
Sri Lanka: Celebrating the Contributions of Women

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Economic Contributions Women in Sri Lanka are unsung heroines in their contributions to Sri Lanka's economy. Working as migrant workers, tea pluckers, and in garment factories, many women have made significant sacrifices in order to invest in the education of their children and the well being of their families and society.

The effects of the global financial crisis have begun to be felt in local employment markets. Once again, poor women are the recipients of these impacts due to the loss of employment opportunities as garment factories close and the tea industry coming under increasing pressure. Commenting on a recent visit to the Gemidiriya project in the Ratnapura district, Naoko Ishii, World Bank's Country Director for Sri Lanka said, "I learned that a woman can do anything if she sets her mind to it. I have witnessed how poor women with limited opportunities have been empowered to take control of their lives and livelihoods and make significant contributions to the development of the village economy." Ishii observed how the women are now in decision making positions of village development plans under the Gama Neguma project. This has improved their knowledge on inter-village connectivity through access to roads and markets. "Women here are definitely in the driver's seat," said Ishii. With the theme of the 2009 International Women's Day being men and women uniting to end harassment against women, "it is an opportune moment to reflect on changes in regard to the role of women in the Sri Lankan economy," said Ishii. Breadwinner Chandrani Kusumalatha, a 27 year old mother and former garment factory worker says that she feels empowered to be employed in a position traditionally reserved for men. At present, Kusumalatha works as a carpenter producing and marketing brush handles to local and international markets. "I never thought I could do this job. At first it was very difficult to get used to as I didn't have any background knowledge or skills in carpentry. I even gave up a couple of times due to injuries and the difficulties of learning the skill," said Kusumalatha. She now earns between Rs. 10,000 to 15,000 in contrast to her previous wages of Rs. 6000 as a sewing machine operator. She also has more time for her family and community as she saves time and money on her commute. "I feel good because this is my own business and I do not have to depend on anyone nor am I working under anyone for a small salary," Kusumalatha said. Self-Employment Kusumalatha is one of the 12 initial members that started the "Saviya" (Strength) brush handle manufacturing company with support from the Gemidiriya community driven development project. The group obtained an initial loan of Rs. 360,000 from the Village Savings and Credit Committee (VSCO). The Gemidiriya project facilitated training and linked the village based company to a supplier in Colombo - Ravi Brush (Private) Limited. The village company is now supplying its products to domestic and international markets. The gross income of the firm is around Rs. 150,000 per month and individual income, based on time contributed, ranges between Rs. 10,000 to 15,000 per month. Empowering Women and Youth "Due to poverty and deprivation, people in villages need a lot of support and encouragement to persevere in self-employment. Through our project activities, we have been able to strengthen and encourage women and youth to persevere in their work and not to give up," said Nilmini Kusumseeli, Gender and Youth Coordinator of the Gemidiriya project. A 50% participation by women and 30% youth participation in decision making positions are encouraged in all Gemidiriya villages. Meeting Youth Aspirations Chandani Adikaram is a 24 year old manager of the Mudunkotuwa West Information Center. Having successfully received her diploma, Adikaram planned to enroll at a university. After getting involved in the Gemidiriya project, she had the opportunity to advance her computer skills as well as improving other employable skills such as bookkeeping and information management. "I am happy to be working here; if I had entered the university directly, I would have wasted my time. I would like to serve my village and improve my skills by supporting village development," Chandani said. K.G. Gayani Sudeshini is an operator at the Nenasala (Knowledge Center) in the village. This 24 year old says that she has learned many computers skills and has improved her English knowledge through the use of the internet to communicate with her new friends from around the world. "I use Skype to communicate with my friends in Korea, Japan, and other countries," Sudeshini said. She was working in the garment industry and joined the Gemidiriya project to improve her knowledge and skills through assisting village development. "Through the use of internet and our web portal - ITSHED (Web portal of Gemidiriya), we hope to find markets for our village based products," said Sudeshini expressing her determination to assist the village. Courtesy: worldbank.lk