

FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOUR MARKET: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JAPAN AND SRI LANKA.

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INTRODUCTION

The Sri Lankan economy witnessed in the last quarter century a sharp increase in the female labour force, surpassing that of their male counterparts. Between the first post-Independence Census of Population (1953) and the late 1990s economically active women increased three-fold from an estimated 725 thousand to over 2 million, with the bulk of the increase taking place in the 80s. The participation rate (FLFPR) peaked at 39% by the close of the 80s. In Japan, likewise, the pace of female participation in economic activity has accelerated. Recovering from the set-back of the oil crisis years of the early 70s, female labour force growth registered a sharper increase of 37% between 1975 and 1996 compared to the 20% growth reported for their male counterparts, to raise the share of females in the total labour force to around 40% in the current decade.

In both economies, the influx has been accompanied by substantial changes in the character and composition of the workforce as well as by the emergence of new issues and challenges.

This presentation has its focus on female labour force participation patterns in post-War Sri Lanka and Japan in comparative perspective, seeking to derive through such investigation

- an identification of the similarities and contrasts, and
- an understanding of the influences behind the similarities and contrasts in the profiles and trends so identified.

FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION: LEVELS

Lower activity rates for women compared to their male counterparts is a universal phenomenon. From a level of 20% reported in the early 60s, the FLFPR in Sri Lanka rose to around 25% in the 70s, and subsequently to 39% by the dawn of the 90s following its sharp acceleration in the 80s. (Table 1) Data for the 90s point to a somewhat lower level of between 31-33%. For males the participation rate (65%, 1997) stands at double that of females. Females currently constitute one-third of the total employed workforce of 6 million.

In Japan, in comparison, 27 million women are in the labour force, yielding, as of 1996, a much higher female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) of 50 per cent. (Table1) The unemployment rate for women is currently placed at slightly over 4 per cent (April 1998) compared to double-digit levels in Sri Lanka (31% in 1971; 16% in 1997, –the highest on record in Asia).

Table 1: Labour Force by Gender

SRI LANKA								
	Census	Census	LFSES	QLFS	QLFS	QLFS	Increase, %	
	1963	1971	1980	1990Qr1	1990*	1996*	71-80	80-90
Male, 000s	2736	3312	4059	4372	3831	4201	22.6	7.7
Female, 000s	716	1171	1536	2596	2134	2044	31.2	69.0
Share of Females, %	20.7	26.1	27.5	37.3	35.8	32.7		
Female LFPR, %	20.0	26.0	25.8	39.5	36.7	31.7		

Notes: For Sri Lanka: Labour force 10 years and above.

*Average of 4 quarters, excluding the Northern and Eastern Provinces where the prevailing insecurity situation precludes enumeration.

JAPAN							
	1955	1965	1975	1985	1996	Increase, %	
						1955-75	1975-96
Male, 000s	24550	28840	33360	35960	39920	35.6	19.7
Female, 000s	17400	19030	19870	23670	27190	14.2	36.8
Share of Females, %	41.5%	39.8%	37.3%	39.7%	40.5%		
Female LFR, %	56.7	50.6	45.7	48.7	50		

Sources: Japan: Japan Statistical Year Books

Sri Lanka: Department of Census & Statistics

At 50% the current FLFR in the Japanese economy is somewhat lower by Anglo-American standards but is significantly above the corresponding Sri Lankan rates. (Table 2) The Sri Lanka rate approximates the position reported for Italy.

