

“Let the Women  
Decide the Margin”

# POLICY BRIEF ON SINGLE WOMEN IN SRI LANKA 2023

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# POLICY BRIEF ON SINGLE WOMEN



## INTRODUCTION

This policy brief focuses on Single Women (SW) in Sri Lanka based on the action research<sup>1</sup> carried out for the project 'Let the Women Decide the Margin' implemented to mobilise, organise and empower SW to realise their economic potential, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), political and social rights, and work towards mitigating discrimination and harassment. The focus of the policy brief is to present recommendations for policy development, implementation of future programmes / activities and capacity development of service providers and CSOs / NGOs, based on evidence-based research for the wellbeing of Single Women.



## DEFINITION

An operational definition was used for the action research and project activities. The operational definition describes SW as, 'women who have never married and are above 40 years of age'.



## SINGLE WOMEN IN SRI LANKA

Information on SW in Sri Lanka was obtained from marital status data in the Censuses of Population and Housing. Census data on marital status covers the population, both male and female, aged 15 and above, and the categorisation identifies the "never-married" group separately. Accordingly, in the 2012 census, 30 per cent of males and 22 per cent of females are recorded as never married. The census data also provides information on the never married population by age and sex, but the data is only up to 49 years and does not capture individuals above that age (Department of Census & Statistics, 2014).

Sri Lanka, over the years, has also seen an increase in Female-Headed Households (FHH), especially after the ethnic conflict in the North and East. The Income and Expenditure Survey 2019 estimated that out of the total 5.4 million households in Sri Lanka, 1.4 million households or 25.3 per cent are headed by women (Department of Census & Statistics, 2022). Single Women are very likely to be included in the category of FHHs.

Research studies specifically on SW in Sri Lanka were hard to find, except for Abeysekera's anthropological study (2017) on urban Sri Lanka. However, there are micro-level studies on Female-Headed Households (FHH) where SW are included with other women belonging to FHH (Ruwanpura, 2003, Boyagoda, 2014, Bulumulla, 2015, Jeyasankar and Ganheva, 2018, Vithanagama, Gunatilaka, & Kodikara, 2018).

## KEY FEATURES<sup>2</sup>



## REASONS TO REMAIN SINGLE

Several reasons had contributed for the interviewed women to be single. For 59.6 per cent of SW, it was a personal choice to remain single. Reasons such as family burden, inability to find a suitable partner, disability and the lack of dowry were also contributory factors.

1 Action research conducted in 2022, covered SW in four districts, Kurunegala, Anuradhapura, Vavuniya and Mullaitivu. The methodology comprised of a (i) desk study, including national and international research on SW, the legal framework, policies, and international standards and (ii) primary data collection - quantitative data collected in two stages: Stage 1- initial Baseline Survey covering 621 and in Stage 2 Sample Survey 60 SW. Single Women were identified using the snowballing sample method and through contacts, as there were no lists available giving information on SW.

A structured questionnaire was used to collect data through the Kobo Collect App. Key informant interviews were conducted with a few State officials from the selected districts.

2 Based on the action research carried out in 2022. No generalisations are made.



## AGE<sup>3</sup>

Age-wise, SW were of two categories- middle-aged and elderly. There were 70.3 per cent SW in their middle ages (40-60 years), while the elderly comprised 29.6 per cent (61 years and above). Elderly single women are bound to face socio-economic issues as a result of their ineligible status to receive social security benefits as the majority worked in the informal sector. This group is most likely to face health issues in the absence of proper health care for elders.



## EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENTS

Eight per cent (8.2 per cent) of SW had never gone to school and 17.8 per cent had only primary education (Grades 1-5). There were 38.5 per cent of SW who had received secondary level education (Grades 6- G.C.E. Ordinary Level). The data highlights the low level of education, as 64.5 per cent had not completed the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination. This includes those who had never gone to school. The levels of education have implications for employment, skill training and capacity development of SW for empowerment. However, there were a few SW with tertiary education- 12 with a degree and nine with diploma level qualifications.



