

International Women's Day: Sri Lankan Women Demand Democracy, Economic Justice, and Freedom

Feminist Collective for Economic Justice



In 1908, 15,000 working women marched through New York City demanding decent working hours, better pay, and voting rights. In 1910, at the Second International Conference of Working Women, Clara Zetkin proposed the idea of an International Women's Day.

On this 8 March 2023, we are moved by our fury at the state of Sri Lankan political institutions, the callousness of decision-makers, and the lack of representation of women in economic decisions to echo the calls of the women workers on that 1908 women's march for labour rights and voting rights. We demand:

- Our democratic right to vote!
- Universal social security schemes to secure education, health, and nutrition!
- Food security by investment in domestic food production and distribution!
- Wealth taxes!
- Subsidised electricity for households!

These are the demands of the suffering masses of women in Sri Lanka. The plea by the Feminist Collective for Economic Justice (FCEJ) a year ago,

comprising several proposals to address the severe pain that the deep economic crisis has inflicted on the poor, women, children, and marginalised communities, has gone unheeded.

In the months since, no plans have emerged to address the issue of food insecurity, malnutrition or the great number of households plunging into poverty. Instead, the government, along with its economic advisors, is single-mindedly focused on delivering on promises to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), removing subsidies, driving up household debt, and paying lip service to social safety nets. Even the illogical schemes proposed without any consultation to allegedly better target beneficiaries have not seen the light of day.

Along with the government's indifference to the people's suffering, the postponement of the scheduled Local Government elections has denied the people their yearning to express their views via democratic means. Even the people's basic right to protest is under daily attack. We cannot envision a just economy without the democratisation of government and society.

Gender Watch

The FCEJ has been documenting the mounting pressures on women in Sri Lanka for several months. After the Gender Watch report of September 2022, the situation has only continued to worsen. In January 2023, the BBC^[i] reported that eight million Sri Lankans, comprising more than a third of the population, are estimated to be food insecure, while 42% of children under five years are reported to be suffering from malnutrition. For the next few years, poverty is projected to remain above 25%. In these circumstances, there are multiple narratives emerging of desperation among families, as monthly earnings no longer allow them to meet basic needs.

Last year, the government's proposed budget for 2023 failed to make provision or plan for meaningful economic relief or food security for a people facing the worst economic crisis Sri Lanka has experienced. Instead of recognising and responding to the plight of the people, President Ranil Wickremasinghe only emphasised "rapid economic growth" and "economic modernisation" as the way forward. Social protections for people were not on the agenda, yet an increase in the defence budget was deemed a priority. For a detailed gender analysis of the proposed budget, see FCEJ's Statement of November 2022.

Sri Lanka continued to fail to acknowledge women's unpaid labour in the proposed national budget. There was no social security response to the increase in the

unpaid care work burden on women. It has been repeatedly highlighted that women typically spend disproportionately more time on unpaid care work than men, as a result of gendered social norms, a situation which has been exacerbated by both the COVID19 pandemic as well as the ongoing crisis. Additionally, there is no State policy in Sri Lanka that acknowledges or recognises this invaluable role played primarily by women or provides any support or assistance for the care of the elderly or disabled.

Increased burdens as a result of weak family laws, including fair maintenance of wives and children by their spouses, sexual and reproductive health, domestic violence, and period poverty are also a result of financial pressures on families. These severely neglected areas compound the distress felt due to restrictions to accessing education and work.

Social Welfare

In October 2022, 3.9 million families (57.5% of Sri Lanka's households) sought some form of financial assistance. One million families had applied to become beneficiaries under the Samurdhi scheme. Even though the State Minister of Finance has publicly stated that it is the State's responsibility to support people in the current environment^[ii], close to six months later no measures have been implemented.

In early January 2023, the government delayed crediting payments for pensioners. In addition, Samurdhi payments have been delayed and the government appears on course to introduce more exclusion factors to prevent people from being eligible for welfare benefits. The Welfare Benefits Board announced on 15 December 2022, that the government would calculate poverty levels under the criteria of education, health, economic level, assets, housing status, and family demography, along with 22 related indicators, and display the list of poverty scores and those eligible for welfare benefits at the Divisional Secretariat level. The focus on targeting of beneficiaries for welfare as opposed to universal schemes has meant that much time and effort is expended, often in flawed and corrupt ways, on welfare schemes that fail to bring people and households to a decent basic standard of living.