Table 2: FLFRs of Selected Countries, Mid-90s

Age, Yrs	Sri Lanka 1994	Japan 1995	US 1995	UK 1993	Canada 1995	Germany 1994	France 1995	Italy 1994
15& +	33.0	50.0	58.0	52.8	57.4	48.2	47.9	33.7

Sources: For Sri Lanka, Dept. of Census & Statistics: Demographic Survey, 1984; Others, ILO Year Book, 1996

In Sri Lanka the persistently high level of female unemployment (31% in 1971; 16% in 1997) can be surmised as having a demoralising effect on prospective job seekers, dissuading them from seeking their fortunes in the labour market for extended periods (i.e. the 'discouraged worker' effect). Meanwhile, Japan, following a decade and half of high-speed economic growth led by manufacturing, reached the threshold of full employment as the 60s ended. The expanding labour requirements of manufacturing in the 60s (paid employment largely) were met partly through a growing population and partly through the transfer of labour from traditional pur-

suits in the primary sector. The factory assembly line held out many opportunities for women workers. Compared to the Japanese economy Sri Lanka's achievements on the economic growth front were of much modest dimensions averaging between 4 and $4\frac{1}{2}$ per cent per annum in the last three decades. The employment relief which economic growth could offer to the labour surplus situation was essentially limited. The growth pattern also did not entail the emergence of a large manufacturing sector.

Disaggregating by major activity, it is seen that both economies had a school going population of around 20% of the total female population. Providing a clue to the differences in the female labour force participation intensity is the relatively higher proportion of women reported in 'housewife' status in the Sri Lankan economy relative to Japan. Housewives constituted around 45% of Sri Lanka's female population in the 70s and the early 80s, but the share has subsequently declined to around one-third in the 90s. In Japan, in contrast, the number of working wives had surpassed the number of full-time housewives by the mid-80s. In the mid-90s two-thirds of the females in the non-agricultural workforce were working wives.

Apart from the 'discouraged worker' effect that accompanies high levels of unemployment, there are several family-related factors also contributing to the relatively lower LFPR in Sri Lanka. The average household size in Sri Lanka is higher (e.g. 4.6 in 1993 compared to 2.8 (1995) in Japan) and the burden of household responsibility is accordingly higher. Similarly, the average child-caring period is longer in Sri Lanka. The number of children per mother averages close to 3 and the median interval between child birth is estimated at 37 months. (Demographic Health Survey, 1987) In Japan the corresponding picture is a low fertility rate of 1.4 (1996) and a telescoping of the child bearing age.

Once the children grow up, there are also still other responsibilities thrust upon the woman. In Sri Lanka schools finish at 1:30 p.m. and presence at home of the mother (or an elderly relative) becomes necessary by this time. There are also other activities such as accompanying children for tuition and extra curricular activities

after school which the female has to attend to while the male spouse is at his job in the office or field.

In Japan reconciliation of household chores with an employment schedule has also been facilitated by time and labour saving appliances in household work and a range of other external support systems (semi-processed food, take-away meals, home-delivery systems, etc.). Changing life styles (e.g. eating out) have also made their contribution. In Sri Lanka the change in these directions has been evidently slow. Compared to the set up in Japan, the household chores of cooking, cleaning, laundering, marketing etc. are of a more time-consuming nature. Use of time-saving household appliances is not widespread. Apart from many of these appliances being beyond the purse of the average family, electricity is also a relatively expensive expenditure item in the prevailing household income context.

Meanwhile, on the demand front the evolution of part-time and flexible working arrangements on an extended scale has made combination of labour force participation with family responsibilities a feasible option in Japan. Broadly defined as working less than 35 hours a week, the number of part-time workers has grown rapidly in the last two decades to constitute a little over one-third of all female employees by the mid-90s. As of February 1996, over $5\frac{1}{2}$ million working females (i.e. 29%) were in part-time employment pursuits compared to only 1% of the male workforce. A further 7% of female workers (i.e. 1.4 million) were in *arubaito* part time work. The latter are basically students working several hours in the week as a side activity. Thus, by the mid-90s, one in every 3 female workers in Japan is a part-timer.

A high level of part-time work is a common phenomenon in the industrialised Anglo-American labour market framework. A disproportionate share for women in the part-time labour force is similarly a common feature. In Sri Lanka, however, part-time work has not emerged as a significant feature of the paid segment of the market.

Finally, in traditional Sri Lankan society, the family's responsibilities towards the offspring also do not usually end up with the marriage of the children. The link between the parental family and the offspring remains quite close and many women spend part of their lives with them and contribute to the upbringing of the next generation.

FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION : THE TIME TREND

A major development in the post-War economy of Japan in respect of female labour force participation trends is its 'U-shaped' behaviour over time, reflecting

- (a) the gradual decline in the FLFPR which had accompanied modernization of the economy in the early years, and
- (b) its subsequent reversal since the mid-70s. (Table 1)

Sri Lanka presents a contrast in this respect: the time trend indicated by the available bench mark statistics assumes the shape of an inverted 'U', namely a sharp increase in the 70s and 80s to peak at the dawn of the 90s and a decline thereafter to stabilise at a lower level of 31-33% in the mid and late 90s.

The 'U-shaped' cyclical pattern of Japan's long period FLFPR performance—declining during the period of High-Growth and subsequently rising in the post-oil shock years—falls into perspective when viewed in the context of the developments on the broad economic and demographic fronts and the changing social environment. The FLFPR decline in the high growth years of the 60s is reflective of growing affluence and the structural change (e.g. decline in traditional agriculture) which went hand in hand with growth. It was also accompanied by a sharp rise in educational enrollments in the economy for both boys and girls. Male LFPRs also declined over this period with the increase in schooling.

Subsequently, when the oil and exchange rate shocks of the 70s changed the

Japanese economy from a high-growth to a low growth economy and eroded the competitive base in manufacturing (de-industrialisation), the developments led to a decline in the female workforce in manufacturing from 5.2 million to 4.8 million between 1970 and 1975, with a corresponding decline in the FLFPR. However, in the ensuing period female absorption picked up pace reflecting the economy's efforts to mobilize supplementary labour resources as the mainstream supply (i.e. routine addition to labour force through population growth) failed to keep pace with the expanding demand requirements.

Alongside these developments on the demand front, the Japanese economy experienced in the latter part of the period the emergence of an alternative source of labour supply —women from employees' households— to fill the gap as traditional sources of labour such as farming families, full time college leavers etc. began to dry out. As already highlighted, socio-economic motives (e.g. desire for more income and higher living standards) combined with developments on the demographic and other fronts (e.g. lesser children, nuclear families, labour saving domestic appliances etc.) to motivate more married females to seek participation in the market. The supply at this level had a preference for part-time working arrangements enabling a combination of career responsibilities with family obligations. The availability of women for part-time working also suited the disposition of employers who were looking for greater flexibility and reduced cost commitment in labour use.

Currently, more than half the working women in Japan are spouses of working men, and come from employees' households. This is in strong contrast to the position in the 50s where the paid female work force was largely individuals of unmarried status drawn from agricultural households.

Another labour market response came from delayed marriages, which enabled the younger women to continue longer in full time employment. The average age at marriage for Japanese women increased from 24 years in the 60s and 70s to 26 years by the 90s. Average household size declined from 4.5 persons in 1960 to 3 by 1990. (Table 3)

**Table 3: Demographic Change affecting Economy and Society, 1960-95:
Selected Indicators**

JAPAN	1960	1970	1980	1990	1995
Av. Age at 1st marriage, women	24.4	24.2	25.2	25.9	26.3
Household size	4.52	3.73	3.25	3.01	2.84
SRI LANKA	1963	1971	1981	1987	1993
Av. Age at 1st marriage, women	22.1	23.5	24.4	24.8	25.5
Household size		5.62 (1973)	5.2 (1980)		4.63
Fertility rates	5.0	3.4 (1975)	3.7 (1982)	2.8	2.3

Turning to Sri Lanka, the rising long term trend in the FLFPR is a reflection of increasing induction of women into the labour force accompanying the rise in educational attainments of females and the decline in traditional social taboos against women working outside their homes. Facilitating participation of young females for a longer period, the average age at marriage has gone up with economic development / modernization (e.g. from 23.5 years to 25.5 years between 1971 and 1993). A similar development is visible in the age at first birth. The median age of females at first birth has increased to above 25 years among the younger generation .