## FAMILY MEMBERS REMAINING SINGLE

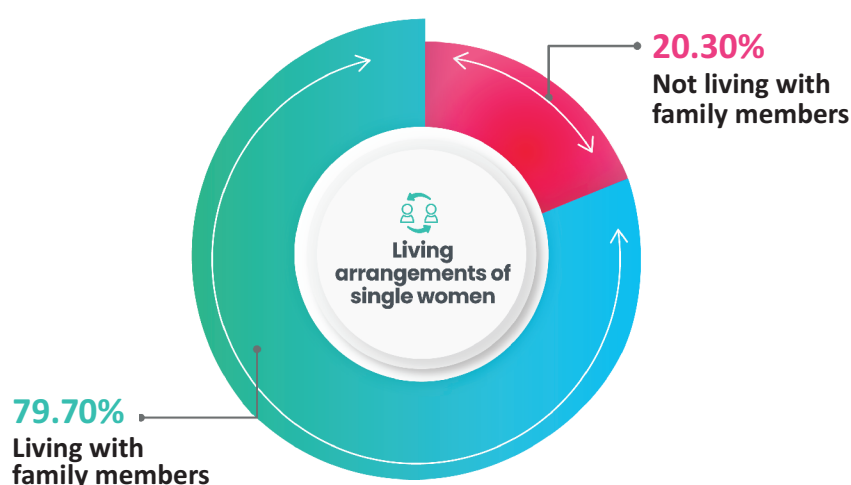
Out of those interviewed, 33.3 per cent of SW had a family member who never married living with her in the same house. They were either a sister or a brother and, in a few cases, both sister and brother. Such households are extremely vulnerable, both economically and socially.



## LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

Eighty per cent (79.7 per cent) of SW were living with their family members (Figure 1). There could be several reasons for a SW to live with her family rather than alone - culture, security, caring for family members, no individual ownership to land/house, etc. Although SW have defied marriage which is culturally upheld as essential for an individual, they have opted to remain single while living with their natal families than living alone.

**Figure 1 :**  
**Living arrangements of single women**



Abeyesekera (2017), through the narrative of a single woman, elaborates on the independence and freedom they enjoy, and the opportunity for self-sacrifice, and to live for others, as an outcome of their singlehood. The author argues that the single woman, even though she uses her agency to

<sup>3</sup> Only those who were 40 years and above were taken as SW

remain single and defies marriage, upholds the values of mothering, nurturing, and caring by being a dutiful daughter, sister, and aunt. Conforming to the above insights, of those interviewed, 37.2 per cent were engaged in activities entrusted to them primarily by family members and others - relatives.

Of the total SW interviewed, 46.5 per cent claimed that they were the head of the household. Included in this number are SW living with and without family members.

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC WELLBEING OF SINGLE WOMEN

### ECONOMIC WELLBEING

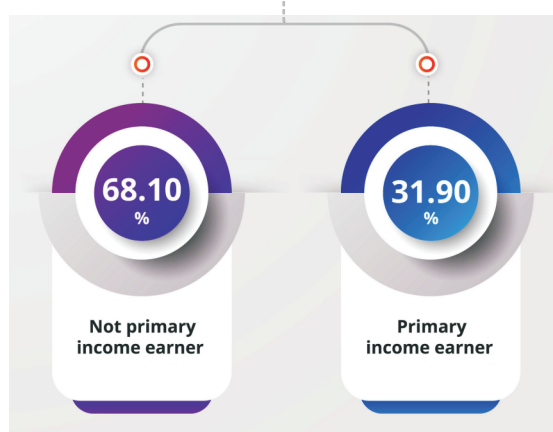


#### INCOME EARNERS

Out of the total SW interviewed, nearly half were income receivers engaged in different types of employment. Out of those SW who were earning an income from employment, most were employed in the informal sector with no regular income. Like so many other women employed in the informal economy deprived of social security benefits, these SW will face several economic and social hardships. This is more so as life expectancy is high among women.

