This working paper explores the relationship between participation in rural agricultural livelihoods and unpaid care work across the life course of rural Sri Lankan women. This research was conducted as part of an Oxfam-Monash Partnership that set out to explore the barriers and enablers for rural women's participation and recognition in agricultural livelihoods in post-war Sri Lanka. Our study shows that rural Sri Lankan women's participation in agriculture dropped to the lowest levels when they had young children. Paradoxically, their engagement in any other non-agricultural livelihood activity peaked at this time in their lives. Activities included home-based non-agricultural production, garment production, self-employment, and migration on temporary labour contracts. Thus, women did not exit livelihood activities altogether when they had children. Rather they took up non-agricultural work. Once women were in their 40s, participation in agriculture again increased for our sample.

Our findings raise two key issues for policy: one is the continuing importance of agriculture to rural economies and rural women despite the prominence of other economic sectors. The agriculture sector accounts for 43 percent of total land use in Sri Lanka, and a third of the Sri Lankan rural population including those in war-affected regions relies on agricultural livelihoods. In 2015 more women were formally employed in agriculture compared to men (33% compared to 27.4%), while in the informal sector (which compromised two thirds of all employment in Sri Lanka), 68% of all ‘contributing family workers’ in the Sri Lankan economy were concentrated in agriculture. In 2013, it was estimated that women constituted 71.8 per cent of these contributing family workers. The Sri Lankan Department of Census and Statistics defined an unpaid contributing family worker as “a person who works without any payment in an enterprise which may be a business enterprise, a service undertaking or a farm, operated by a member of the household.” Given that domestic agriculture including small holding (less than a quarter acre) provides approximately 75% percent of food for the country via small scale farming activity, women's contribution to food security is immense.

The second issue, which the remainder of this briefing focuses on, is that considering care work is crucial to accurately understanding women's participation in agriculture. Care work encompasses affective and material activities associated with birth, raising children, elder care, domestic work, emotional labour, and other household and community maintenance activities that are vital for all societies to survive and flourish. In Sri Lanka as elsewhere, women's contribution to unpaid care work is not accounted for by the state, despite increasing recognition of women's disproportionate care work burden being an impediment to women’s economic empowerment (specifically to market participation) (e.g. the 2017 UN High Level Panel on Report on Economic Empowerment).

Care work in post-war contexts is an important but overlooked element in reconstruction efforts. In war and post-war contexts, care work unfolds under conditions of inequality, trauma and the lack of sustainable livelihood options. The extract below from the Final Report on the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms exemplifies the burden faced by Sri Lankan women:

“...Women who faced the brunt of the war are also the ones who are forced to provide for their families, playing multiple roles. One woman from Polonnaruwa in the North Central Province said in a focus group discussion that she was forced to leave her children and go abroad after the husband who was the main breadwinner was disappeared.”

Likewise, they suggest that:

“the design, monitoring and implementation of a reparations programme should take into account differences in the experiences of men and women. This includes factoring in the multiple roles women play as primary caregivers and breadwinners as well as the differences [between
women and women] in access to services and employment/livelihoods."

Similarly, Sri Lankan women’s advocacy groups have lobbied for the state to take measures to promote secure livelihoods and to recognize and value women’s unpaid labour within households.7 Recognizing the disproportionate share of care work by women, they argued, is important in quantifying and measuring women’s contribution to the household and economy.

Women’s disproportionate burden of care work can lead to their omission from peace-processes, livelihood opportunities, political participation, and education/training.8 Conversely, it can lead to physical and mental depletion through their participation in post-war processes when household care work burden remains unchanged. This may be exacerbated in post-war contexts, in which there is often a push to deepen traditional or ‘pre-war’ gender norms, meanings, and practices.9 In Sri Lanka, these norms are centered on women’s roles as ‘respectable’ wives and mothers, as well as their symbolic status as bearers of national culture.10 While such ideologies venerate women’s caring roles, the disproportionate labour of care work remains perpetually under-recognized by the post-war state. As such, efforts to address the disproportionate burden of care work women take on are under-resourced.

