

Patrick Woods
Southwind High School
Memphis, TN
Sri Lanka, Factor 15

Sri Lanka: Unlocking Gender and Cultural Equality and Promoting Economic Empowerment in the Pearl of the Indian Ocean

Sri Lanka is an extremely diverse country represented by numerous religions, ethnic groups, and cultures. Located in the Northern Indian Ocean off the coast of Southern Asia, Sri Lanka is an island nation best known as The Pearl of the Indian Ocean—due to its shape and natural beauty. Resplendent with a rich ecosystem and a location that made it ideal as part of the infamous “silk road” trading route, Sri Lanka has experienced a tumultuous history as many nations have laid claim to control the country, its’ people, and its’ natural resources (“World Factbook: Sri Lanka”). Like many island nations, Sri Lanka is a major tourist destination known for its beautiful beaches and cities that cater to tourists, but behind the façade of tourism lays a nation that has experienced, and continues to experience, developmental challenges in economics, politics, trade, and social freedoms.

Originally called Ceylon, the country gained its independence from Great Britain in 1948 and changed its name to Sri Lanka in 1972. Unfortunately, independence did not lead to peace as opposing political factions fought to take over control of the country. In 1983, civil war erupted in the island nation and waged for over two decades displacing many inhabitants from their homes and land. Although the conflict ended in 2009, political and civil relations have remained tense. The current government, considered to be a Democratic Socialist Republic, maintains a tight control over entrepreneurship, land rights, and trade in an effort to recover from decades of war and to promote economic growth and development for the island nation. The global crisis of 2008-09 nearly crippled the country’s economy due to extreme budget deficits from floating large amounts of debt (CORI). Agriculture was hit particularly hard during the recession as land that had already been ravaged by civil war was then crippled by a major drought several years after the heavy damage sustained from the 2004 tsunami.

As much of the world is doing after the global crisis, Sri Lanka is beginning to experience growth again, albeit it slow and arduous, and with an increase in demand for exports returning, the government is confident that prosperity will once again return to the “Pearl.” However, for the people of Sri Lanka there exists a definitive divide of economic prosperity. In a recent article written by W. A. Wijewardena, he expressed his concern with a lack of economic equity in Sri Lanka by stating, “The stubborn income inequality in Sri Lanka poses a serious question about the ultimate goal of the country’s growth efforts. The country’s rich have been able to maintain their relative position undiminished while the poor have been worse-off. The middle class, on the contrary, has fattened itself. The high income inequality, as noted by many economists, threatens the social and political instability of the country (Wijewardena).” Throughout history, it has been shown that income inequality can lead to: 1) keeping the poor “poor” by denying access to education, healthcare, and employment; 2) governments are more apt to focus their efforts on expansion that targets large business and international trade instead of providing programs to support the poor becoming self-sufficient; and 3) continued inequality can lead to social and political unrest as has been witnessed in the last couple of years in Egypt, Yemen, and Syria.

According to the International Monetary Fund, Sri Lanka is on the list of developing nations as defined by the World Bank’s GNI of \$11,905 USD or less. With a 2013 GDP per capita of \$3,280 USD, Sri Lanka is ranked 124 out of 189 countries. The population is quite dense for such a small nation with an estimated 20 million people. Women represent approximately 51% of the population and approximately 42.6% of the population falls in the age bracket of 25-54 year olds (“World Factbook: Sri Lanka”). Unemployment and poverty rates are not as high in urban areas as they are in the rural areas. Prior to the

2004 tsunami, approximately 8 million (40%) of the country's inhabitants were living below the poverty level (as designated in U.S. dollars) and in the rural areas alone 4 million people were living below the poverty level. The majority of individuals (almost 85% of the population) live in rural areas and more than 40% of those are small farmers ("Tsunami's Effects on Agriculture").

