

# Briefing Notes

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**SRI LANKA:**

**WOMEN**

**RIGHTS**

**CHALLENGES**

**INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2025**

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## INTRODUCTION

The CEDAW held its Sri Lanka review on 13 February 2025, just three weeks before International Women’s Day. The Sri Lankan government decided to have week-long programs to commemorate International Women’s Day 2025 at national, provincial, district, and divisional levels ending on 08 March under the theme of “Building a Sustainable Tomorrow: Her Strength is the Path.”

In its concluding observations, CEDAW expressed its concern about the high prevalence of sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence. The Committee also expressed its deep concerns about the increasing restrictions on non-governmental organisations, including women’s organisations, and women human rights defenders. Additionally, the Committee noted that funding restrictions and bureaucratic obstacles disproportionately hinder the work of women’s rights organisations, particularly those operating in conflict-affected areas.

On this International Women’s Day, this Briefing Note looks at the rights and challenges faced by women in Sri Lanka.

The recommendations provided under Way Forward are not exhaustive due to time and space limitations.

**“The Commission believes that the new government, that intentionally mobilized women based on their rights during elections, presents a unique opportunity for law reform and also to strengthen state institutions’ respect for the rights of women and sexual and gender minorities. The Commission urges the government, therefore, to present a comprehensive roadmap for the implementation of the CEDAW related law reforms that it promised.”**

*- Prof. Farzana Haniffa, Commissioner, Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka at the CEDAW review of Sri Lanka.*



*Mobilisation of women became the springboard for the NPP election campaign  
Photo credit: NPP Facebook.*



## FACT BOX

- **Population:** Women comprise approximately **52%** of Sri Lanka's total population of around **23 million**.
- **Life Expectancy:** Female life expectancy is **80.9 years**, compared to **73.6 years** for men. (WHO)
- **Literacy Rate:** The female literacy rate stands at **92%**, slightly lower than the male literacy rate of **93%**. (World Bank)
- **Labor Force Participation:** Only **35%** of Sri Lankan women are engaged in the workforce, compared to **75%** of men. (World Bank)
- **Female Workers:** Sri Lanka's foreign exchange earnings rests on the backs of women workers, who predominantly populate the garment sector, tea exports and migrant workers to the Middle East. (IPE)
- **Political Representation:** Women comprise only **9.8%** of seats in Parliament since Nov 2024.
- **Gender Pay Gap:** Women earn, on average, 30-36% less than their male counterparts. This gap is even wider in the informal sector, where many women are employed. (ILO)
- **Intimate Partner Violence:** Estimated 40% (95% CI 38% - 42%) of women aged 15 years or older reported experiencing physical, sexual, emotional, and/or economic violence and/or controlling behaviours by a partner in their lifetime. (pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)
- **Gender-Based Violence:** 90% of Sri Lankan women and girls have faced sexual harassment in public buses and trains, while 1 in 4 women report having experienced physical and/or sexual violence since age 15. (UNFPA 2019)



## CHALLENGE: SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BARRIERS

- Sri Lankan society is deeply rooted in patriarchal norms and values, which often place women in subordinate roles. This limits their opportunities for education, employment, and leadership positions. Women are often expected to prioritize family responsibilities over personal ambitions. Traditional values rate boys higher than girls and stereotyping of girls as weak gender is prevalent. Empowering women and improving their status often face resistance due to entrenched cultural norms and attitudes.
- Cultural and social attitudes often blame victims of gender-based violence rather than the perpetrators. This leads to underreporting of incidents such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and rape.
- Cultural expectations often dictate that women should prioritize family and household responsibilities over personal and professional aspirations. This can hinder their ability to pursue higher education and career opportunities.
- Despite some progress, women remain underrepresented in political and decision-making positions. This lack of representation can result in policies and laws that do not adequately address women's needs and concerns.