By composition, the share of full time students in the female population has been relatively stable at between 18-20% in the 70s and the 80s, with a slight increase coming in the 90s. Relative to this, the proportion of housewives has fallen from around 45% of the female population in the 70s to around one-third in the Quarterly Labour Force Surveys of the 90s. In absolute numbers too women engaged in own household work declined from 2.6 million in 1981 (Population Census) to 1.8 million in the first quarter of 1990, pointing to a position of more women changing from housewife status to labour force status in the 80s.

The rhythm indicated by the standard statistics seems erratic in the 90s, however. Two parallel developments deserve to be highlighted in this connection: namely,

- a) the large exodus of housewives from the middle age cohorts from Sri Lanka for overseas employment, and
- b) the growth of manufacturing employment in the domestic economy with a major thrust on younger groups such as in the Free Trade Zones. Free Trade Zones currently employ close upon 100 thousand employees, over 80% of whom are women. Around 70% of the Free Trade Zone workers fall within 18-25 years of age.

It is to be noted that within an annual figure of around 125,000 women migrating overseas for employment from the Sri Lanka in the 90s, the overwhelming majority come from the rank of housewives. By age around 75% of the Middle East migrants are concentrated in the age group 25 - 44 years. Over two-thirds of them are married.

The gross annual figure in respect of females migrating overseas for employment in the 90s is more than double the net addition to the female labour force in a year. The stock of female labour in contract employment in the Middle East is estimated by the Bureau of Foreign Employment at 378,500 in 1996. With labour market participation outside national boundaries duly incorporated into the calculation, the level of involvement of Sri Lankan females in income generating activity would be higher than implied by the simple FLFPR indicator. A modified FLFPR measure (duly adjusted to take account of this factor) is preferable to such simple FLFPR criterion as an indicator of the participation propensity of Sri Lankan women. Inferential evidence does not point to a decline in female participation propensity in economic activity; the indications in fact are to the contrary.

AGE-SPECIFIC FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION: BEHAVIOUR

Another source of contrast between the two markets is in age-specific female participation behaviour. The Japanese pattern is characterised by the evolution of a

two-peak (i.e. 'M-shaped') profile. (Table 3) In Sri Lanka, in contrast, the picture is uni-model. Another distinctive feature of the Sri Lankan profile is its 'plateauing' (albeit at a slightly lower level) over the successive cohorts after recording its peak in the 20 - 24 year age band. (Table 4)

Japan's M-shaped profile reflects, by and large, the labour market 'withdrawal' and 'return' phenomena of females in different stages of the life cycle. Over the years the 'M'-shape has continued and sharpened. As Table 3 illustrates, the curve shifts up horizontally with time reflecting enhanced overall participation. This temporal movement has featured a particularly conspicuous upward shift both of the bottom point of the 'M' as well as of the second peak of the 'M'.

Another major development to be recognised is the shifting of the bottom (trough) point at the close of the 1970s to the 30 - 34 year age group from the 20 - 29 year age group where it stood in the preceding years. (Table 3)

The broad age profile of the phenomena for Japan and Sri Lanka is brought together for comparison in Table 4 together with the corresponding picture for some selected developed economies.

Table 4: Age-Specific FLFPRs of Selected Countries, Mid-90s

Age, Yrs	Sri Lanka 1994	Japan 1995	US 1995	UK 1993	Germany 1995	France 1994	Canada 1995	Italy 1994
15-24	33.4	47.2	62.3#	66.0#	50.9	27.6	60.4	34.6*
25-54	38.4	65.2	75.6	73.8	74.4	79.5	75.9	53.1
55-	14.6	29.6	23.1	16.5	13.9	11.9	16.5	6.6

#16-24years

*14-24years

Sources: For Sri Lanka, Dept. of Census & Statistics; *Demographic Survey*, 1984; Others, ILO Year Book, 1996

A common feature observed in Sri Lanka and Japan is the low LFPR teenager females, at around 20% (slightly lower in Japan). This is in contrast to higher rates reported in the Anglo-American labour markets.

