

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	729
Land:	Sri Lanka
Kilde:	Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada
Titel:	Sri Lanka: Situation of single women, including widows, and their treatment by society and authorities, including their ability to live on their own and access housing, education, employment, health care, and support services (2021–June 2023)
Udgivet:	21. juni 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	5. februar 2024



Document #2095459

IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (Author)

Sri Lanka: Situation of single women, including widows, and their treatment by society and authorities, including their ability to live on their own and access housing, education, employment, health care, and support services (2021–June 2023) [LKA201522.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Situation and Treatment of Single Women

1.1 Treatment by Society

According to the US *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2022*, women have equal rights under civil and criminal law but they face "societal discrimination" and the adjudication of family law matters such as marriage, divorce and inheritance "varied according to the customary law of each ethnic or religious group, resulting in discrimination" (US 2023-03-20, 35). Freedom House states that it is "common" for women to face sexual harassment and employment discrimination (2023-03-09, sec. F4). According to a study by the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), with data collected from September 2020 to February 2021 using a structured questionnaire completed by 566 firms operating in "key sub-sectors of the manufacturing and service sector," there is "considerable evidence of gender-biased discrimination by employers," with most survey respondents being male, making them "significantly less likely" to hire women (UN 2022, viii, ix). According to the same source, other factors included the cost of providing maternity benefits and "perceived" legislative constraints on flexible working hours and nightwork (UN 2022, ix). According to the Department of Census and Statistics of the Ministry of Finance, Economic Stabilization and National Policies, in 2021 the

unemployment rate for men and women aged 15 or older was 3.7 percent and 7.9 percent respectively, and the labour force participation rate was 31.8 percent for women compared to 71 percent for men (Sri Lanka 2022, iii). The same source notes that 59.4 percent of women who were not in the labour force [1] stated that their lack of participation was due to their "involvement in housework activities" with 3.4 percent of male respondents providing the same reason (Sri Lanka 2022, 12). The Department of Census and Statistics report notes that the average monthly income for those who earn a monthly salary is 38,638 Sri Lankan rupees (LKR) [C\$166] for women and 47,270 LKR [C\$203] for men, but the average monthly income for those who earn a daily salary is 14,900 LKR [C\$64] for women and 26,438 LKR [C\$114] for men (Sri Lanka 2022, 20). The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) cites local sources as stating that single women face "some social stigma" as "[t]raditional attitudes" are that by a certain age, women should be married and have children and "aspersions are cast" on those who do not meet these expectations; the local sources further note that single women can "frequently ... live full lives" in urban centres and in villages where the community values their capacity to support their families by looking after their elders and nieces and nephews (Australia 2021-12-23, para. 3.100). In an interview with the Research Directorate, the President of the Sarvodaya Women's Movement (SWM), an independent organization in Sri Lanka that has been working for over 30 years to address women's issues (Sarvodaya n.d.), stated that single women faced "very few cases of discrimination" (President 2023-06-12). The SWM President noted that single women do not face barriers in access to education, jobs, or housing due to being single, but both single women and widows face violence against women (President 2023-06-12). In an interview with the Research Directorate, the head of a women's organization in Sri Lanka stated that single women over the age of 25 or 30 are labelled as "spinsters" and face "stigma that leaves them more susceptible to violations, particularly violence" (Head of organization 2023-06-19). The same source further noted that in urban settings there are more women who are career focused and "put marriage second," but the stigma still exists in villages and districts (Head of organization 2023-06-19). The Head of the organization stated that single women face "societal barriers," which sometimes "tend to be worse" and "more pervasive" than legal barriers, as the attitudes and treatment of women lead to isolation and stigma (2023-06-19).

1.2 Treatment by Authorities

According to a report authored and submitted by Sri Lanka to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), human rights principles and the CEDAW are part of the curriculum of the police academy and law enforcement officials and legal practitioners receive training in women's rights (Sri Lanka 2022-08-10, 8). According to the same source, in 2020 the government established a new state ministry dedicated to women and children's education under the

Cabinet Ministry of Education with the aim of "ensur[ing] gender equality and women empowerment" (Sri Lanka 2022-08-10, 5). An article from the *Diplomat*, a current affairs magazine covering the Asia-Pacific region (*The Diplomat* n.d.), states that the government has a secondary state ministry which "not only oversees women's affairs, but also focuses on" child development, education, and school infrastructure, which has "diluted the focus on women's rights and has slowed the progress of key legislation concerning women" (*The Diplomat* 2021-06-04).

