Getting to work [1]

Unlocking women's potential in Sri Lanka's Labor Force
Author: Solotaroff, J. L., Joseph, G., & Kuriakose, A. T.
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Executive Summary

This report is an overview of a new World Bank study (Solotaroff, Joseph, and Kuriakose, forthcoming) that updates and expands upon the 2013 World Bank policy study, Getting In and Staying In: Increasing Women's Labor Force Participation in Sri Lanka. Both studies are intended to provide a better understanding of the puzzle of women's persistently low labor force participation (LFP) rates and other poor labor market outcomes in the country. The earlier study focused on the years leading up to the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War (2006–09); the current study compares the earlier findings to data from the years following the civil war (2010–15). Using nationally representative secondary survey data, as well as primary qualitative and quantitative research, both studies test three hypotheses that would explain gender gaps in labor market outcomes: (1) household roles and responsibilities, which fall disproportionately on women; (2) a human capital mismatch, whereby women are not acquiring the proper skills demanded by job markets; and (3) gender discrimination in job search, hiring, and promotion processes.

The current study finds that not only are all three hypotheses supported, as they were with the earlier report, but also the social norms governing women's responsibilities for child care, elder care, and housework—and that inhibit women from joining labor markets, obtaining employment, and closing gender wage gaps—have become more entrenched since the end of the civil war. Having young children in the household is now associated with even lower odds of LFP, lower chances of becoming a paid employee, and lower earnings for women compared with before 2010, and compared with those of men for all three outcomes. The disparity between marriage's association with men's versus women's odds of LFP is the only gender gap associated with household roles that appears to be shrinking over time; however, marriage still penalizes women in labor markets (lowering their odds of LFP by 4.4 percentage points), whereas for men it provides an 11 percentage point premium in their odds of LFP.1 Gender norms that restrict women's mobility more than men's—especially lack of social support for women commuting to work—and that prevent women from accessing safe and comfortable transportation to work, as well as parents' greater encouragement of sons' rather than daughters' pursuit of careers (especially in the private sector) are other supply-side factors undermining women in labor markets.

The analysis also suggests that since 2009, women find it even more challenging than men to translate their educational attainment into high-skill and higherpaying jobs. This is true of women with even university education or higher, who still queue for public sector jobs in spite of limited openings, pushing up their rates of unemployment among young women. Another worrying trend is that poorer and less educated women are falling further behind more educated and wealthier women in chances of LFP and other employment and wage-related outcomes.

The good news for women is that raw gender wage gaps are shrinking every year; moreover, the explained portions of these wage gaps are increasing over time. In other words, gender discrimination appears to play less and less of a role in these gaps in earnings; discrimination also appears to determine gender gaps in LFP rates to a diminishing degree over time. The primary data bolster these findings: employers, on average, report that they look for the same skills and experience in men and women, actively discriminating by gender to a much smaller degree than employees suspect. Employers in some industries studied in the primary research—such as the garment industry and tea estate sector—express a preference for hiring women workers because they believe them to be more reliable and hard working than men. Yet, persistent occupational segregation across industries suggests that these preferences may not hold for promotions—especially into high-skill and management jobs, which men continue to dominate.

The report concludes with four priority areas (summarized in annex OA) for addressing the multiple supply- and demand-side factors to improve women's LFP rates and reduce other gender gaps in labor market outcomes. It also offers specific recommendations for improving women's participation in the five private sector industries studied for the primary data collection: information and communication technology (ICT), tea estate work, tourism, garments, and commercial agriculture (see annex OB). Common recommendations across the five industries include the provision of care services to ease women's time poverty, and improvements in providing safe, comfortable transportation to worksites or nearworksite accommodations for women so that they are at lower risk of the genderbased violence that is highly prevalent on public transportation and in public spaces. Together, these recommendations are intended to help the government, the private sector, and other stakeholders in Sri Lanka collaborate and harmonize efforts in getting women to work.

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