

Gender Dimensions of Poverty in Sri Lanka

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Foreword

This series of Poverty Briefs (No. 1 to 10) was produced for OXFAM Great Britain (GB) by the Centre for Poverty Analysis to provide a macro overview of key thematic areas relating to poverty, of relevance to Oxfam GB's work in Sri Lanka. They are specifically designed to provide Oxfam GB programme staff with insights into the major issues, concerns, and debates within these themes and their linkages and effects on poverty in Sri Lanka. They also aim to highlight potential areas for policy advocacy by Oxfam GB. This input was used in staff preparation for Oxfam GB's Strategic Review in August 2004.

Oxfam GB's mission is, to work with others to overcome poverty and suffering. Its current programme focus is on: Livelihoods and poor people's access to markets; Gender equality, empowerment and ending violence against women; Public health promotion and access to quality water and sanitation facilities; Emergency preparedness and response; Relationship building between and within communities; and Empowerment of the poor through building of Community Based Organisations.

The views and opinions expressed in the Poverty Briefs are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Oxfam GB or the Centre for Poverty Analysis.

This series of Poverty Briefs was prepared in mid 2004, prior to the events of the Tsunami on 26th December 2004. The context and issues discussed in some of the Briefs could have changed since then.

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1. Introduction

Gender and poverty issues in Sri Lanka need to be understood through an interdisciplinary approach. Using concept of 'gender' helps to clarify the ways in which socialisation processes within a society give more power to men than women. Women and men have unequal access to and control over resources, whether it is in terms of food, healthcare, skills training, credit, property, income or decision-making. Lack of access to such resources can also result in those with less 'power' being subjected to violence and intimidation whether in the privacy of their own homes or in the public sphere.

Programmes and policy addressing the issue of poverty are framed around ways and means through which women and men with few resources are able, through identified channels, to access those resources to better themselves economically. Policy on poverty necessarily calls for a closer and more comprehensive understanding of the situation of the target population which can utilise such resources. The critical issue here is the need to understand that continuing gender inequality would result in women and men being unable to utilise resources available to empower themselves economically, socially and politically.

This brief sets out some of the key areas linking poverty and gender within the employment and income structures, institutional settings and policy frameworks and in the context of a conflict-affected society. The key subjects addressed in this brief are as follows:

- Relationship between poverty and gender
- Women and men in the labour market
- State and NGO poverty alleviation programmes
- From a gender perspective
- State institutions relating to women
- Gender and poverty in conflict affected areas
- Poverty and violence against women

2. Relationship between Poverty and Gender

A key factor in the study of poverty through a gender perspective is the recognition that the poor are not a homogeneous entity: the poor comprise women and men. These women and men have gender-specific roles which they perform in their homes and in society. Women and men are located in specific ways in relation to the economy, production and income capacities. The gender approach critically examines these distinctive roles of women and identifies the relationship of these roles to women's ability, or inability, to access resources and opportunities. It recognises that the general uneven distribution of power between women and men in both the social and domestic spheres subordinates women. The unequal distribution of power, in turn, directly impacts on their conditions of poverty and their ability to overcome these conditions.

It is important to understand that in a situation of poverty, the prevailing norms of social obligations toward their families place additional burdens on women: they are expected not only to fulfil their household 'duties' and role as 'nurturer', but are often compelled to continuously look for income earning work to ensure the survival of the family/household.

There are significant aspects of poverty and social development needs in which women are more involved due to the nature of their socialisation and the social division of labour. Aspects such as nutrition, childcare, housing, and other social infra-structure for household and family survival need to be integrated into poverty-related policies and programmes through a recognition of the interests of women.

3. Women and Men in the Labour Market

Within the last 30 years, there has been a diversification in employment opportunities in Sri Lanka, following economic expansion policies adopted in the late 1970s. Primary among these has been the setting up of garment manufacturing enterprises in Free Trade Zones and elsewhere mainly for the export market, the expansion in the construction industry and the expansion of expatriate employment opportunities primarily to west Asian countries. The impact of these clearly gendered labour absorption strategies has been highest for women whose participation in the labour

force increased significantly within a period of 20 years. Central Bank data and Department of Census and Statistics data note that women's labour force participation increased, from 19.4% to 32.2% over a 20 year period between 1981 and 2003. There has also been a shift of women from the demographic category of 'unpaid family worker' (where women have traditionally tended to be concentrated) to that of 'employee'. This shift indicates both women's awareness of the need for income as well as of the opportunities available to them. The Sri Lanka Foreign Employment Bureau, for example, notes that the North Western, North Central and Central provinces, (where women have tended to be concentrated as unpaid family workers) record some of the highest outflows of women as migrant workers to west Asian countries; further, the east districts of Trincomalee, Ampara and Batticaloa account for approximately 10% of total female migration overseas. When one relates such data to the educational status of women in the labour force, it becomes clear that much of these employment opportunities are available to women with lower levels of education and correspondingly lower wages.