## WAY FORWARD

- Adopt a comprehensive strategy with proactive and sustained measures, targeted at women, men, girls and boys at all levels of society, including community and religious leaders, to eliminate patriarchal attitudes, discriminatory stereotypes and social norms concerning the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and in society, allocate sufficient resources to, and ensure monitoring and evaluation of, its implementation.
- Build the capacity of public officials and media professionals to address gender stereotypes, including by using gender-responsive language, combat women's objectification and promote positive media portrayals of women as active agents of change.

- CEDAW concluding observations, Sri Lanka review, February 2025.



*Cabinet of Ministers, Sri Lanka Photo credit PMD, Sri Lanka*

## CHALLENGE: LOW POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

- Despite a history of female political leaders, female parliamentary representation in the legislature is low. The current proportion of women in the Parliament remains alarmingly low at 9.78 percent, less than half the regional average (22.1 percent).
- The governing National Peoples' Power has 140 male MPs and 19 female MPs. Its cabinet comprises 20 male members and 2 female members. There are 29 deputy ministers and all of them are male. Altogether the ratio of male-female in ministerial positions is 49:2 while the ratio in the government is almost 7:1. (NPP website)
- Gender bias, patriarchal norms, and lack of party support hinder women's political participation. Violent and authoritative male behaviour discourages women from entering politics.

## WAY FORWARD

- One of the Government's key electoral pledges has been to increase women's political participation by 50% by making necessary structural and social changes in the coming years.
- Sri Lanka's first National Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security for 2023 to 2027, has been launched with the support of the Government of Japan and UN Women. The Action Plan was developed through an inclusive process of broad consultations based on the understanding that, to reflect ground realities, it should reach beyond the Government to non-government entities and the general populace.  
- Sri Lanka Minister of Women and Child Affairs at the CEDAW hearing on 17 Feb 2025.
- Introduce statutory quotas requiring political parties to ensure 50:50 parity, subject to fines in case of non-compliance, for the nomination of candidates at elections to the Parliament and provincial and local councils.
- Introduce specific policies to prevent hate speech against women politicians and women candidates in public discourse, including online, and prevent harassment and threats against them, including by requiring political parties to adopt internal regulations on gender equality and on combating harassment of women candidates and activists, and also by holding social media companies accountable for discriminatory user-generated content.
- Provide capacity-building on political leadership and campaigning skills, as well as access to campaign financing, to women candidates standing for election or to public office, including women with disabilities and LGBTI women.

- CEDAW Concluding Observations, Sri Lanka review Feb 2020



Government-sponsored Women's Day Campaign March 2025  
Photo credit: Daily Mirror



## CHALLENGE: SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (SGBV)

- SGBV is widespread in Sri Lanka, with many cases going unreported due to cultural sensitivities and associated stigma.
- SGBV includes domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, and intimate partner violence. During the civil war, sexual violence was used as a military tactic, and it continues to be a problem in post-conflict areas.
- GBV has severe physical, psychological, and social consequences for victims. It affects their health, well-being, and ability to participate in society.
- There is a lack of trust in the justice system, and only a small percentage of cases lead to prosecutions. The Penal Code limits rape to penovaginal penetration by men; Marital rape and intimate partner violence are not specifically criminalized, except when spouses are legally separated or if the victim is under.
- The Domestic Violence Act (2005) exists, but enforcement remains weak.
- The increased use of new digital technologies for online gender-based violence, including cyberstalking, harassment, doxing, and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, as well as the proliferation of AI-generated sexually explicit media, deepfake videos, synthetic media and cyber porn that commodify and objectify women's bodies.

## WAY FORWARD:

- Expedite the adoption of the proposed amendments to the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act No. 34 of 2005, ensuring stronger legal protection for victims of domestic and intimate partner violence.
- Amend the Penal Code to align the definition of rape with international standards, basing it on the lack of freely given consent rather than the use of force, threat, or deception, and ensure that it takes into consideration coercive circumstances.
- Amend the Penal Code to explicitly criminalize marital rape in all circumstances and revise section 363 to ensure that statutory rape protections apply to all girls under 18 years of age without exception.