With this in mind, this brief outlines ways in which policy makers can begin to factor in care-work in post-war transitional contexts. Policy makers and others advocating for a sustainable solution should consider engaging with the set of key recommendations outlined here, as they are derived from an important evidence base including on the ground knowledge from women most affected.

STUDYING RURAL WOMEN’S LIVELIHOODS IN POST-WAR SRI LANKA

Our study on rural women’s participation in agricultural livelihoods in Sri Lanka aimed to capture how women’s participation in livelihoods had changed over time and across the life-course, and any barriers and opportunities women faced through their life-course. Data was collected in 2015, six years following the end of war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (1983-2009), in three of Sri Lanka’s dry zone districts: Polonnaruwa, Ampara and Hambantota districts. The women participating in the research were selected from multiple ethnic groups (Singhalese, Tamil, Muslim, Adavasi) and different age groups. A life course approach was used to capture the totality of women’s lives from girlhood to elder status. A “life course” represents a relationship between time and human behaviour, and how age, relationships, life transitions such as marriage, social change, interactions with institutions, social movements, the environment, culture, families, communities, and political processes change and shape people’s lives from birth to death.

A mixed method approach was used to collect data. A semi-structured survey was administered from February–April 2015. 2093 survey responses were collected by field enumerators using a multi-stage stratified random sampling method in three randomly selected Divisional Secretariat Divisions, and then within these Divisions, a Grama Nilidari (village) Division in each district. The qualitative research consisted of 66 in-depth interviews in 7 villages. Participants and non-participants in Oxfam livelihood projects were interviewed in person during December 2014 – January 2015.

Although ethnically diverse, the selected districts shared several commonalities. Previous studies have demonstrated that households in these regions derive a significant share of their income from non-farm related activities.9 Households identified as female-headed, having many dependents, poor family support, or a lack of voice and positions of influence were associated with higher poverty levels.11 All communities were deeply affected by various forms of violence including war between the LTTE and Government of Sri Lanka, insurrectionary action by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in Hambantota as well as communal conflict in Polonnaruwa and Ampara. Many experienced expulsion, displacement, land dispossession, and loss of family, and the constant search for sustainable livelihoods pushed women into precarious work, exacerbated by the lack of access to land.12

WOMEN’S LIVELIHOODS THROUGH THEIR LIFE COURSE

Throughout their life-course, at various points most of the women engaged in cultivation (vegetables, fruits, legumes, paddy, chena and tea), animal husbandry, post-harvest work, selling produce, fetching water, home gardening and auxiliary work such as weaving coconut fronds or cooking and taking food to labourers. Many interviewees reported that they did the same tasks as their husbands after marriage (e.g. harvesting paddy cultivation, clearing weeds). They were involved in almost all stages of work from planning and preparing land, harvesting, weeding and applying pesticides and fertilisers. However, none of the women reported operating tractors or other heavy machinery (traditionally viewed as a man’s role), suggesting that some forms of gender job segregation have persisted. Non-agricultural livelihoods the women reported engaging in included craft work, running small shops selling everyday household items (soap, tea, biscuits) care work, and migration to other countries to work as maids.
On average, women started to participate in and contribute to agricultural production in their early to late teens, working alongside their parents and guardians in paddy (rice) production in particular. Figure 1 below is based on the survey.

This orange inverse u-shaped curve demonstrates how participation in any activity increases as women reach their 20s, and sharply declines after the age of 50. The age bracket 21–40 years of age was the time when the highest percentage of respondents engaged in “some form of livelihood activity.” The blue line represents those women that participated in agricultural activity. Participation in agriculture falls to the lowest level of participation between the ages of 21-30. Beyond this, agricultural livelihood engagement sharply increases, reaching a peak after the age of 60, as other forms of livelihoods decline significantly for elder women. The diamond formed by the blue and red lines between the age groups 16-20 and 31-40 represent the time women got married and had young children. This suggests that this life course transition was a significant barrier to women’s participation in agriculture. Most of the rural women who participated in this survey were married (87%). The majority of married women (91.6%) had married and had their first child (84%) by the age of 30. Of the women with children, 64% of the respondents had their first child by the age of 25, and a further 27.2% had their first child at the age of 35.