It is also important to note that over the same period, the unemployment rate for women has remained more than twice that of men. In Sri Lanka, despite equal access to free education for girls and boys, there is more educated unemployment among women compared to men. Many of the women seeking employment in the FTZs or as migrant workers, come from among those who have secondary or lower levels of education.

This discussion points to a gendered labour market and to gendered access to employment opportunities and income. Clearly, while there has been an increase in avenues for wage work for women, they tend to be concentrated at the lower end of the income structure. Unemployment among women has been consistently higher than that of men indicating, thereby, that access to education does not correspond to increased employment opportunities for women. These factors impinge on women's ability to negotiate or bargain for better economic returns for their labour.

4. State and NGO Poverty Alleviation Programmes from a Gender Perspective

Sri Lanka's institutionalised recognition of poverty took place in the late 1970s with the shift from a universal system of delivery of state-subsidised 'rations' of essential food and other subsistence items to a system of 'food stamps' for a targeted population assessed as being in poverty. In the early 1980s the Janasaviya Poverty Alleviation Programme was the largest nation-wide targeted programme of delivery of goods and services to a population identified as being in poverty. With the change of government in 1994, the Janasaviya scheme was renamed the Samurdhi poverty alleviation programme. This change in policy approach is important in the examining of gender and poverty since this was the first attempt by the State to recognise, even in a limited sense, that women and men relate differently with and, had different contributions to, household survival.

The focus of the state poverty alleviation programme is the (primarily male-headed) household. It is important to note that in terms of national policy as well as of predominant social norms, the household is envisaged as a unit comprising harmonious family relations where gender inequities and differences in power and access to resources between women and men found everywhere else in society are not found. This critical 'construction' of the household effectively denies the fact that in reality there are obvious gender based differences in the utilisation of the 'benefits' of poverty alleviation programmes where women often do not have direct access to the financial support given by such programmes.

State poverty alleviation programmes utilise existing gender relations often burdening women with additional demands on their time. The adult male is assumed to be the head of the household and hence eligible for membership. However, it is women who need to show, through their regular weekly attendance at Samurdhi meetings, that the household remains eligible for State support. Despite records which show that 80% or more of the participants in the Samurdhi schemes at the household level are women, the official policy focus is on the male as beneficiary. Women can claim to be the main beneficiary/household head only after proving either the absence of an adult male in the household or the lack of support by her male partner.

There are several other key players in the strategies for poverty alleviation in Sri Lanka, notably from the non-government sector such as Sanasa and SEEDS (Sarvodaya linked), Arthacharya Foundation etc. Almost all these endeavours are founded on the understanding that the male-headed household is the focus of implementation. However, the overwhelming reliance on women to ensure proper utilisation of assistance provided, clearly reinforces prevailing gender ideology and the gendered social location of women and takes it for granted that men are less responsible/dependable as actual participants compared to women.

Poverty alleviation strategies by the State and other large institutions utilise a highly gendered conceptualising of the family-based household. The demarcations of the responsibilities and participation of women and men remain largely un-acknowledged; men's role in society is seen to be situated outside the family unit in terms of the family's immediate welfare needs. Women are seen to be more 'responsible', 'accountable' and hence 'better' clients of poverty alleviation schemes.

5. State Institutions and Policy Relating to Women

While it is important to be aware that the concept of gender is often incorrectly translated in programme implementation in a limited focus on women, it is equally important to be aware of the specific state institutions which have been set up as an acknowledgement that gender-based differentials necessarily require targeted interventions to facilitate women's empowerment. There are 3 main State institutions which are mandated to look into issues relating to women's economic, social and political empowerment. Following the first UN World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975, the Sri Lankan State embarked on a policy of setting up institutional mechanisms to address women's issues. Currently the Ministry of Women's Affairs is required to focus on policy while the Women's Bureau and the National Committee on Women have the mandate to monitor implementation and the creation of awareness about these policies through its cadre. State policy on women is set out in the Women's Charter of 1993 while implementation mechanisms are detailed in the National Plan of Action on Women, first drafted in 1996 and revised in 2001. Economic and poverty related issues are key concerns in both these documents.