*-CEDAW Concluding Observations, Sri Lanka review Feb 2020*

- Ensure that law enforcement officers are trained to handle GBV cases sensitively and effectively to help build trust in the justice system.
- Provide accessible and comprehensive support services, including shelters, counselling, and legal aid. These services should be available in both urban and rural areas to ensure that all survivors have access to the help they need.
- Raising awareness about SGBV through public campaigns can help change societal attitudes and reduce stigma. Education on gender sensitivity and equality should be integrated into school curriculums to challenge harmful stereotypes from a young age.
- Monitoring and Evaluation: Implementing a robust system for monitoring and evaluating SGBV interventions can help identify gaps and areas for improvement. Regular assessments can ensure that policies and programs are effective and responsive to the needs of survivors.

## CHALLENGE: SITUATION OF THE WOMEN WORKERS OF THE MALAIYAHA TAMIL COMMUNITY

- **Exploitation and Discrimination:** Malaiyaha Tamil Women in the plantation sector often face exploitation and discrimination. They are typically paid less than their male counterparts and are subjected to harsh working conditions.
- **Poor Living Conditions:** Many women live in overcrowded and dilapidated housing, known as line rooms, which lack basic amenities and privacy.
- **Health and Safety:** The isolated conditions of plantations contribute to increased instances of sexual harassment and domestic violence. Women often lack access to proper healthcare and sanitation facilities.
- **Economic Isolation:** The exploitative labour conditions under which they are compelled to work, compounded by historical marginalization through exclusionary citizenship laws and the long absence of state services within the sector, has led to severe social and economic isolation.
- **Lack of Education:** Girls of the community drop out of school due to care burdens and end up as domestic workers in distant cities and are at risk of violence and trafficking. Schools remain obsolete and without adequate funding.



*Primary schools in the Plantation sector lack basic facilities  
Photo credit: Sunanda Deshapriya*





## WAY FORWARD

- Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission's thematic subcommittee on the Malayaha Tamil community, together with civil society representatives, seeks to engage both state and private actors in ensuring long overdue redress for the many issues that the community faces. We urge the CEDAW committee to recommend that the government prioritize needs of women and sexual and gender minorities within the Malayaha Tamil community.  
*- Prof. Farzana Haniffa Commissioner of HRCSL at the CEDAW Sri Lanka review, Feb 2025.*
- Address the root causes making women and girls on plantations vulnerable to trafficking, including unequal wages for women, lack of education, lack of access to alternative livelihood opportunities and chronic poverty.  
*- CEDAW concluding observations, Sri Lanka review Feb 2025*
- Ensure that tea plantation workers who have been denied land rights for two centuries are finally able to acquire land and own their own houses by proceeding with Government and Parliamentary approval to allow the Ministry of Labour and Foreign Employment to enact the special laws required to guarantee land deeds.
- Ensure that existing kindergarten nurseries on plantations are able to access trained staff and resource materials to ensure that they are a viable childcare option for younger siblings, in order to ensure that older girls are not missing or dropping out of school as a consequence.
- Implement strict controls on tea plantations to ensure that women are receiving wages commensurate with their labour and are not being penalised with arbitrary wage deductions.
- Ensure that the new daily minimum wage of LKR 1,350 and the attendance promotion special allowance of LKR 350, totalling LKR 1,700, agreed upon by the Wages Board in August 2024, is implemented without delay for all tea plantation workers.  
*- HRO, Kandy, report to CEDAW Sri Lanka Review Feb 2025*

## CHALLENGE: SITUATION OF WOMEN WORKERS IN THE GARMENT SECTOR

- **Long Working Hours:** Women in the garment sector often work long hours with minimal breaks. They are frequently required to work overtime without adequate compensation.
- **Low Wages:** Despite the significant contribution of the garment sector to the economy, women workers are often underpaid and struggle to make ends meet.
- **Health and Safety:** The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerabilities faced by female garment workers, including inadequate housing and limited access to healthcare.
- **Harassment and Discrimination:** Women in the garment sector face harassment and discrimination in the workplace. There is a lack of awareness about labour rights and limited opportunities for unionization.

