as credit and finance facilities both helped and debilitated women's ability to participate in agricultural livelihood activity. Micro-credit providers (private, NGO-led, and state-run) were ubiquitous except in Ampara, where the lack of access to finance inhibited initial engagement. Elsewhere, inability to repay loans resulted in the exit from agriculture or shifting participation patterns. The majority of loans were taken to sustain existing cultivation activities, particularly paddy. When harvests failed, women became indebted, leading to land loss, and working as day labour elsewhere.

There were large training deficits among this cohort. Although a few women received short-term training from CBOs, NGOs and government programmes (that often channelled them out of agriculture), women had little or no access to new skill and knowledge acquisition pertaining to agriculture through their life course. Education-wise, the majority had a 10th grade education. Less than 1% of the survey reported participating in agriculture-related vocational education. Commonly referred to as 'extension services', government officials interviewed as part of the study viewed state-run technical colleges to be of negligible interest to the local areas. Skills gained during childhood and youth sustained participation in agriculture, especially as women aged. Others learned new skills via social networks, including in-laws and husbands.

Outside of the household, the survey found that there was little overall engagement among the cohort in civic participation including, surprisingly, in women's groups. The lowest participation rates were in groups directly related to agriculture (3% or lower); the highest were in funeral welfare societies. Those participating took on a significant amount of responsibility, which in some cases added to their time burden (e.g. attending meetings).

The qualitative research demonstrated that there were numerous state-run, CBO and INGOs and other networks of collective organisations in the rural areas researched. Women participated in these to varying degrees, from passive meeting attendance, to taking on an active leadership role in CBOs (in the qualitative literature). Participation in CBOs gave access to resources including social capital such as networks, training, finance, housing, advocacy on their behalf and, most strikingly, enabled women to develop their confidence and leadership capacities, including their ability to advocate with various officials on behalf of their communities. Training in paddy cultivation, organic methods and sustainable water management enabled some women to participate in agriculture. However, this alone did not help them sustain agricultural engagement owing to the other factors, such as social reproduction roles, discussed here.

Political patronage structured all of the communities to some extent. One of the most prominent officials consulted as the first port of call at the village level was the Grama Niladhari, to seek assistance to do with living conditions or livelihood matters. In some communities, village level officials blocked access to resources and opportunity owing to personal disputes or enabled access owing to favouritism including political loyalties. Regardless, women instrumentally participated in political networks to access resources such as land and employment, but this did not guarantee access to sustainable livelihoods. Having successfully engaged in meetings and canvassing for Ministers, some were able to access land permits, employment for children, or housing assistance. This was discriminatory for those who did not engage in these activities; they felt they were unable to access the resources needed. Moreover, engagement with political patronage was a long-term commitment that required much time and labour from the women, which also added to their time burden.

Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that women relied more on social networks such as family and neighbours rather than official state or even NGO sources to access

information and opportunities related to land, employment, education, livelihood opportunities, childcare, and multiple forms of security.

The factors discussed above could often not be isolated from each other: they were mutually reinforcing and, as such, need to be addressed in this way. Gendered structural, economic, cultural and political elements need to be unsettled both by challenging gender norms and by designing policy and development practices that are cognisant of women's unpaid and paid labour, roles and responsibilities in agrarian households and communities. Sri Lankan rural women face a duality of being ever-present in agricultural economies, but invisible in policy, which has deepened their marginalisation. It is time to recognise their contribution to Sri Lanka.

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Ranjani Kumari, 29yrs, farming cauliflowers with loan support from RGNK/Oxfam. Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka
Photo: Tom Greenwood/OxfamAUS

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS, PLANNERS, AND IMPLEMENTERS

1 **Develop a gender-sensitive integrated national plan to promote gender equality, rural livelihoods and sustainable agriculture.**