As shown in Figure 2, it is to be noted that of those who were living with their families, 31.9 per cent were the primary income earner in the family, contributing to the family's survival. In the Sri Lankan culture, age is not the standard for a son or a daughter to seek a life of independence, rather it is marriage that allows them to lead an independent life upon leaving their parental home. This is more so in rural areas. However, children who remain single in the family take responsibility to contribute to the family income and in some instances as the main income earner. This illustrates the economic vulnerability of SW and their families.

**Figure 2 :**  
**Single women's economic status within their families**



#### INCOME LEVEL

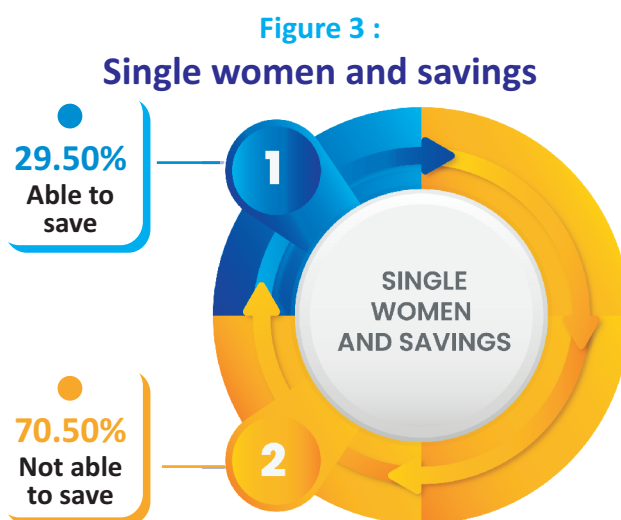
The monthly individual income of SW was rather low, with a majority (57.2 per cent) receiving an income equal to or less than Rs. 10,000. However, there were a few SW (13 women) who earned more than Rs. 40,000 a month. Self-employment and casual labour, which do not guarantee a secure income, may be the reasons for the low income level. This further highlights the economic vulnerability of SW, especially in old age and in sickness, as self-employment and casual labour do not guarantee income security during illness. Economic vulnerability can also be an enabling factor for discrimination, harassment, and violence.

Nearly half of the SW interviewed could make decisions on spending their incomes. The others had to depend on family members, either their parents or siblings. The lack of agency among SW and the power relations maintained in SW families are apparent.



## SAVINGS

Saving is important for the economic wellbeing of SW. However, SW appear vulnerable in this aspect as only 29.5 per cent were able to save (Figure 3). This may be a result of unsteady and low incomes, as SW in the study were employed in the informal sector. The popular mode of saving was with a CBO in small groups.



## INDEBTEDNESS

Although the majority of SW were unable to save money, 82 per cent were not indebted. Despite the majority of SW not being in a state of indebtedness, they are still economically vulnerable. This is especially true in times of disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as most SW are employed in the informal sector with unstable incomes, leaving them without the ability to save money.



## PROBLEMS AT WORKPLACE

Forty-five per cent of SW perceived that employed SW faced problems in their workplaces. A majority of the SW (81.5 per cent) believed employed SW were given more work, 66.7 per cent were of the view that they had to work late hours, and 55.6 per cent believed they were not paid adequately. Sexual harassment by co-workers (22.2 per cent) and superiors (22.2 per cent) asking for sexual favours was also identified. Co-workers passing unpleasant remarks was also a problem faced by SW. The responses show that SW are treated differently from married women in the workplace. Such situations are bound to have an impact on SW's wellbeing.

# SOCIAL WELLBEING



## FAMILY SUPPORT

As stated earlier, the majority of SW were living with their families. A majority of SW (74.7 per cent) received family support, mainly concerning safety, and assistance in their day-to-day work. Such family support would have a positive impact on the social wellbeing of SW.





## HEALTH STATUS

Health status is an important aspect of one's social wellbeing. An accurate health assessment based on medical records could not be obtained, but according to SW's perception of their health situation, 61.4 per cent perceived that they were not suffering from an illness. For those who claimed that they were suffering from an illness, most said that their illnesses were chronic diseases and disabilities. The disability may be from birth, or had come on later in life, or with ageing.