2. Situation and Treatment of Widows

The DFAT report states that the definition of women-headed households (WHHs) "varies, but can include war widows, never married, disabled and elderly women, and family members of the missing or disappeared" (Australia 2021-12-23, para. 3.97). The *Diplomat* article indicates that there is no "consistent" definition for WHHs, which

has led to the generalization of WHHs as a homogenous group and excluded certain vulnerable categories of WHHs such as women with disabilities, women with spouses who are living with disabilities, divorced and/or abandoned women, elderly women, ex-combatants, and widows of former combatants. (*The Diplomat* 2021-06-04)

The same source added that due to being excluded from the definition, these groups of women "often" lack access to government welfare and social protection programs (*The Diplomat* 2021-06-04). The Department of Census and Statistics stated that as of 2019, 25.3 percent of households were WHHs (Sri Lanka 2019a). The same source also notes that of the number of WHHs in 2019, 50.6 percent were widowed (Sri Lanka 2019b). The *Diplomat* article indicates that the "majority" of WHHs are "'military widows'" (widows of government military personnel who died during the conflict) and states, using 2019 data from the Department of Census and Statistics, that while WHHs are "prevalent" across the country,

the district of Batticaloa in the east constitutes the highest percentage of WHHs at 32.3 percent, the district of Kandy in the Central Province is home to the second highest percentage of WHHs at 31.2 percent. Other districts in the Southern (Galle), North Central (Anuradhapura) and North Western (Kurunegala) provinces also have high percentages of WHHs at 28.5 percent, 27.2 percent, and 26.7 percent, respectively. (2021-06-04)

According to the DFAT report, "[a]necdotal evidence indicates" that Tamil widows experience "stigma" and that Hindus view widows as "'bad luck'" which results in exclusion or, in some cases, ostracism (Australia 2021-12-23, para. 3.100). The Head of the organization stated that the stigma faced by WHHs is "immense," particularly for Tamil and Muslim women and women in "war-affected districts" (2023-06-19). The same source added that WHHs are the "most stigmatized," considered "unlucky," excluded from certain ceremonies in the community, and can be "alienated by the

community" if they remarry (Head of organization 2023-06-19). According to a UN Special Rapporteur report on freedom of religion, widows face "challenges" when remarrying if the community worries that they will convert to another religion (UN 2020-08-25, para. 48). Without specifying the source, the DFAT report notes that, according to one source, "all widows face social stigma" but "widows of Sri Lankan Army servicemen were much better looked after financially than widows of [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)] cadres" (Australia 2021-12-23, para. 3.98). The *Diplomat* article states that the "majority of 'military widows' are Sinhalese," while "most 'war widows'" are Tamil (2021-06-04). According to the same source, military widows who head households are perceived as being "economically stable" due to their eligibility for a "government-mandated salary and the pension of their deceased spouse," while "other war widows do not receive any form of redress" (*The Diplomat* 2021-06-04). The Centre for Equality and Justice (CEJ), a Colombo-based women's organization which focuses on the rights of Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim women affected by war (CEJ n.d.), indicates in a 2018 report that Sinhalese military widows are "marginalized and exploited, albeit to a lesser degree than [WHHs], including war widows, from minority communities" (2018-07, 3). The SWM President noted that when trying to support themselves economically, war widows face sexual abuse (2023-06-12).

3. Access to Housing, Education, Employment, and Health Care

According to the Trincomalee District Women Network (TDWN), a regional organization which focuses on strengthening and building women's capacity to advocate for themselves, WHHs in Trincomalee have "very limited" security and a lack of counselling and psychosocial supports, which leave women and girls "vulnerable" (TDWN 2023-02-28, 8).

The *Diplomat* article notes that the "majority" of WHHs engage in "low-paying informal employment and/or daily income generation activities" (2021-06-04). According to the DFAT report, WHHs "are vulnerable to poverty, gender-based violence and sexual exploitation, and face obstacles to accessing services and employment opportunities" (Australia 2021-12-23, para. 3.98). The same source notes that livelihood, housing and psychosocial support is provided by the government and NGOs, but local sources state that this support is "minimal and under-resourced"; women can be unaware of government services and experience harassment and exploitation when accessing services (Australia 2021-12-23, para. 3.98-3.99). The TDWN states that WHHs have a "double burden" as caretakers and income earners and face obstacles such as domestic violence and "inefficient and unjust systems" of maintenance payments to WHHs (TDWN 2023-02-23, 3). A 2017 report from the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues notes instances of war widows and female family members of those who disappeared during the war being asked for money or sexual services in exchange for information (UN 2017-01-31, para. 49). The same source states that there are reports of widows of

former LTTE combatants facing "intimidation and harassment" from the Criminal Investigation Division (UN 2017-01-31, para. 49). The CEJ report states that WHHs "are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and sexual bribery" (2018-07, 3). The same source also notes that