With respect to payments and wages, only 22.8% of respondents up to 15 years old were paid. The percentage of respondents involved in wage earning livelihoods increased significantly from 16 years and above. 56.8% in the 16–20 age category were paid, and, in the 21–30 category, the figure rises to 68.1%. The 31–40 category maintains this percentage (68.1%), and it goes down only slightly in the 51–60 category (60.6%). As noted above, the results show periods when women were not as highly engaged in agriculture. This leads to the conclusion that whatever waged labour the respondents were engaged in, it was not necessarily related to agriculture. Interestingly, the 60 and above category has the highest percentage of respondents who are paid for their work, while participation in agriculture peaked.

In the survey, women reported preference for home-based, non-agricultural production, followed by agricultural production. The top reasons given were: that it was home-based (24.4% gave this option as their first preference), with high incomes (13.4%), time saving (11.5%) and a traditional or common activity in the area (11%). Interview data demonstrated that women had limited mobility with young children. Being close to home enabled women to look after their children and complete their household tasks such as cooking, while also earning income. Indeed, the survey highlighted the gendered division of labour within the household at the time of the research. Women were overwhelmingly responsible for cooking (94.4%), cleaning (95.9%) and collecting firewood (73.0%). Women also maintained the most responsibility for home gardening. The biggest contribution husbands made was to home gardening with 18% of respondents reporting this support.

**SOCIAL NORMS AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN CARE WORK**

The interviews demonstrated that women contributed to care work through their life-course. Young women’s contributions to tasks such as looking after siblings or cooking enabled their parents or guardians to continue livelihood engagement. Elder women also provided care to their grandchildren. Unpaid work

---

68% of all ‘contributing family workers’ in the Sri Lankan economy were concentrated in agriculture. In 2013, it was estimated that women constituted 71.8 per cent of these contributing family workers.
Considering care work is crucial to accurately understanding women’s participation in agriculture.

women engaged in included cooking, cleaning, looking after young children, maintaining their yards/gardens, overseeing schooling, socialising children, taking children to school, protecting children and youth, and participating in community life. Women provided more unpaid labour for volunteer work compared with men in their communities – in local political party activities, development projects that were premised on local participation, grassroots organisations and non-government organisations, as well as their children’s schools.

The provision of care is clearly gendered when considered within the purview of women’s (unpaid) labour in Sri Lanka in their role as daughters, wives and mothers (see Gunawardana 2013 on gender norms). Our study demonstrates the importance of girls (under the age of 18) in providing care for their families, while also noting that as women got older, gender norms, expectations and duties around motherhood (for those with young children) and care constricted women’s participation in agriculture. The interviews demonstrated that between the ages of 16-20, or just prior to marriage, women moved out of agriculture into other livelihoods, and at the same time dropped out of school due to poverty or disruption such as conflict. During this period that some women migrated overseas or domestically to take up opportunities in factories or as maids. Some began to earn wages as independent agricultural wage earners. This was especially striking in the case of the Muslim community in Palamunai, Ampara, where migration-based livelihoods in this period were related to dowry accumulation. This often represented a key phase of independence before marriage for most women, although most remained strongly tied to their kinship networks. In this context, ‘independence’ meant moving away from their earlier engagement in family livelihood activities and care work, to begin waged work (which might have been waged care work such as domestic work or nannying). These findings suggest that examining care work across the life-course is crucial.

Following marriage, as the interviews demonstrated, expectations around women’s roles in childcare were particularly salient. Three responses were noted when women gave birth to their first child: dropping out, restricting livelihoods, or forgoing livelihood opportunities. Spouses who encouraged women to focus on their social reproductive roles as mothers reinforced these decisions. In Ampara, social reproductive roles included overseeing and ensuring girl’s security. This included both ensuring safety and freedom from harm in a community perceived to be insecure for girls, as well as in Muslim communities with matrilineal inheritance, ensuring material wellbeing (e.g. securing dowry). Thus, it is not surprising that in interviews, women expressed a preference for home-based work or work close to home. This preference can be understood as a ‘forced choice’ given constraints around mobility, care and gender norms.