The typical subsistence small farm family size averages 3.8 people. The majority of families include a father, mother, and two to three children ("Sri Lanka"). The average age for the head of household ranges from 45-65 years old. Education is held in high regard in Sri Lanka and children between the ages of 5 and 14 must attend school. Approximately 98% of children living in rural areas attend school and the literacy rate countrywide is 97%. Based on 2012 statistics, 61.95% of graduating secondary students were accepted and enrolled in university ("Overview"). Unfortunately, as often found in other developing nations, many Sri Lankans that graduate from college then move to developed nations for better job offers with a higher standard of living. This leaves a major glut of qualified and skilled applicants to fulfill the possibility for future economic growth as individuals with the education to enact major change have left their communities either for urban living or have left the nation entirely.

Sri Lanka's major rural agriculture production, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), includes food crops such as rice, sugarcane, grains, coconut, livestock, and fisheries. As an important partner in the 2014 International Year of Family Farming, the FAO is focusing on improving food security in the rural areas of countries that were abandoned and ravaged due to civil wars and the impact of weather such as tsunamis and droughts. Their goal is to renew the land, build irrigation systems, provide drought-resistant seed, and offer training in new methods of agriculture. The majority of the work of the FAO is focused in Eastern Sri Lanka as that is the part of the country that has the most arable geographic terrain. The work being done, will, and has, enabled many families to go beyond farming for daily subsistence to long-term sustainability and food security (FAO).

It is important to understand that major barriers for productivity and growth for small farm holders have much more of an impact than they do on large corporate farms or in urban areas of the country. Larger corporate or government-owned farms have access to funds, specialized equipment, land rights, infrastructure, and inventory to maintain their operations during periods of instability or lack of production. On the other hand, small farm holders usually operate on a day-to-day basis and the slightest barrier can shut down their production permanently and cause the family to go hungry. Most small farm holders produce on land on which they have no ownership and which can be taken away at a moment's notice and/or be taxed to such an extent that any profits disappear. They are often located in remote areas with no infrastructure such as roads, telecommunications, or capital equipment. Access to food markets to sell their goods is difficult as most involve a long and laborious journey on foot to even reach a market. Finally, many of the small farmers in Sri Lanka are women as the men are either in another country trying to make money for the family or have been crippled or killed during the civil war and the 2004 tsunami.

Cultural discrimination does exist in Sri Lanka mainly against the minority group known as the Tamil, a Muslim group that has been persecuted for over 20 years, and still continue to live primarily in refugee camps. This struggle has contributed to the poverty rate in Sri Lanka and the lack of men involved in small farming. During the civil war, more than 70,000 Tamil were killed and approximately 400,000 were displaced. Currently, out of approximately 85 villages in Sri Lanka, 27 of those villages were once inhabited by Muslims that are still living in refugee camps in the North of Sri Lanka in a geographic area that is not farmable nor are they provided with any other means to earn a living (Siddiqui).

One of the most significant barriers to agricultural sustainability and food security in most developing nations, including Sri Lanka, is gender inequality. According to the Women in Development Service, a division of the FAO, "women are responsible for 60-80% of food production worldwide ("Women and Sustainable Food Security"). Unfortunately, women deal with many challenges that preclude them from

advancing their standard of living due to cultural norms, control of production, few, if any, land rights, education, and access to markets. When women struggle with economic empowerment, there is more of an effect on the family as women are usually in charge of education for their children, healthcare, and creating a more palpable living environment .

Even though the current UN Millennium Development Goal reports provide statistics to indicate that Sri Lanka has made numerous strides in equality for all genders, the majority of the changes are taking place in urban areas. Rural areas are still hampered by tradition and culture in terms of the rights of women which creates an unfortunate economic cycle of intergenerational poverty that at some point must be broken. It is very interesting to consider the hypothesis set forth by the FAO as to what would happen to world hunger if women were afforded the same rights as men in developing nations. The FAO predicts that if this was the case, women could increase crop production by 20-30%, lifting between 100-150 million out of hunger worldwide ("Women in Agriculture: Closing the Gap for Gender Development"). Those are substantial numbers and should not be ignored.

Most Sri Lankan women are either unmarried, divorced, widowed, or living separately from their husbands. Seventy percent of the women are widowed due to the civil war and the killing, beating, and raping of women in Sri Lanka is a tragic statistic .The average rate of at least five cases of rape are reported daily. Many women sell their bodies for money to buy food and clothes for their families. Most women join groups like the Human Rights' Defenders to gain confidence and believe that their gender will become a non-issue; however, many are still hesitant that gender equality will remain the norm in their country versus the exception ("Elusive Peace, Pervasive Violence: Sri Lankan Women's Struggle for Security and Justice").