The Ministry of Labour put out its Draft National Employment Policy for Sri Lanka in 2002. This document, when examined from a gender sensitive perspective, articulates women's economic participation through the framework of maternity and gendered responsibility. For example, it notes that,

Women's employability is perceived to be seriously constrained by existing gender-based attitudes and stereotypes in society. Whilst improving women's employability in the labour market, adequate attention would also be paid to their commitment to fulfil their maternal responsibilities. ...Consideration will be given to women's maternity functions and awareness to be created amongst women that maternity would not become a hindrance to their careers.

What is of concern here is that even economic policy is being formulated at the State level with emphasis being given only to women's maternal responsibilities. Men's paternal roles and responsibilities which are equally important for any family unit, especially those which are in poverty, to better their economic condition, are never highlighted.

6. Gender and Poverty in Conflict Affected Areas

Women and men living in conflict affected areas have experienced major changes to their lives, livelihoods, social networks and places of residence among other aspects. A gender-sensitive framework of analysis would guard against crucially misleading assumptions about common perceptions by affected communities and populations. It would focus on the differential roles of and impact on women and men in situations of military and social conflict.

The long period of conflict in Sri Lanka's north-eastern region (the combined Northern and Eastern provinces) has impacted on and changed the social and economic contributions of women and men in these areas. Women have had to take on the social role of primary economic provider for their households in the absence (due to death, etc.) of their spouses. For example, even in the early 1990s women were engaging in fishing in the Batticaloa district, an occupation which had traditionally been that of men. The emergence of female-headed households was estimated in the late 1990s to be around 21% excluding reliable data from the north east. In 2003, the Sri Lanka: Assessment of Needs in the Conflict Affected Areas Report of the UNDP noted that approximately 41,000 widows had been identified

in the districts of Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Vavuniya, Ampara and Mullaitivu (p. 15). A major issue in relation to this development is that the loss of housing and documents to show right to ownership of property necessarily means that available government resources in rebuilding homes and obtaining property must recognise the right of access by female heads of households.

While healthcare facilities in Sri Lanka are recognised as being generally accessible to the population at large, in the conflict affected areas, health related services and infrastructure have been severely affected. Combined with prevailing gender based differentials in access to resources, women's health situation has been particularly affected. The Sri Lanka Assessment of Needs Report found that the percentage of low birth weight rate in the north east was 25.7 compared to 16.7 in the rest of the country. Current use of contraception in the North-East is 36.2% compared to 70.0% in the rest of the country. Data from the conflict affected areas indicate that women's health conditions in general and their reproductive health status in particular has suffered greatly over the past two decades.

7. Poverty and Violence Against Women

In Sri Lankan society, where social norms are governed by an ideology which condones male control over women in many aspects, but especially in the realm of sexuality and intimacy, violence against women tends to be accepted as being part of our 'culture' or, worse, to be blamed on the victim as something she brings upon herself through perceived 'misconduct' by her. Rather than argue for a direct link between the incidence of poverty and violence against women, it is best to recognise that these socially accepted rules of conduct for women and men are applicable even where families are in poverty. Hence, women from poor households are also subject to violence and intimidation from their male partners or spouses. Domestic violence has emerged as a grave issue in Sri Lanka. The Women's Rights Watch report of the Women and Media Collective found, in 1998, that there were 129 murders of women within their homes reported in the press. It further noted that in the majority of these murders, the perpetrator was the husband. In 2002, responding to growing pressure from women's groups and others, the Ministry of Justice drafted a Bill on Domestic Violence. The Bill was submitted to the Cabinet of Ministers in 2003 and the Ministry is currently awaiting the decision of Cabinet on this issue.

8. Concluding Remarks

This Poverty and Gender Brief has focused on selected areas of relevance to indicate the critical importance of understanding the complex relationship between the economic and the social in the lives of women and men living in poverty. While poverty is the result of lack of access to monetary and/or social resources, gender-based differences between women and men underline their ability/inability to utilise whatever resources are available and demarcate whether and how they can access other resources. Within each of the focus areas discussed above, these complexities are looked at with the aim of enabling the formulation of gender sensitive programmes and policies which could facilitate a genuine empowerment of those living in poverty.