[L]ike Tamil and Muslim [WHH] in the Northern Province, a large number of Sinhala military widows too have complained of constantly facing sexual harassment as well as being coerced into sexual bribery and other forms of sexual exploitation as they have sought to apply for their husbands' salaries, procure bank loans, get documents certified and enroll their children in schools, from the military as well as various other state and private institutions. (2018-07, 3)

According to the US Department of State's 2022 *Trafficking in Persons Report*, there were reports of local government and security officials who asked for commercial sex acts in exchange for information or benefits from women with missing husbands and widows (US 2022-07-19). The SWM President stated that single women or widows were reluctant to report incidences to the police, including violent incidents, because the officer will ask for sexual bribery (2023-06-12). The Head of the organization stated that "some of the worst perpetrators of sexual bribery are the police" (2023-06-19). The same source further noted that women do not risk reporting due to fear of reprisal; some women who filed reports had to leave their districts "in fear for their lives" due to the close-knit nature of their communities and government officials (2023-06-19).

4. Support Services

According to the DFAT report, there are no services specifically for single women, but they are not "barred" from accessing state and non-state services (Australia 2021-12-23, para. 3.96). The *Diplomat* notes that the National Action Plan on Women-Headed Households was drafted in 2017 but was not finalized due to government changes (2021-06-04). The TDWN notes that while previous initiatives from the government and NGOs were successful, they are unable to face the current economic crisis (TDWN 2023-02-23, 3). The UN notes that the first National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security was approved on 27 February 2023 and launched on 8 March 2023, which added "to the country's legal and policy frameworks to protect and empower women in line with international commitments," with the goal "to strengthen coordination between stakeholders of the women, peace and security agenda" (UN 2023-03-09). The UN notes that

the National Action Plan aims to improve access to state services in particular for military and police widows, women ex-combatants and female-heads of households. This involves evaluating existing laws and policies and applying a gender perspective to ensure that they respond to the unique needs of those women, and that they receive targeted support

including psychosocial assistance. Measures will also be taken to provide them with sustainable livelihoods. (UN 2023-06-08)

The Ministry of Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment states that some of their main development programs include the economic empowerment of widows and WHHs through income generation opportunities, the development of a national centre in Kilinochchi district to empower widows and WHHs, the empowering of WHHs in the Karachchi Divisional Secretariat Division through a farm project, and entrepreneurship development workshops for WHHs in the districts of Matara and Puttalam (Sri Lanka n.d.)

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Note

[1] The government defines people "not in the labour force" as those who were neither working nor looking for work, those who care for a household full time, are students, live with a disability, or are not interested in working (Sri Lanka 2022, 83).

References

Australia. 2021-12-23. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). *DFAT Country Information Report: Sri Lanka*. [Accessed 2023-06-02]

Centre for Equality and Justice (CEJ). 2018-07. *Sexual Bribery of Military Widows in Sri Lanka*. [Accessed 2023-07-06]

Centre for Equality and Justice (CEJ). N.d. "Who We Are." [Accessed 2023-06-14]

The Diplomat. 2021-06-04. Lihini Ratwatte. "Spotlight on Sri Lanka's Women-Headed Households Affected by COVID-19." [Accessed 2023-06-06]

The Diplomat. N.d. "The Diplomat." [Accessed 2023-06-12]

Freedom House. 2023-03-09. "Sri Lanka." *Freedom in the World 2023*. [Accessed 2023-06-02]

Head of organization, women's organization in Sri Lanka. 2023-06-19. Interview with the Research Directorate.

President, Sarvodaya Women's Movement (SWM). 2023-06-12. Interview with the Research Directorate.

Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement (Sarvodaya). N.d. "[Sarvodaya Womens Movement](#)." [Accessed 2023-06-13]

Sri Lanka. 2022-08-10. *Ninth Periodic Report Submitted by Sri Lanka Under Article 18 of the Convention, due in 2021*. (CEDAW/C/LKA/9) [Accessed 2023-05-16]

Sri Lanka. 2022. Ministry of Finance, Economic Stabilization and National Policies, Department of Census and Statistics. *Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey: Annual Report - 2021*. [Accessed 2023-05-19]

Sri Lanka. 2019a. Ministry of Finance, Economic Stabilization and National Policies, Department of Census and Statistics. "[Table 6.2: Female Headed Households by Sector, Province and District](#)." [Accessed 2023-06-06]

Sri Lanka. 2019b. Ministry of Finance, Economic Stabilization and National Policies, Department of Census and Statistics. "[Table 6.5: Percentage Distribution of Female Headed Households by Marital Status and Sector - 2016,2019](#)." [Accessed 2023-06-02]

Sri Lanka. N.d. Ministry of Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment. "[Main Development Programmes](#)." [Accessed 2023-06-01]

Trincomalee District Women Network (TDWN). 2023-02-28. "[Advocacy Paper on Establishing a Special Judicial Process for Sexual Violations](#)." [Accessed 2023-06-06]

United Nations (UN). 2023-06-08. UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). "[Expert's Take: Six Ways Sri Lanka's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security Will Support Women During Crises](#)." [Accessed 2023-06-08]

United Nations (UN). 2023-03-09. UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). "[Sri Lanka Adopts First National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security](#)." [Accessed 2023-06-08]

United Nations (UN). 2022. UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). *Gender Disparities and Labour Market Challenges: the Demand for Women Workers in Sri Lanka*. By Ramani Gunatilaka & Sunil Chandrasiri. [Accessed 2023-06-12]

United Nations (UN). 2020-08-25. Human Rights Council. *Visit to Sri Lanka: Report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief*. (A/HRC/43/48/Add.2) [Accessed 2023-06-02]

United Nations (UN). 2017-01-31. Human Rights Council. [*Report of the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues on Her Mission to Sri Lanka.*](#) (A/HRC/34/53/Add.3) [Accessed 2023-06-19]

United States (US). 2023-03-20. Department of State. ["Sri Lanka." *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2022.*](#) [Accessed 2023-05-16]

United States (US). 2022-07-19. Department of State. ["Sri Lanka." *Trafficking in Persons Report.*](#) [Accessed 2023-06-02]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Centre for Women's Research; professor at an American university who conducted field work in Sri Lanka studying health and livelihood projects; professor at an American university who conducted research on widows in Sri Lanka; professor of psychology at an American university who conducted trauma research in Sri Lanka; Sri Lanka – Ministry of Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment; Widows for Peace Through Democracy; Women in Need; Women's Development Centre; Women's Education and Research Centre.

Internet sites, including: AHAM Humanitarian Resource Center; American Psychological Association; Amnesty International; Asylum Research Centre; Belgium – Commissariat général aux réfugiés et aux apatrides; Bertelsmann Stiftung; Center for Human Rights Development; Centre for Public Impact; Centre for Women's Research; *Daily Mirror*; Denmark – Danish Immigration Service; Human Rights Watch; International Crisis Group; *International Journal of Psychology*; *The Island*; *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*; NewsWire; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; People for Equality and Relief in Lanka; Progressive Women's Collective; Sri Lanka – Cabinet of Ministers, Election Commission, Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, Northern Provincial Council; Sri Lanka Brief; Sri Lanka Centre for Development Facilitation; UK – Home Office; UN – Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNDP, UN Population Fund, Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund; University of Colombo – Centre for the Study of Human Rights; US – CIA; Women and Media Collective; Women's Centre Sri Lanka; Women's Development Centre; Women's Education & Research Centre.

Associated documents

Document ID 2095459 Translation / language version

21 June 2023 | [IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada](#)
(Author)

Sri Lanka

Query response on Sri Lanka: Situation of single women and their treatment by society and authorities (2021 - June 2023)

Sri Lanka : information sur la situation des femmes célibataires, y compris les veuves, et le traitement qui leur est réservé par la société et les autorités, y compris la possibilité pour elles de vivre seules et d'accéder au logement, à l'éducation, à l'emploi, aux soins de santé et à des services de soutien (2021-juin 2023) [LKA201522.EF] (Response, French)

fr

ID 2095460

ecoi.net description:

Query response on Sri Lanka: Situation of single women and their treatment by society and authorities (2021 - June 2023)

Country:

Sri Lanka

Source:

[IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada](#) (Author)

Original link:

<https://irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/country-information/rir/Pages/index.aspx?doc=458835&pls=1>

Document type:

Response

Language:

English

Published:

21 June 2023

Available on ecoi.net since:

11 August 2023

Document ID:

2095459

Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for
Country of Origin and
Asylum Research and
Documentation
(ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße
32, 1041 Wien
T +43 1 589 00 583
F +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
Imprint & Disclaimer
F.A.Q.
Data Protection Notice

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