- Align agricultural policy with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #5 to ensure gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, and Goal #2 to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
- Ensure that all agriculture policy is in line with the Policy Framework and National Action Plan to Address Sexual and Gender Based Violence, and is evidence-based – including use of gender analysis.
- Policy should recognise that ‘women’ are not a homogeneous group: life course stage, ethnicity, and local contexts matter.
- Decouple ‘youth’ from ‘women’ in policy making. The tendency to treat ‘women and youth’ in the same policy is factually incorrect as ‘youth’ can include boys as well as girls. Although youth and women share some similar challenges, the challenges women face are different to men and boys.
- Work with the Ministry of Finance to ensure that a gender responsive budgeting process is implemented for all agricultural planning, policy, programme formulation, assessment of needs, allocation of resources, implementation, auditing, and impact evaluations.
- A gender analysis of existing markets, policy and value chains should be conducted e.g. of programs such as the Food Production National Program 2016-2018. This will mean asking the question of whether men and women are able to participate in and benefit from this National Program, or whether the programme entrenches existing norms. It will also mean assessing the outcomes of the programmes and measuring impact on equality.
- Develop gender disaggregated data that takes into account women’s unpaid, uncounted contributions in all areas of agriculture.
- The state institution with the highest political clout, in conjunction with the Ministry of Development Strategies and International Trade and the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, should work in collaboration to develop an integrated national plan to address gender equality, livelihoods and sustainable agriculture.
- Concrete action plans and targets should be developed through consultation of communities, civil society and state institutions.

2 **Ensure that all the institutions involved in translating policy into practice are gender mainstreamed:**

- Gender mainstreaming should extend to the relevant agricultural ministries, including: the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Rural Economy, Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, Ministry of Plantation Industries, and Ministry of Irrigation. Moreover, authorities such as the Department of Agriculture, Department of Agrarian Services, Provincial Councils and Provincial Ministries, Mahaweli Authority, as well as institutions such as the Hector Kobbekaduwa Agrarian Research and Training Institute, and universities including regional universities such Ruhunu University and Eastern University, should be consulted and involved.
- In addition to gender/woman focused roles within these organizations, identify leaders in these departments among high-level ranks that may be outside of ‘gender/ women focused’ work who can act as champions inside these organisations.
- Personnel should receive training and capacity building support to engage in gender mainstreaming, which encourages reflection and learning.
- Support cross institutional bridge-building and focus on problem driven approaches.

3 **Recognise, explore, and address the enduring relationship between different forms of violence that impact women’s lives and agricultural livelihood engagement.**

- All stakeholders should recognise that violence in multiple manifestations (e.g. from structural violence such as land dispossession, multiple forms of domestic violence, and the violence of insurgencies, war and conflict) impact opportunities and access to all the forms of resources needed to engage in agricultural livelihoods.
- The Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, civil society, regional government authorities, police, legal aid commissions and women’s development organizations should invest in programmes that help to educate, prevent and address violence against women.
- Adopt a National Action Plan for women as mandated under United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which affirms the vital role and equal participation of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction.

4 Ensure that agricultural and supporting policies/ programs, while standardised across the country, are flexible and targeted towards women in different life stages. Women at different stages of their lives, situated in different regions, have different needs.

- War-affected communities and war-affected women need support to help build up agricultural livelihoods.
- Girls should be encouraged to continue schooling rather than dropping out when they are under 18 years of age. Encouragement and education can come from civil society or the state to stay in school longer through extra support and resources.
- Consider targeting vocational and technical training policy and programmes to girls who drop out early.
- Women over the age of 40 participate in large numbers in agriculture but have little access to training and opportunity. Consider targeting vocational and technical training policy and programmes to older women. Ensure appropriate and accessible design of learning material.
- Ensure policy includes initiatives that are designed keeping in mind care responsibilities. Aim to recognise, reduce or redistribute these responsibilities via supportive policy and programmes.
- Account for and develop programmes and policy for women with disabilities.

5 With the International Labour Organisation, research and strengthen regulation and practice around agricultural labour conditions on commercial farms and wage labour.

- Review working conditions in agriculture across the island.
- Work with the International Labour Organization (ILO), industry groups, employers to develop code of conduct for agriculture labour; connect to the SDGs.
- Support development of an inspections system for farm labour.

6 Work with existing agencies, communities, grassroots level women leaders, NGOs and CBOs to define key areas of women's empowerment in agriculture to build community responsive and contextual policy for diverse cohorts of women.

- Work with the community to:
 - ▶ Share knowledge about international and national standards and targets such as the Sustainable Development Goals.
 - ▶ Seek out the voices of communities to understand what empowerment feels and looks like.
 - ▶ Identify areas where women already take on leadership roles and decision making, so interventions will not undermine their leadership.
 - ▶ Identify whether any policies will intensify gender-based violence.
 - ▶ Design policies and programmes that do not add additional unpaid labour for women.
 - ▶ Ensure non-partisan selection processes for inclusion in these endeavours (see below).