A clear difference was noted in the health status with ageing. Sixty-four per cent aged 40-50 years, 62.8 per cent aged 51-60 years, 57.1 per cent aged 61-70 years and 53.6 per cent aged above 70 years perceived that they were not suffering from any illness, which implies that with increasing age more SW were suffering from an illness.

Chronic diseases increased with old age. Accordingly, 23.1 per cent aged 61-70 years and 32.1 per cent aged 70 and above claimed they were suffering from a chronic illness.

Literature points out that SW do face mental health issues more than married women (Kotar, 2014, Fekih and Macziane, 2016). This could be so in the case of Sri Lanka. However this was not explored in the survey.



## DISCRIMINATION

Society's negative stereotypical views of women who remain single lead to discrimination (Hancock, 2017). Sharp and Ganong (2010) highlight the issues of discrimination and stigma attached to SW where society promotes marriage and motherhood as central to women's identities. The social identity of 'single woman' carries different connotations as marriage is a social requirement. Moreover, one's status cannot be concealed from close associates, especially in rural areas. These undertones are not in any way favourable to SW and result in discrimination. Though being single could be a woman's choice, that choice is often viewed as bad, and with marriage considered vital to one's life, single women are negatively viewed as failures of womanhood (Boyagoda, 2014; Hancock, 2017).

Of the SW interviewed, 25.9 per cent had experienced discrimination. SW were mainly discriminated by their family members (55.9 per cent), relatives (54.7 per cent), and neighbours (50.3 per cent). Single women faced discrimination at social events. Single women faced discrimination at weddings (65.4 per cent), religious events (38.5 per cent), and cultural events (34.6 per cent).

As stated earlier, marriage for a woman is considered as essential and deemed a social norm, and those who go against this norm are found fault with or seen as deviants, leading to discrimination. This is highlighted clearly in responses given by SW on the types of discrimination they face. A majority of SW (80 per cent) said that finding fault for being single was a form of discrimination. The other main ways of discrimination were, unfair treatment in dividing family property (56.7 per cent), condemnation (43.3 per cent), ill-treatment at family functions, (20 per cent) and refusal to associate them. Such types of discrimination result from society's negative attitude towards SW.

SW were also discriminated by community members. Nearly fifty per cent (48.3 per cent) were of the view that SW do face discrimination from the community.

In addition to family and community discrimination, SW were of the view that there was Government discrimination in distributing State allocations to beneficiaries. According to SW, they face discrimination in receiving Samurdhi benefits (38.3 per cent), allocating houses (31.7 per cent), distribution of State land (30.0 per cent), and distribution of COVID-19 relief (30.0 per cent).



## SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Single women (27.2 per cent) were of the view that they face exclusion at social events, commonly by relatives, their families, and neighbours.

Voluntary exclusion was noted. Responses show that 28.7 per cent of SW had refrained from participating in social events. This may be to avoid embarrassment and unwanted situations. This is highlighted by Abeyasekera, who says, “Younger single women talked about how they dreaded the often asked question: ‘When are you getting married?’” Several confessed to dreading family events because they had to justify themselves – “Why aren’t you married yet?” Older women – who never married shared how they were the subject of speculation and pity” (2017, 20).



## HARASSMENT / VIOLENCE

Of the total interviewed, 22.1 per cent (137 SW) said that they face harassment. Single women were mainly exposed to verbal (91.2 per cent) and psychological/emotional (78.1 per cent) harassment. Nearly 11 per cent and 12.4 per cent experienced physical and sexual harassment respectively.

A majority (82.4 per cent) of SW had not heard about cyber violence. Lack of awareness on cyber violence is of concern in view of the increasing incidence of cyber violence in the country. Three women said they were subjected to online violence.



## WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Women’s rights are universal irrespective of specific identities such as marital status, ethnicity, class, religion, etc. Of those interviewed, only 40 per cent claimed that they knew that the Sri Lankan Constitution guarantees non-discrimination on grounds of sex. Regarding the Women’s Charter, 66.7 per cent of SW believed that they did not know about it. Only 6.7 per cent of SW said that they had a good understanding of the rights given in the Charter. There were 26.7 per cent who believed that they knew to a certain extent.