## WAY FORWARD

- A living wage for women in free trade zones/garment industry that meets the cost of living and allows for decent labour standards that can be pursued should be implemented. Compliance with wages shall be observed with regular reporting, ensuring workers' fair compensation within the free trade zone/ garment industry, particularly considering gender.
- Introduce occupational designation letters for women workers in free trade zones/garment industry to clearly define the role and responsibilities of women workers for better occupational safety and security.
- Regular safety audits should be conducted with complete compliance to maintain occupational health standards at free trade zones/garment industry, keeping in focus female workers.
- Improve healthcare services' access available for women in the free trade zones through the availability of hospital care facilities on an extended basis, relevant to the needs of women workers for maternal care, reproductive health, and general health care.

- NEFSO plus report to CEDAW Sri Lanka review Feb 2025



*Sri Lanka's garment workers are caught between production targets and destitution, sickness and increasing authoritarianism. Photo and caption credit: War on Want/ Jacobin*



## CHALLENGE: RURAL WOMEN'S SITUATION

- **Food production:** Rural women, particularly women farmers and fisherwomen, contribute more than 50% to the food production process. However, they face significant challenges related to the cost of production, including access to land, water, capital, and equipment.
- **Economic Inequality:** Women in rural areas often have limited access to financial resources, markets, and technology. Despite making up a significant portion of the agricultural workforce, they own only a small percentage of the land and have limited control over natural resources.
- **Unpaid Care Work:** Rural women are burdened with a disproportionate amount of unpaid care work, including domestic chores, child-rearing, and elder care. This limits their ability to participate in paid employment and economic activities.
- **Lack of Representation:** Women are often excluded from decision-making processes and remain invisible in national data and policy frameworks. This structural exclusion hampers their potential and contributions to socio-economic recovery.
- **Health and Education:** Access to healthcare and education is limited in rural areas, affecting the overall well-being and development of women and their families

## WAY FORWARD:

- Empower women to actively participate in local decision-making processes through the development of women-led committees and cooperatives at the rural level.
- Ensure representative governance mechanisms at the local and regional levels, where women's voices will be represented at decision-making tables, especially on environment and agriculture policy matters  
- NEFSO plus report to CEDAW Sri Lanka review Feb 2025
- Effectively enforce the principle of equal pay for work of equal value in order to narrow and eventually close the gender pay gap by (i) conducting regular labour inspections; (ii) conducting regular pay surveys; and (iii) assisting employers in submitting their gender pay gap data to the authorities and making voluntary efforts to close the gap, with a view to better understanding the reasons for the gender pay gap and gender pension gap.
- Ensure that women working in the informal economy, including women domestic workers, have access to social protection schemes and extend the application of labour protection to the informal sector.  
- CEDAW Concluding observations, Sri Lanka review, Feb 2025
- Upgrade rural schools and hospitals as a priority providing sufficient human and material resources.



*For decades, farming communities here have looked to the skies waiting for the rains to break droughts, or lamenting lost harvests destroyed by floods. Now climate change is bringing cascading and devastating social impacts, entrenching generations of rural communities in cycles of poverty and debt.  
Photo and caption credit: UNDP Sri Lanka*

## CHALLENGE:

### FEMALE MIGRANT WORKERS SITUATION

- **Middle East:** Approximately 1.2 million Sri Lankans are working in the Middle East. A significant portion of these workers are women, particularly employed as domestic workers in countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar. They continue to face numerous issues.
- **Abuse and Exploitation:** Many Sri Lankan female domestic workers face serious abuse, including physical and verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and even rape.
- **Long Working Hours:** Domestic workers typically labor for 16 to 21 hours a day without rest breaks or days off. This leads to extreme physical and mental exhaustion.
- **Lack of Legal Protection:** Labor laws in many Middle Eastern countries do not provide adequate protection for migrant domestic workers.
- **Debt and Financial Exploitation:** Labor agents in Sri Lanka charge excessive fees, leaving migrants heavily indebted. Many workers are misinformed about their jobs and end up in exploitative situations.
- **Impact on Families:** The migration of women for work often leads to family breakdowns, increased juvenile delinquency, and other social issues in Sri Lanka.