Although gender norms around respectability, honour, and shame acted as a barrier in all areas, varying by ethnic/religious group/marital status, for the Muslim community in Palamunai, Ampara however, prohibitive gender norms around mobility and public economic participation gained particular strength in the post-war period, meaning women were largely confined to their household. Many of the Muslim women had in fact migrated overseas before marriage to work as domestic workers but, over time, they faced greater restrictions. This was in contrast to a neighbouring Tamil community in Ampara and in Sinhalese dominated Panama, where gender norms around economic participation and leadership were reported to be breaking down. A significant shift was the participation of Tamil women in paid work (in Akkaraipattu) and in Sinhalese paddy cultivation (in Panama) over the last two decades.

Care work ultimately did not lead to a complete withdrawal from agricultural livelihood activity where support was available to assist with social reproduction. Unsurprisingly, accessing childcare — usually from other female relatives — helped women to participate in all livelihoods. At times other women in their role as grandmothers and aunts, supported female kin by providing childcare enabling others to support the family, but only a tiny sample of women in the survey and interviews reported having had this assistance.

The interviews revealed that other than accessing childcare, in general, women relied heavily on kinship ties to give them access to livelihoods including access to land, employment, education, and security in times of displacement, food scarcity and unemployment. The lack of reported strong kinship ties among a small number of women in Palamunai, Ampara highlight how insecurity can be heightened when kinship ties are severed or absent. The survey showed that women relied most on kinship networks, neighbours and elders for information about livelihoods, rather than official sources such as NGOs or state officials. As women got older, they relied more on social networks including kin and neighbours to source livelihood opportunities.
RESPONDING TO RURAL WOMEN’S BURDEN OF UNPAID CARE LABOUR TO INCREASE PARTICIPATION IN AGRICULTURE

Our study demonstrates that care work does not lead to a wholesale exit from agriculture. Shahra Razavi used the notion of a care diamond to describe the structures and institutions through which care is provided in a developing country context. As shown in Figure 2, this care diamond encompasses families/households, the state, markets and non-profits.

Although rural women in our study accessed Samurdhi (welfare) allowance from the state, and instrumentally participated in political networks (e.g. canvassing during elections) to access resources such as land, employment and housing assistance, limited state support was provided for care. In Sri Lanka, the immediate and extended family (usually another kin-related woman) is the primary source of care for children and the elderly, particularly in rural locations, with a lack of state supported institutions to promote alternatives. Thus, as the results above demonstrate, those with access to kinship networks could often continue participating in agriculture. However, this care work itself is not recognized as contributing to the wider economy.

Long established formal and informal marketised forms of care (child care, domestic workers, elder carers) are available in Sri Lanka. However, this care work occupational category tends to be low paid, often invisible and less valued and it replicates gender, class, and ethnic inequalities. The emergence of private local care providers can be noted in the last decade, however these services tend to be only accessible to the wealthy and continue to replicate gendered historical oppressions. Moreover, it is noted that rural women (from economically and often socially marginalized communities) in our study provided some of this paid labour, rather than receiving it. Several women had engaged in paid forms of care as domestic workers and nannies throughout their livelihoods within Sri Lanka or as migrant workers overseas. They continued to struggle with accessing sustainable livelihoods.

Responding to the findings of this study, policy changes should be implemented to help address the barrier of care work as an impediment to agricultural sector participation. As the post-war Sri Lankan case demonstrates, it is important to recognise the ways in which care work changes through the life course and to design appropriate interventions and policies that take life course stages into account. The policy recommendations below are specifically formulated for government officials, aid and multilateral organizations, as well as civil society advocating for change. Specifically, they are designed to address the need of women with young children who exit agricultural production.

The policies are inspired by insight by scholars such as Ilkkaracan, who outlined a vision for “an economic order that is organised around sustainability of caring labour through a redistributive internalisation of the costs of care into the working of the [economic] system” (see recommendation 2 and 3). This entails not “reverting to mechanisms that reproduce inequalities by gender, class and origin.” She echoes calls by others to recognise, reduce and redistribute the care burden or mitigate, replenish and transform the care economy (see recommendation 1, 2, 3). Ilkkarakan argues that a sustainable care economy should include greater universal investments in care services and provisioning (state or privately provided, recommendation 3) especially in rural areas, macro-economic reform including greater social expenditure on care and ‘decent work’ creation, as well as strong regulation of the

Prohibitive gender norms around mobility and public economic participation gained particular strength in the post-war period.
lack of labour market and human resource management policies for employees with caring responsibilities (recommendations 1, 2, 3).