In both countries such low rate is reflective of the delayed entry into the labour market associated with the high enrollment rate of female students in educational institutions. In Sri Lanka, despite being a less developed economy, as much as 58%, females in the 15-19 year cohort are reported to be in full-time educational pursuits. (Demographic Survey, 1994) The availability of free education up to university level in Sri Lanka, a well dispersed network of schools covering both urban and rural areas, the attraction to education as a means of access to a white collar job, etc. have been the major propelling factors.

In contrast to the Anglo-American experience on record, FLFP rates in the child-bearing/child-caring cohorts is lower in both Japan and Sri Lanka. This pattern is an Asian phenomenon; a reflection of Asian societal traditions and values which assign a key role to the woman in home-making and family raising.

In Japan the prominent second peak of the LFPR curve has been caused by women returning to the market later in life, as discussed earlier on in the analysis. This segment of the LFPR curve mirrors the increase in working mothers, middle-aged women, part-timers etc. described in the preceding section. The pressures and stimuli underlying the 'return' phenomenon include personal satisfaction from working, the desire for higher living standards and/or the need for family income supplementation to meet the expenses of housing, children's schooling etc., which have escalated in recent years to sizable proportions. The facilitating influences on the demographic and other fronts (drop in birth rates, telescoping of the child bearing-caring period etc.) have already been highlighted. Facilitating influences have also come from advances on the health front which enhanced life expectancy and physical fitness.

The 'single peak-cum-plateauing' pattern in the Sri Lankan profile has several implications. Firstly, the plateauing is suggestive of a tendency for a larger propor-

tion of the working females to continue in employment once a job is secured. This is in contrast to the withdrawal process visible for Japanese working females after the first few years of employment. Secondly, the absence of a double-hump (i.e. 'M' phenomenon) in the Sri Lankan frame is suggestive of a pattern of permanent withdrawal once the worker quits the labour market. In the Japanese (and Anglo-American) profile, in contrast, return to the market after child-bearing/child-rearing responsibilities is becoming more common over the years.

What facilitate such continuity in employment in Sri Lanka as against the 'drop out' phenomenon reported in the Japanese (and other industrialised) economies? One feature to be borne in mind in respect of Sri Lanka is the continuing large constituency of female workers in traditional agriculture and services sector where time use is flexible and work routines are of an informal nature facilitating a combination of economic pursuits with household and child-caring obligations without withdrawing from economic pursuits. It is to be recalled that even in the mid-90s, as much as 16% of the employed females were in self employment (58% of them in agriculture), and a similar number in unpaid family work (86% of them in agriculture). (DS, 1994) In Japan in contrast, self employment and unpaid family work accounted for only 20% of total female employment (1996).

What is of deeper interest is the prevalence of the plateau type pattern (i.e. work continuation without withdrawal) in major pockets of formal paid employment as well. Among factors facilitating such continuation in the Sri Lankan market is support from the family/extended family and paid domestic helps in managing the day-to-day household chores and child caring during the critical phase of a working woman's career. In the plantations sector which contains a fifth of the paid female workforce, continuation of the female in economic activity is sustained by the supporting institution of the extended family. Also facilitating the arrangement is the residential nature of plantation employment where the workforce is accommodated in living quarters built on a part of the estate itself. The availability of creche facilities on the estate (improved in recent years through UNICEF and other donor-assisted programmes) has been another major facilitating factor. At 45% the LFPR of

females in the estate sector is much higher in comparison with the national average of 33%.

Likewise, for a large part of the female workforce in public sector employment which accounts for a third of the paid female workers, major facilitating factors are visible in availability of family help /paid household help to man the cooking and house/child-minding chores. 'Extended family' help still persists in the Sri Lankan society while Japan had a rapid transition towards the 'nuclear family' system. Mothers helping with the raising of their children's offspring is a common phenomenon in Sri Lankan society.