## WAY FORWARD

- Strengthen and expand its consular assistance services in Gulf countries and the Middle East by establishing 24-hour emergency hotlines, increasing the number of labour attachés at diplomatic missions, and ensuring adequate staffing and resources to respond to crises.
- Develop and implement emergency evacuation protocols and crisis response mechanisms specifically designed for migrant domestic workers, including dedicated emergency funds for repatriation.
- Establish a comprehensive tracking system to maintain updated contact information and employment details of all Sri Lankan women migrant domestic workers, enabling swift response during emergencies.
- Provide regular training to consular staff on gender-sensitive approaches to assisting domestic workers, including handling cases of abuse, wage theft, and forced labour.
- Establish a dedicated unit within diplomatic missions to monitor employers and recruitment agencies and maintain a database of complaints and blacklisted employers.

- CEDAW concluding observations, Sri Lanka review Feb 2025.



*Ensure that workers who wish to travel have access to reliable information about the repatriation process and requirements. Photo credit: Sandy Lyen/ Anti Racism Movement*



## CHALLENGE:

### REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AND HEALTH CONCERNS

- **Maternal mortality rate:** 30 deaths per 100,000 live births, relatively low but still concerning.
- **Access to Health Services:** Access to reproductive health services is not equal, particularly in rural areas.
- **Right to Abortion:** Abortion is illegal, except when the mother's life is in danger, leading to unsafe procedures.



*Education on sexual and reproductive health is necessary to ensure reproductive health*  
Photo credit: Sunanda Deshapriya

## WAY FORWARD

- Integrate comprehensive age-appropriate education on sexual and reproductive health, including responsible sexual behaviour, modern forms of contraception and sexually transmitted diseases, into curriculums at all levels of education.
- Strengthen and enforce laws related to reproductive rights, including access to safe and legal abortion.
- Improve access to quality reproductive healthcare services, including family planning, prenatal and postnatal care, and safe delivery services. This includes expanding healthcare infrastructure in rural and underserved areas.



## CHALLENGE:

### CHILD MARRIAGES & FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

- While the legal marriage age is **18**, child marriages still occur, especially in rural Muslim communities.
- The **Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA)** allows girls as young as 12 to marry, which has led to criticism from human rights groups.
- A 2024 study conducted indicated that FGM is prevalent within the Muslim community, and the practice is growing. FGM is considered a religious requirement to mark newborn girls as Muslims.  
- *WAN plus report to CEDAW Sri Lanka review Feb 2025*

## WAY FORWARD

- Systematically document and report FGM as a hidden threat to children's and women's health.
- Develop localized guidelines for healthcare professionals to identify and address FGM sensitively. Strengthen community healthcare providers' capacity, especially nurses and midwives, to raise awareness and support FGM victims.
- Raise science-based awareness on FGM prevalence and risks at community, policymaker, and medical levels.  
- *WAN plus report to CEDAW Sri Lanka review Feb 2025*
- Adopt, within a clear timeframe, a unified family code that ensures equality of women and men in marriage and family relations by explicitly prohibiting child marriage, polygamy, and discriminatory customary practices, ensuring women's equal rights in marriage and divorce, to inheritance and property, including land ownership, as well as equal parental rights and responsibilities.
- Amend the General Marriage Registration Ordinance to ensure Muslim women's right to choose to marry under either the general law or Muslim personal law, and eliminate any discriminatory barriers or practices that may prevent them from exercising their choice.
- Increase the minimum age of marriage for to 18 years for both women and men, without exceptions.  
- *CEDAW concluding observations, Sri Lanka review Feb 2025.*