With 80% of Sri Lanka's population living in rural areas and a mixture of Buddhism and Muslim religions, it will continue to be a struggle to obtain complete gender equality. Women still face the stereotype that they should stay at home, raise their children, and work on the farm which makes it difficult to find gainful employment outside of the area of agriculture. Even though Sri Lanka has a very high literacy rate among women (~90%), if a woman does find a job outside of agriculture she usually receives half the pay that men receive ("World Factbook: Sri Lanka").

Due to the island's geographic location at the tip of Indian in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka is extremely susceptible to climate changes including tsunamis, earthquakes, monsoons, and drought. The 2004 tsunami damaged thousands of farms, which is one of Sri Lanka's major agricultural issues. The issue with recovering farmlands after the tsunami is that funding is still needed to have the fields and farmland cleared. Over 40,000 farms were damaged including the loss of homes, farm equipment, and production materials. Many small-scale family farmlands were also affected, causing toxins on the land and the lack of resources to repair the damages. Additionally, much of the arable land was damaged due to extreme erosion from the excessive water. Although the government and numerous international aid organizations have supplied Sri Lanka with assistance, the damage was so widespread, that 10 years later, there are still vast areas of previous farmable land just sitting there unusable ("IFAD in Sri Lanka").

In 2012, Sri Lanka was hit with another climate issue—drought. A delay of the normal monsoon season created serious issues for many regions of the country that counted on the rain to feed the land and provide drinking water for thousands. Now, in 2014, the country has succumbed again to another drought situation that is becoming increasingly more destructive as farmers, especially the small farm holders, are still recovering from the 2012 drought. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, this year's drought has already impacted over 240,000 people through loss of harvests and a reduced drinking supply. Rice, a staple for the country, has been affected the most with a loss of almost 5% of the harvest by March of this year and predictions of a weak monsoon season for this year could raise that number substantially ("Drought Begins to Bite in Sri Lanka").

There are two recommendations I would like to propose to address the issues presented in my research. The first is the use of microfinance as a tool to eradicate poverty and promote economic growth and development. The second is to promote advocacy for tolerance of cultural differences and the empowerment of women. I shall address each of these separately.

Microfinance is the lending of small amounts of money to individuals and/or groups that are unable to obtain loans from commercial banks due to lack of collateral or credit (Kavass). One of the main advantages of microfinance is that along with providing loans, microfinance institutions (MFIs) also provide training in new and innovative agricultural methodologies, financial and business counseling, healthcare education, and community support. According to KIVA.org, the majority of microfinance loans worldwide are provided to women with a repayment rate of 98.85% (KIVA). Many microfinance institutions target women in poor and developing regions because MFIs recognize that women are more likely to use the loans to not only achieve business success but will take any profits and reinvest them back into the family by paying for schooling and healthcare for their children. Additionally, women in rural areas are more likely to complete the mandatory training and establish groups within their community to support each other to succeed and make sustainable changes in their standard of living.

My vision for implementation over a period of several years, similar to that of John Wood's organization Room to Read and Muhammad Yunus' Grameen Foundation, would be to establish Village Community Microfinance Organizations (VCMO). In each village, we would establish a VCMO with a Board of Directors made up of 10 village inhabitants and a district or regional manager representing an existing MFI already working in that area. The VCMO would be required to provide a community center and a donation of communal land. Once a month, the VCMO would hold a community meeting to lend funds, collect repayments, and provide education on various topics to aid in improving the standard of living and production for the community. The communal land would be divided into small plots and given to females between the ages of 15 and 35. The females would be responsible for farming their plot, joining the VCMO and attending all training, repaying their microfinance loans on a timely basis, and establishing a market (or traveling to an existing market) to sell their surplus goods. A small percentage of their profits will be placed into a VCMO savings account which can then be accessed by members of the community when an emergency arises. Additionally, the VCMO will work collaboratively to provide transportation for the community's products to go to market. As each community has its own unique geographical challenges, the mode of transportation would be voted on by the VCMO.