7 Women have greater time and mobility constraints than men, as gender norms and expectations place primary responsibility for child-care and domestic duties on women. These responsibilities directly influence the type of work that women can participate in and the location where work occurs. Thus, help change the narrative and behaviours:

- Support national awareness campaigns in local communities targeting women to help themselves assert their identity as producers as well as mothers and wives.
 - ▶ Instigate a national conversation on who is a 'farmer'. Even women who do not own farming land are still farmers, engaging in waged labour or home gardening.
 - ▶ Build on tradition rather than rejecting tradition. Sri Lankan society venerates motherhood; celebrate social reproduction as valuable and encourage conversation about what motherhood means in terms of labour contribution. Women are mothers, farmers, producers, 'food heroes' – all these roles help to contribute to rural society.
- Highlight where tradition has broken down for the better (e.g. women no longer banned from fields).
- Support policy and projects that recognise, reduce or redistribute social reproductive labour responsibilities.
 - ▶ For example, consider subsidised childcare, and training of a cadre of childcare workers that will generate employment but also enable others to participate in agriculture. Childcare is itself a devalued occupation that attracts very low wages. However, this presents an opportunity to explore different modes of childcare delivery such as cooperatives where workers can also gain higher returns.
- Consider a national conversation that challenges assumptions about gender roles in the household and the value of women's labour in all areas identified.
- Engage with men and boys as well as women and girls. Spouses are important influencers of livelihood and caring decisions.
- Pay attention to regional differences among different cohorts such as Tamil, Sinhalese, and Muslim women as well as caste and class groups.
 - ▶ Aside from a national conversation, ensure that the conversation is region/district specific.
- Work with local community leaders, advocacy groups, community development specialists, and women in Ampara to address constraints among the Muslim cohort.
- Help change norms around suitable education for rural women; promote vocational and technical training.



Kumudu Devi, 38yrs.
Home gardener with Oxfam/KPNDU support.
Vakarai, Batticaloa district, Sri Lanka.
Photo: Tom Greenwood

8 Revise and reinvigorate technical training and vocational training in rural areas.

- Give women access to extension services and technical training that encompass agricultural knowledge. Utilise existing training infrastructure such as rural training centres.
- Change norms around 'suitable' education for women; they should not only be channelled into micro-enterprise.
- Include topics such as sustainability and sustainable agriculture and entrepreneurial training in extension courses.
- Explore designing specific inclusive vocational education programmes for women farmers with low levels of education.
- Design education programmes in a flexible manner so that women can take up the opportunities, e.g. hold them during school hours or other times women can attend.
- Provide childcare facilities.
- Train and employ more women instructors.
- Ensure trainers and teachers have knowledge about women farmers.
- Consider forming partnerships with universities and university students e.g. at Ruhunu to provide training services.
- Reinvigorate the notion of the "Farmer Field School Approach" to include discussions of all forms of agriculture (traditionally, it was focused on paddy), sustainability and eco-friendly forms of farming.

9 Recognise that women are not accessing resources and information through official sources, and often rely on social networks:

- With civil society, assess why more women are not approaching official outlets for information (e.g. councils, Mahaweli authority).
- Explore alternative models of information sharing.
- Strengthen communities and families to facilitate communication. Explore the strengths and weaknesses of traditional communication processes; do they omit women? How can they be revised to include women?
- ▶ Support initiatives that advocate for participatory communication efforts.

10 Have greater regulation and guidelines to regulate all forms of microfinance (private, public and NGO sector).

- Microfinance Institutions need to be more transparent with clients on their charges, terms and conditions.
- Support programmes that help women to make informed decisions and to differentiate between different providers/sources as well as their services.
- Complemented by capacity-building of agencies such as the Cooperatives Ministry, Central Bank of Sri Lanka to properly monitor and supervise the industry, as well as to be gender sensitive of the relevant factors.
- Support community driven micro credit systems using successful example. Strengthen policies to ensure the reliability of such systems

RECOMMENDATION FOR ADVOCACY & PROGRAMME PLANNING

1 Advocate to various stakeholders the importance of gender mainstreaming agricultural policy, practice and programmes.

- Share and disseminate the results and recommendations of this and similar studies to raise awareness from the grassroots level to the policymakers about women's multiple forms of labour contribution and participation in agriculture.
 - ▶ This may require building a business and social case as to why gender mainstreaming is important, e.g. build and share a case as to why women should not be solely responsible for childcare and other social reproductive tasks.
- Help identify 'champions' of equality across various government departments related to agriculture and not just those in gender/women focused roles.
- Work with a university, the UN or other experts to help provision training and capacity building for ministries and government department.
- Work in partnership with stakeholders to conduct research projects and development of gender sensitive indicators. Be the champion of this type of analysis.