## CHALLENGE: PERIOD POVERTY

- **Education and Awareness:** There is a lack of education and awareness about menstruation and menstrual hygiene. Many girls learn about menstruation from their mothers, who may also have limited knowledge. Nearly 66% of girls in Sri Lanka are not aware of menstruation until menarche (UNICEF 2018) The current Period poverty rate is 50%. (WMC report to CEADW 25)
- **Lack of Access to Menstrual Products:** Many women and girls in Sri Lanka cannot afford menstrual hygiene products due to high costs and taxes. This leads to the use of unhygienic alternatives, which can cause health issues.
- **Stigma and Taboos:** Menstruation is often considered a taboo topic in Sri Lankan society. This stigma can lead to shame and embarrassment, preventing women and girls from seeking help or discussing menstrual health openly.
- **Impact on Education and Work:** Period poverty can lead to absenteeism from school and work. Girls and women may miss out on education and employment opportunities due to the lack of access to menstrual products and proper sanitary facilities.

## WAY FORWARD

- A single-use menstrual product packet imported from India and taxed at 51%, despite the presence of free trade agreements, costs LKR 500/= i.e, the same as two kilos of rice, forcing low-income families to sacrifice women's and girls' hygiene and well-being for food.
- Repealing menstrual hygiene product taxes to list it as an essential medical device and incentivise local manufacturers appears feasible as their estimated contribution to total tax revenue is an insignificant 0.0002%.
- Recognising period poverty through the National Strategic Plan on Adolescent and Youth Health 2023-2028 (NSPAYH) could facilitate a State response toward improving the well-being of adolescent girls and young women.   
- (WMC plus Report to CEDAW)
- Ensure access for girls to adequate water and sanitation, sex-segregated restrooms and menstrual hygiene products and facilities in schools.   
- CEDAW Concluding Observations, Sri Lanka review Feb 2020
- The government has allocated Rs 1.4 billion to provide sanitary napkins to schoolgirls in its inaugural budget. This initiative aims to improve girls' health and ensure uninterrupted access to education. However, a significant number of government schools lack separate washrooms for girls with adequate facilities, which may undermine the government's objective.



In a country with a female population of 11.2 million, 51.6% of the total population, a 52% tax is charged on menstrual hygiene products.   
Photo credit: iStock

## CHALLENGE: WOMEN IN CONFLICT AND POST-WAR SITUATIONS

- The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009) left thousands of women widowed, especially in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Many war-affected women struggle with poverty, sexual violence, and limited access to justice.
- Many families still waiting after 15 years of war's end for justice for wartime atrocities.
- Lack of requisite mechanisms to ensure accountability for conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV).
- Heavy militarisation in Tamil-dominated Northern province prevents normalcy from being established making women more vulnerable.
- Ensure that all allegations of sexual violence committed during the conflict, including by members of the State security forces, are promptly and impartially investigated to ensure criminal accountability.

## WAY FORWARD

- Establish, without delay, an independent mechanism with adequate resources and authority to investigate and determine the fate and whereabouts of disappeared persons, in collaboration with the OHCHR Sri Lanka Accountability Project, provide comprehensive protection measures for women victims and witnesses, ensure regular public reporting on progress, and conduct meaningful consultations with victims' families throughout the process.
- Design and implement a comprehensive truth and reconciliation process that places women survivors' experiences and needs at its centre, provides adequate psychosocial support and ensures confidentiality and protection, and allocate sufficient resources for such implementation.
- Establish an independent prosecutorial authority for CRSV cases, separate from the Attorney General's office, with a mandate to evaluate evidence and make autonomous prosecutorial decisions.
- Ensure time-bound, transparent investigations of CRSV, with mandatory reporting mechanisms and systematic public disclosure of the status of cases.
- Ensure that all complaints of CRSV are promptly and thoroughly investigated, and that perpetrators receive sentences commensurate with the gravity of their crimes, to address impunity and normalization of such crimes.