A high majority (80.0 per cent) had a positive attitude towards learning about their rights as women. Educating SW through capacity development would be less of a challenge as they showed willingness to acquire knowledge.



## SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS (SRHR)

Of the SW interviewed, only 16.3 per cent had participated in sexual and reproductive health rights awareness programmes. Such a low participation may be an outcome of organisers targeting only married women or because SW on their own did not attend such programmes, believing that sexual and reproductive health issues belong in the domain of married women. Although reproductive health problems are health issues, sociological factors such as stigma, the notion of shame, and gossip leading to discrimination are important factors that determine human behaviour.

Only 15.0 per cent of SW said they had knowledge of SRHR, 65.0 per cent believed that they knew to some extent, and 20 per cent claimed that they did not have any knowledge. A majority of SW (96.7 per cent), believed that knowledge of SRHR is important. Therefore, gaining knowledge on SRHR is important for SW to enjoy a healthy life.

Out of the SW interviewed, a little more than half had heard about the Well Woman Clinics (WWC). However, of those who had heard about the WWC, only 23.5 per cent had been to a clinic to obtain its services. Several factors may have contributed to their low participation, such as SW assuming that reproductive health issues are relevant only to married women and hence those clinics are

only for them, health workers primarily pursuing young mothers, and SW's inhibitions in attending a WWC.

Only a few SW believed that they possessed adequate knowledge about HIV/AIDS and STDs. However, realising the importance of acquiring such knowledge and their willingness to learn were positive attitudes that were observed.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Stakeholder	Recommendations
<b>Government</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Mapping of vulnerable SW at DS level by age, income and living arrangements, and include them as a distinct group in policy matters.</li> <li>♦ Form a special committee at the DS level to target SW/FHHs focusing on economic, health, legal and social aspects and have regular meetings under the leadership of the Divisional Secretary.</li> <li>♦ Ensure that SW have access to State social support benefits based on the legitimate status of SW.</li> <li>♦ Conduct awareness programmes through women's societies to create sensitivity towards SW to bring about an attitudinal change within the community and to make their life easier and non-discriminatory.</li> <li>♦ To bring about an attitudinal change, create opportunities for SW to take leadership roles in women's societies, community projects, etc.</li> <li>♦ Provide livelihood opportunities with financial literacy and training for SW, enabling them to engage in stable income-earning employment opportunities.</li> <li>♦ Ensure that SW have equal access to health services including Well Woman Clinics for reproductive health without prejudice.</li> <li>♦ Pay special focus on the health of elderly SW as they can be missed since they are not in the reproductive age group.</li> <li>♦ Provide necessary mental health care and psychosocial support services to SW in need.</li> <li>♦ Enhance knowledge on human rights, women's rights and SRHR among SW.</li> <li>♦ Community Police to identify vulnerable SW who face economic difficulties and require counselling support in their area of operation and refer them to relevant officers at the divisional level.</li> </ul>
<b>CSOs and NGOs</b>	<p>Develop a pool of trainers from the CSOs/NGOs to create awareness at their project locations on :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Gender issues.</li> <li>♦ Women's rights, rights violations, SRHR, violence, and cyber violence.</li> <li>♦ Stigma and discrimination against single women.</li> </ul> <p>Conduct targeted programmes for SW by Trainers of Trainers to create awareness and empower SW on the importance of :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Saving.</li> <li>➤ Acquiring knowledge of relevant laws.</li> <li>➤ Following good health behavioural practices including reproductive issues.</li> <li>➤ Services and benefits available from the State and eligibility criteria to access them.</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Sensitise and empower communities (men, women, and youth,) to stand against discrimination, and harassment experienced by single women.</li> <li>♦ Provide livelihood opportunities for SW to enable them to engage in work that offers a stable income.</li> <li>♦ Form SW groups as a united and empowered force to raise a voice for social justice.</li> <li>♦ Strengthen networking among like-minded organizations who work for/ with SW at the national and regional levels.</li> </ul>
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