Also to be recognised is the contribution (directly and indirectly) of labour legislation and policy as facilitative/ restraining factors in the two environments. Labour Welfare legislation in Sri Lanka has a strong coverage of maternity protection and with respect to working hours. The Wages Board and Shop and Office legislation lay down the length of the working week/month and time rates for overtime work. The oil crisis led to a change over to a 5-day working week in the state sector in order to effect economy in energy use and there has been no reversion to the previous $5\frac{1}{2}$ day schedule. Leave regulations in Sri Lanka are also relatively generous. State employees enjoy 21 days of casual and 24 days of vacation leave in a year. In the formal private sector the entitlement is 28 days except in the Wages Boards trades where the figure ranges between 14 to 21 days. Sri Lanka also has a larger number of paid public holidays. With the full moon holidays included public holidays add up to 26 for public sector employees, 21 for the mercantile sector and 28 for banks. Thus, with the weekend holidays added, employees in the public sector would have around 175 non-working days in the year if the full quota of leave and holidays is taken. Female employees in the private sector are also currently entitled to 84 days of maternity leave for the first two live births and 45 days for the successive births. In addition, lactating mothers are allowed time for feeding. Utilisation of leave by employees is significantly high in Sri Lanka. The 1990 Census of Public Sector employees revealed that 63% of the female employees who were entitled to take leave had

taken 20 or more days leave in the year. For employees of the Central government the corresponding figure was 75%. These generous holiday/leave provisions, no doubt, help the beneficiaries in combining career obligations with their household and social commitments without forfeiting the job.

Also contributing to the long tenure pattern of both male and female employees is legal restrictions on termination of employment. The termination of Employment Act of 1971 and its amendments lay down strict conditions and procedures for effecting dismissal. Termination on non-disciplinary grounds requires the sanction of the Commissioner of Labour. Strong trade unionism has also been another influence behind job security.

Finally, in an environment of a large labour surplus where 'good' jobs cannot be found with relative ease, a job commands a premium every effort is made to retain it once acquired. Jobs in the state sector of the formal private sector have job security and social insurance benefits. Formal sector remuneration patterns also have incremental pay scales; long tenure is encouraged thereby.

The 'plateauing' phenomenon in the FLFPR may thus be seen as a reflection of these facilitative conditions which encourage and sustain long tenure. In Sri Lanka it is not incorrect to describe the employment in the public sector as one of virtual 'lifetime employment.' Jobs in the elite private sector also display similar characteristics.

Although these features have lent the Sri Lankan female labour market certain distinctive characteristics, the evidence in the market is suggestive of a process of transition as the economy completes the last lap of the millenium. The traditional 'extended family' cum self-help systems are being increasingly challenged by the emerging forces of modernization/commercialisation. The traditional sources of paid household labour are drying out under a process of employment migration overseas which takes out each year much more than the addition to the female labour force in the year. The large fraction of these women are going into domestic employment in rich

Arab households. With the ensuing scarcity of domestic helpers within the economy, wage rates in this segment are being driven up beyond the reach of many middle level grades which used to depend on such support. These will impact on the LFPR profiles to superimpose dents on the present configuration.

Meanwhile, in the new enclave of Free Trade Zones which currently have a female workforce of over 75 thousand in direct employment, a behaviour profile different from the labour force participation patterns described earlier is beginning to be evident. The traditional economic growth pattern in the Sri Lankan economy until the recent years did not feature the establishment of large factory units outside the plantation processing trades of tea, rubber and coconut which could absorb females (or even males) in large numbers. The Free Trade Zones symbolise the growth of a new industrial workforce, with a full-time work commitment, strict working time schedules and strong industrial discipline. The workforce in Free Trade Zone employment is predominantly one of young females in unmarried status even after $1\frac{1}{2}$ decades since its establishment. Withdrawal from factory employment consequent upon marriage is a common emerging pattern in this segment. As these types increase their share in the aggregate employment profile, new patterns of 'work and quit' or 'one-shot participation' type will be superimposed on the FLFP profile changing its shape in the long run towards profile characteristics of individual societies. The slight dip and recovery of the 'M-type' visible in some contemporary surveys (QLFS 1st Quarter, 1990; QLFS 1993; DS 1994) is reflective of these developments and provide an indication of the shape of things to come in the new millennium.

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