The final aspect of my vision is to involve the local government to ensure that the communal land is owned by the VCMO, that taxes are levied at a reasonable rate, and that the community has a voice in local politics. An official from the local government would be asked to serve as a "designated government representative" to the VCMO and would be invited to attend the monthly meetings.

Investing in women means investing in the family and the community which then contributes to upward economic mobility for an entire area as new jobs are created, education becomes more widespread, and many health issues become manageable. Finally, microfinance can eventually lead to a greater impact through financial inclusion. As the recipients repay their loans, they start to accumulate assets which then provide the opportunity for savings, reinvestment in their business and the availability of commercial loans for larger amounts and lower interest rates. Women are able to achieve a certain degree of equality with their husbands in terms of making household and familial decisions. This empowerment and collaboration can eventually change the cycle of intergenerational poverty and raise the standard of living for families all over the country.

The second area that I believe can make a substantive change in the lives of many Sri Lankans is advocacy of tolerance and understanding of cultural differences and the empowerment of women working

with the United Nations and other such organizations to address Millennium Development Goal #3 – Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women. After three decades of violence, many families returned to find their homes no longer existed. They needed a way to start their lives over again and the cultural norms and traditions that existed prior needed to be set aside for rebirth and growth to occur in rural villages all over Sri Lanka. The UN Development Programme has made substantial improvements in the empowerment of women and advocacy for toleration of cultural differences through their Transition Recovery Program. The TR Program provides the basic equipment and materials needed to establish micro enterprises, community education programs, and partnerships with other organizations and the government to aid in the establishment of peace and stability for the country ("Sri Lanka: Women Look to the Future with Optimism").

Another organization that has been influential in enacting change for the empowerment of women in order to eradicate many of the global issues addressed by the UN Millennium Development goals is the Asia Foundation. For more than half a century, the Asia Foundation has been helping women gain confidence and realizing their full potential. Their mission is to improve social, economic, and political opportunities for women by offering strategies to address adversities in life and providing lessons on specific issues to improve their family's standard of living. The Asia Foundation works with over 20 countries in Asia including Sri Lanka, and over 10 programs to help women in Asia ("Women's Empowerment").

I would suggest that the VCMOs created in each village work with the organizations listed above (and any others) to receive training in establishing an organization in the community, requests for equipment and materials for improving their ability to farm on a larger scale, and methods of working with the local and national government to receive land ownership rights, protection from warring factions, and having a voice in government decisions for their country.

The government is a major player in promoting gender equality and economic development and growth. Women should have equal rights in Sri Lanka, not only for the purpose of greatly improving food security and reducing poverty, but because it is a basic human freedom. The government of Sri Lanka has been an active advocate for the rights of women and was one of the first to sign and support the United Nations' Protocol on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2002). It has also been very vocal in supporting the efforts of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in his recent efforts to focus the world's attention on support of women (Kohona). Now, it is time for communities to come together and work with the government by advocating for their rights. One of the best ways to advocate is to share ones' stories. This can be accomplished through social media, inviting non-profit organizations and media to write about development in the villages, write letters to political representatives, and engage other individuals in the villages to join the movement to have a voice.

My decision to research a country that is considered to be "middle income" was a deliberate one. In many developing nations that are at the bottom of the GDP per capita list, there is an obvious and well-known need for aid in eradicating poverty, providing gender equality, and ending cultural discrimination that has created the loss of so many lives through civil wars and displacement. I was curious to discover how a country such as Sri Lanka would compare to others; and, although its statistics are not as dismal as those that one would find in Sub-Saharan Africa or Central America, there are still issues that need to be addressed.

I found that so much emphasis is placed on creating "upscale urban playgrounds" that rural areas are often ignored and the people suffer. "Out of sight, out of mind" tends to be a prevailing thought and until the island nation focuses on all its' people, issues such as those discussed in my research will continue to remain a challenge for this nation. In order to preserve a semblance of balance, there is still much work to be done in Sri Lanka. For efforts to be successful, including reducing gender inequity, removing cultural

barriers, and diminishing the range of income inequality, all Sri Lankans must work together towards a harmonious social, political, and economic climate. This includes government, businesses, communities, and international partners. Imagine how “the Pearl” could shine and prosper if this could be accomplished.