1. Develop a gender-sensitive integrated National Plan to promote gender equality, rural livelihoods and sustainable agriculture.
   a. Align this plan to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #5 to ensure gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, and Goal #2 to end hunger, achieve food security, improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
   b. Recognise that ‘women’ are not a homogeneous group, and that life course stage, ethnicity, and local contexts matter.
   c. Gender sensitive statistics that consider women’s unpaid, uncounted contributions in all areas of agriculture need to be developed.
   d. Concrete action plans and targets should be developed through consultation of rural communities, civil society and state institutions.

2. Support influencing norms about gender roles.
   a. Gender norms and expectations place primary responsibility for childcare and domestic duties on women. National awareness campaigns can thus involve local communities targeting women to help them assert their identity as producers as well as mothers and wives. This can involve instigating a national conversation about who is a ‘farmer’, and highlighting women’s ongoing contribution to agriculture.
   b. A national conversation can challenge assumptions about gender roles in the household and the value of women’s labour. This means engaging with men and boys as well as women and girls to redistribute care burdens within households.

3. Exploring avenues that provide childcare options for households participating in agriculture.
   a. This recommendation should be explored in conjunction with the recommendations above to avoid replicating existing gender inequalities, and continuing to place the responsibility for childcare on women.
   b. Extend public childcare education systems to rural areas. Sri Lanka has a nascent NGO and privately run early childhood development sector, with only about 50% of children accessing childcare opportunities. There are strong disparities in participation by socio economic status and location. Providing public investment in early childcare education systems in rural areas can help to ease the burden of care for women for young children while strengthening educational outcomes for children.
   c. Encourage private and state run commercial farms to explore models of workplace provisioned care. This includes investing in research to learn from best practice around the world. The care should be affordable while not compromising standards. In particular, the cooperatives should adhere to strict child protection regulations.

   d. Examine whether parent worker childcare cooperatives can be introduced in rural areas for small holders, family workers and commercial farms. The cooperative structure has a long history in Sri Lanka, and can provide a community based response to care deficits.

   However, such options should be supported and resourced to ensure that this structure does not put additional (paid) care burdens on women when other facets of their unpaid care work remains unchanged. The care should be affordable while not compromising standards. In particular, the cooperatives should adhere to strict child protection regulations.

Similarly, Sri Lankan women’s advocacy groups have lobbied for the state to take measures to promote secure livelihoods and to recognize and value women’s unpaid labour within households.
FOOTNOTES


2. The mission of the Oxfam-Monash Partnership is to improve development practice and its outcomes for communities. More specifically, the Partnership aims to bring together the differing yet complementary resources of the NGO and academic sectors, and combine these resources to achieve greater development impact than would otherwise be possible. The Oxfam-Monash Partnership is part of the Monash Sustainable Development Institute (www.monash.edu/oxfam).


13. Of the others who did not have a spouse: 8.3% were single, 0.9 were divorced, 1.9 were widowed, while 0.7 were separated.


Monash Gender, Peace & Security is a group of policy and community engaged scholars whose research is focused in the field of gender, peace and security. We seek to use our research to inform scholarly debate, policy development and implementation, public understanding about the gendered politics of armed conflict and the search for peace.

Samanthi J Gunawardana is a Lecturer in Gender and Development in the School of Social Sciences at Monash University, and Higher Degree Research (HDR) Coordinator at Monash University’s Gender, Peace and Security (Monash GPS) Centre. She can be contacted at samanthi.gunawardana@monash.edu.

This publication is part of the Gender, Peace and Security Research Reports series.

Content Editors: Dr Lesley Pruitt and Barbara K. Trojanowska
Technical Editor: Elliot Dolan-Evans

www.monashgps.org | #MonashGPS | monashGPS@monash.edu