2 Use the Sustainable Development Goals #2 and #5 as a strategic point for advocacy.

- Work regionally to extend this discussion with neighbouring countries, arrange exchanges with other regions to learn and share information.

3 Recognise that women in different life stages have different needs e.g. young women, women entering into childbearing years, elder women, and as such, programmes should be tailored to specific life course stages.

- Target young women to either (a) stay in school or (b) if they are unable to continue, orient towards technical and vocational education using existing networks.
- Explore models of community-based childcare/childcare cooperatives that also offer fair wages for workers.
- Ensure programme participation does not impose greater time burdens on women, provide childcare for example.
- Older women lack access to educational/upskilling opportunities; ensure training is accessible to all.
- Women with disabilities require programmes that are inclusive.

4 Support or instigate a national and regional campaign/conversation on gender roles in the household and how to value labour.

- Support national awareness campaigns in local communities targeting women to help themselves assert their identity as producers as well as mothers and wives.
 - ▶ Instigate a national conversation on who is a 'farmer'. Even women who do not own farming land are still farmers, engaging in waged labour or home gardening.
 - ▶ Build on tradition rather than rejecting tradition. Sri Lankan society venerates motherhood; celebrate social reproduction as valuable and encourage conversation about what motherhood means in terms of labour contribution. Women are mothers, farmers, producers, 'food heroes' – all these roles help to contribute to rural society.

5 Highlight where tradition has broken down for the better (e.g. women no longer banned from fields).

- Support policy and projects that recognise, reduce or redistribute social reproductive labour responsibilities.
 - ▶ For example, consider subsidised childcare, and training of a cadre of childcare workers that will generate employment but also enable others to participate in agriculture. Childcare is itself a devalued occupation that attracts very low wages. However, this presents an opportunity to explore different modes of childcare delivery such as cooperatives where workers can also gain higher returns.

6 Build community, collectivisation, and leadership so women and male allies can work together to address these issues with stakeholders.

- Stop treating women as ‘beneficiaries’; approach women as political agents.
- Arrange childcare collectives for meetings/collective groups so women can participate more; make this a permanent budget line in grant applications, project plans and costing.
- Create opportunities for long term engagement including leadership. Build women’s capacity to advocate for themselves.
- Support women’s leadership in community level politics to ensure women are in a position to decide their needs and act upon them.
- Sensitise men with respect to the gendered division of labour in households, care work, and violence against women through community level activities.
- Bring together the community and powerful stakeholders in various forums to help define women’s empowerment in agriculture.
- Work with local farmers, associations, groups and collectives to build awareness and support changes in structures to be more inclusive of women.
- Explore the importance of social networks and participatory communication methodologies, which emphasise horizontal communication exchange.
- Support collectivisation in all arenas.
 - ▶ Consider facilitating the formation of a national association or movement of women farmers/food producers.
 - ▶ Unionise waged agricultural workers, as well as casualised labour. Reach out to non-partisan unions who may be sympathetic and value gender equality including in leadership.

7 Support revitalisation of technical training and vocational training in rural areas, using existing infrastructure.

- Help to change norms around ‘suitable’ education for women.
- Advocate for sustainability/sustainable agriculture and entrepreneurial training.
- Aid design and delivery of training for women farmers with low levels of education, or low levels of mobility, e.g. reinvigorate the notion of “Farmer Field School Approach”.
- Ensure revitalisation includes provision of childcare facilities.
- Advocate for the training and employment of more women instructors.

8 Recognise, explore, and address the enduring relationship between different forms of violence that impact women’s lives and agricultural livelihood engagement.

- Recognise that violence in multiple manifestations (e.g. from structural violence such as land dispossession, multiple forms of domestic violence, and the violence of insurgencies, war and conflict) impacts opportunities and access to the all forms of resources needed to engage in agricultural livelihoods.
- Invest in programmes that help to educate, prevent and address violence against women.
- Advocate for the adoption of a National Action Plan for women as mandated under United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which affirms the vital role and equal participation of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction.
- Reevaluate delivery of microfinance programmes

9 Review microfinance programmes

- Support programmes that help women to make informed decisions and to differentiate between different providers/sources as well as their services.
- Ensure microfinance programmes are implemented with financial literacy and business development training programmes.

Mrs.K.H.Ranjanee & Daughter,
Hambantota District, Miniethiliya, Ambalantota Sri Lanka.
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Back Cover Image: Matara, Sri Lanka
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