REFERENCES

"About Us." KIVA. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Jul 2014. www.kiva.org

CORI. "CORI Country Report: Sri Lanka, April 2010." Refugee World. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Division of International Protection, n.d. Web. 3 July 2014. <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4bd1aa632.pdf>

"Drought Begins to Bite in Sri Lanka." *ColomboPage*. N.p., 04 04 2014. Web. 20 Jul 2014. http://www.lankapage.com/NewsFiles14/Apr04_1396622766.php

"Elusive Peace, Pervasive Violence: Sri Lankan Women’s Struggle for Security and Justice." *ICAN for Women's Rights, Peace and Security*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Jul 2014. <http://www.icanpeacework.org/sri-lanka>

FAO, prod. *Enhancing Food Security among the Most Vulnerable Farm Families in Eastern Sri Lanka*. Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, 2014. Film. 25 Jun 2014. <http://www.fao.org/srilanka/en/>

"IFAD in Sri Lanka." *IFAD: Investing in Rural People*. IFAD, n.d. Web. 18 June 2014. http://operations.ifad.org/web/ifad/operations/country/home/tags/sri_lanka

IMF. *World Economic Outlook: April 2011*. (2011): n. page. Web. 25 Jul. 2014. <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2011/01/pdf/text.pdf>

Kavass, Biba. Economics Teacher. Southwind High School. Personal Interview. 5 June 2014.

Kohona, Ambassador Dr. Palitha. "Sri Lanka: Advancing Gender Equality with Carefully Calculated Strategies." (2013): n. page. Web. 24 Jul. 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ambassador-dr-palitha-tb-kohona/sri-lanka-advancing-gende_b_3991231.html

“Overview.” Ministry of Higher Education. LankaCom. 27 May 2014. Web. 30 May 2014. <http://www.mohe.gov.lk/index.php/en/about-ministry/overview>

Siddiqui , Sabena. "Ethnic Discrimination in Sri Lanka." *Opinion Maker*. (2014): n. page. Web. 22 Jul. 2014. <http://www.opinion-maker.org/2014/04/ethnic-discrimination-in-sri-lanka/>

"Sri Lanka: Defending Women's Land Rights." *Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Jul 2014. <http://globalinitiative-escr.org/advocacy/regional-advocacy/>

“Sri Lanka.” Department of Census and Statistics. Statistical Data Sheet Sri Lanka 2013. Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics Ministry of Finance and Planning. 2013. Web. 15 May 2014. <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/>

"Sri Lanka: Women Look to the Future with Optimism." *United Nations Development Programme*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Jul 2014.

<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/womenempowerment/successstories/sri-lanka--looking-to-the-future-with-hope-and-optimism>

"Tsunami's Effects on Agriculture." Professor Zoltan Grossman. *International Environmental Problems and Policy*. ND. Web. 1 June 2014 <http://academic.evergreen.edu/g/grossmaz/STOFFSH/>

United States. Central Intelligence Agency. *World Factbook: Sri Lanka*. 2014. Web.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ce.html>

Wijewardena, W.A. "Sri Lanka's growth paradox: When poverty yields, income gap holds stubbornly."

Daily FT. (2014): n. page. Web. 9 Jul. 2014. <http://www.ft.lk/2014/05/12/sri-lankas-growth-paradox-when-poverty-yields-income-gap-holds-stubbornly/>

"Women and Sustainable Food Security." *SD Dimensions*. Prepared by the Women in Development Service (SDWW), n.d. Web. 23 Jul 2014. <http://www.fao.org/sd/fsdirect/fbdirect/fsp001.htm>

"Women's Empowerment." *The Asia Foundation*. The Asia Foundation, n.d. Web. 25 Jul 2014.

<http://asiafoundation.org/program/overview/womens-empowerment>

"Women in Agriculture: Closing the Gap for Gender Development." *State of Food and Agriculture 2010-11*. (2011): n. page. Web. 23 Jul. 2014. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i2050e/i2050e00.htm>