It is outrageous that while occasional promises are made, no meaningful State assistance has been received by those who need it the most. The people's desperation only grows with no relief in sight.

Women Workers

The response to Sri Lanka's debt crisis ignores the voices and needs of working class women who are being made to pay for the odious debt generated by the corruption and recklessness of Sri Lanka's political elite. It is clear that the brunt of the economic crisis has been borne by women, and that the brunt of the recovery proposals will also continue to be borne by women workers.

Women working in the garments industry have faced a massive reduction in their take-home income due to the loss in labour hours, as most of the small-scale garment businesses where they work are in dire financial trouble. The take-home salary of workers that was previously in the range of Rs. 40,000 – 60,000 has now drastically dropped to about Rs. 25,000 – 30,000 which is just their basic salary.^[iii]

Women workers in the plantation areas are being pushed into informal labour arrangements as a consequence of the suspension of the collective agreements that regulated pay and working conditions. Workers are losing their rights to minimum monthly wages and to statutory Employment Provident and Trust Fund contributions by employers, whilst also receiving even fewer protections for occupational health issues. Trade union busting is also on the rise.

Migration by women for work, both within the country and overseas, is also increasing. A recent report indicated that at least 32 Sri Lankans leave the country every hour^[iv], and there will be a loss of future resources with parents looking to educate children abroad, pointing to signs of a country in rapid decline^[v].

Subsidies and Taxes

The two-step electricity tariff hike implemented from January 2023 is justified as necessary to cover current losses of the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB).^[vi] Low-end consumers will be imposed with a disproportionately steep tariff hike. A recent exposure of corruption in the industry begs the question of whether the poorest consumer is paying to cover theft by government cronies.^[vii] While Sri Lanka has achieved high electrification (99% of households), the tariff hikes raise concerns of whether households and small home-based economic activities will be plunged into darkness.

Higher income tax regulations have come into force from January 2023. Any individual with gross monthly earnings of Rs. 100,000 or above will be liable for income tax, and tax-free allowances have been reduced to widen the tax base. 90% of income earners in Sri Lanka earn less than Rs. 79,000 per month. The new

income tax targets those who are in the top 8 – 10% of income earners in the country.^[viii] As to whether the revenue gained from the income tax increase will be channelled towards enhancing public services that benefit the poor must be closely followed. In the context of declining incomes, the government continues to ignore the demands for the imposition of a wealth tax aimed at ensuring redistributive justice.

Of Mismanagement and Passing the Burden

The misuse of public funds and assets continues largely unchecked. News reports claim that 36 billion USD of Sri Lanka's export money, more than one-third of its economy, is held in offshore bank accounts.^[ix] Reports of mismanagement of public resources continue to surface. For example, the wrong type of crude oil was imported by the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, containing high rates of sulphur, which cannot be used by power plants to generate electricity^[x]; and the Committee on Public Enterprises (COPE) revealed that the drug shortage was caused by the mismanagement of already available funds meant for the importation of drugs.^[xi] While those responsible for the mismanagement of public resources are not held accountable, the government has imposed severe austerity measures which adversely affect the public provision of services crucial for Sri Lankans. Where is the justice in this?

Misogyny

We are appalled by the recent events of extreme violence against women that have come to light, while also acknowledging that misogyny is a common phenomenon faced by women in Sri Lanka. Farzana Haniffa recently wrote that “the low rates of women's political participation/representation in the legislature and local government since independence, the high incidence of gender-based violence and the economy's exploitation of vulnerable women's labour”, are indicators of the pervasiveness of this misogyny in our institutions.^[xii]

We condemn the continuing displays of misogyny in the political arena including an incident where a Trade Union leader and member of the National People's Power insulted nurses by using explicitly sexist remarks at a public gathering of nurses. Similarly, a female Member of Parliament faced abusive and obscene language in Parliament, directed at her by a government MP and cabinet minister.