- CEDAW concluding observations, Sri Lanka review Feb 2025



*Tamil Women in North Sri Lanka held a protest to mark 8 years of campaigning for justice for the wartime atrocities allegedly committed by Sri Lanka security forces including 1000s of disappearances. Photo credit: vilalpa.org.*





## CHALLENGE: INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATION

Intersectional discrimination for women in Sri Lanka refers to the compounded and overlapping forms of oppression faced by women due to their intersecting identities, such as ethnicity, religion, caste, class, and sexual orientation. Sri Lanka's patriarchal society, combined with its history of ethnic conflict and social hierarchies, creates unique challenges for women who belong to marginalized groups.

- **Ethnicity and Religion:** Tamil women, particularly in the north and east, face discrimination due to their ethnicity and gender. Post-civil war, many Tamil women struggle with displacement, lack of access to resources, and the trauma of war, including the loss of family members and sexual violence. Muslim women often face restrictions due to cultural and religious norms, such as limited mobility and access to education. They also experience discrimination in the context of rising Buddhist nationalism. While Sinhalese women may have relatively better access to resources, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds or rural areas still face significant gender-based discrimination.
- **Caste:** Women from so-called lower castes, particularly in rural areas, face dual discrimination based on both caste and gender. They often have limited access to education, employment, and social mobility. Caste is the system of dividing people in a society into different social classes according to their birth.
- **Class and Economic Disparities:** Poor women, regardless of ethnicity, face significant barriers to accessing healthcare, education, and employment. Economic marginalization exacerbates other forms of discrimination, making it difficult for these women to break the cycle of poverty.
- **LGBTQ+ Women:** LGBTQ+ women face significant stigma and discrimination, compounded by the criminalization of homosexuality under colonial-era laws. This legal and social environment makes it difficult for LGBTQ+ women to live openly and access support services.



*Ethnic minority Muslim women from the southern district of Hambantota.  
Photo credit: Sunanda Deshapriya*

## WAY FORWARD

Addressing intersectional discrimination of women in Sri Lanka requires a multi-faceted approach that considers various overlapping factors such as gender, ethnicity, class, and more. Here are some strategies that can be effective, they include legal reforms, Education and Awareness, Economic Empowerment, Support Services, Community Engagement and Policy Implementation. These issues have been covered under different challenges in this report.

Sri Lanka has made notable strides in women's education, health, and rights, but challenges continue to remain in political representation, social and cultural traditions and behaviours, gender-based violence, gender discrimination, economic participation, and legal protections. Strengthening laws, changing cultural perceptions, and promoting gender equality in all sectors will be crucial to ensuring true empowerment for women in Sri Lanka.

# Sri Lanka's constitutional and legislative framework and definition of discrimination against women:

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) notes with concern that:

- (a) The Constitution lacks a comprehensive and explicit definition of discrimination against women, covering both direct and indirect discrimination in the public and private spheres.
- (b) The existing legal framework fails to apply the principle of intersectionality, leaving many women belonging to disadvantaged groups, including Tamil, Muslim, and Kandyan women, women governed by the Tesawalamai Law, rural women, older women, single women, women living in poverty, women with disabilities, and LGBTI women, without adequate protection.
- (c) Article 16 (1) of the Constitution prevents judicial review of discriminatory laws enacted prior to its adoption, including colonial-era and customary laws that continue to discriminate against women and girls.
- (d) The continued application of colonial-era laws, such as the Vagrants Ordinance and the Brothels Ordinance, disproportionately impacts marginalized women, including women in prostitution and LGBTI women, subjecting them to arbitrary arrests and harassment.

- CEDAW Concluding Observations, Sri Lanka Review February 2025.