In December 2022, the President who is also the Minister for Women, Child Affairs, and Social Empowerment, stated that he will present a Bill on

Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women focusing on establishing a National Commission on Women and an Ombudsman for women's rights. A Cabinet decision approving the Women's Empowerment Policy was made on 27 February 2023. We note with irony that while policies are passed, the political culture in Sri Lanka remains steeped in sexism and unchecked misogyny. As Sri Lankan policymakers are rushing to implement the recommendations of the IMF, the calls for gender equality made by women which have been ignored for decades, are now being dangled like carrots in the form of bills and policies.

This 112th International Women's Day, given the many increasing pressures on the lives of women and vulnerable communities and the exclusion of women by structural failures and misogyny reflected in the spectrum of 'solutions' proposed towards this economic crisis, we demand that change start now and that everyone joins this call for change. It is time. A demand for democracy, economic justice, and freedom is never too impractical, never too much, or is never made at a wrong time.

The Feminist Collective for Economic Justice is a collective of feminist economists, scholars, activists, university students, and lawyers from across Sri Lanka that came together in April 2022 to understand, analyse, and give voice to policy recommendations based on the lived realities of communities they work with in the current economic crisis in Sri Lanka.

Image Credit: Sarala Emmanuel

Notes

[i] *BBC News*. (2023). "Sri Lanka's central bank urges China and India to reduce its debts" (12 January). Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-64232166>

[ii] *Daily Mirror*. (2022). "Govt. says 58% of households seeking financial assistance under various social welfare schemes" (28 October). Available at https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/Govt-says-58-of-households-seeking-financial-assistance-under-various-social-welfare-schemes/108-247595

[iii] *The Sunday Times*. (2023). "Apparel SMEs in grave crisis" (29 January). Available at <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/230129/business-times/apparel-smes-in-grave-crisis-509597.html>

[iv] *The Sunday Times*. (2022). "32 Sri Lankans leaving for overseas jobs every hour" (07 August). Available at <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/220807/news/32-sri-lankans-leaving-for-overseas-jobs-every-hour-491069.html#:~:text=Faceted%20with%20vistas%20of%20bankruptcy,the%20Central%20Bank%20have%20revealed>

[v] *Daily Mirror*. (2022). "Recent report shows 32 Lankans migrate every hour; sign of country's rapid decline: Karu" (22 September). Available at https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/Recent-report-shows-32-Lankans-migrate-every-hour-sign-of-countrys-rapid-decline-Karu/108-245556

[vi] *News Wire*. (2022). "Cabinet approval for electricity tariff hike in 2023 – CEB" (30 November). Available at <https://www.newswire.lk/2022/11/30/cabinet-approval-for-electricity-tariff-hike-in-2023-ceb/>

[vii] Ranawaka, Dilshani. (2023). "A light at the end of CEB's 50-year tunnel?" *The Morning* (11 March). Available at <https://www.themorning.lk/articles/40311>

[viii] Department of Census and Statistics. (2019). *Household Income and Expenditure Survey – 2019 Final Result*. Available at <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Resource/en/IncomeAndExpenditure/HouseholdIncomeandExpenditureSurvey2019FinalResults.pdf>

[ix] *Daily Mirror*. (2023). "US\$ 36 billion of Sri Lanka's export money held offshore" (24 February). Available at <https://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/US-36-billion-of-Sri-Lankas-export-money-held-offshore/231-254732>

[x] *News Wire*. (2022). "Power cut increased due to wrong type of crude oil imported" (26 September). Available at <https://www.newswire.lk/2022/09/26/power-cut-increased-due-to-wrong-type-of-crude-oil-imported/>

[xi] *Daily Mirror*. (2022). "Indian Credit line meant for medical drugs used for fuel, other payments" (17 October). Available at <https://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/Indian-Credit-line-meant-for-medical-drugs-used-for-fuel-other-payments/172-246901>

[xii] Haniffa, Farzana. (2023). "The Future is Female?" *The Island* (28 February). Available at <https://island.lk/the-future-is-female/>