

Impact of Socio-cultural Factors for Gender Pay Gap among Agricultural Labourers in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This article is an outcome of a study conducted to understand the research problem of what are the socio-cultural factors that contribute for the gender pay gap in rural agricultural sector in Sri Lanka?. The gender pay gap refers to the percentage gap between the male average wages and female average wages. The gender pay disparity has economic, social, cultural and political consequences on individuals, business and governments. Primary data for this research was collected from the *Liyangastota Grama Niladhari* Division in *Ambalantota* Divisional Secretariat Division of *Hambantota* District in Sri Lanka. A questionnaire survey supported with 10 case studies, interviews and field observations were used as techniques of primary data collection from a sample of 56 respondents selected through simple random sampling method. Data analysis was done using both qualitative and quantitative analysis methods. Some of the key factors identified as effects of socio-cultural factors for gender pay gap in the studied village include under-valuation of the female's work by the society, occupational segregation, lack of work-skills of female labourers, effects of part-time and casual works on the female labourers, and labour market related factors such as level of competition in the labour market, new agro-technological inputs. The study found that family responsibilities, gender-based stereotypes and cultural norms; gender-based discrimination, marital status and male bias attitudes of the society largely contributed to determine the wage disparity among female and male labourers in the agricultural sector. Based on the key findings, the study concluded that, consistent gender pay gap has a negative impact on the standard of living of a labourer's household.

Keywords: Agricultural Sector; Female Labourers; Gender Pay Gap; Socio-cultural Factors.

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1. Introduction

Gender is a socio-cultural phenomenon and it refers to masculine and feminine qualities, behaviour patterns, roles and responsibilities. Moreover, it discusses the social and cultural relationships between men and women in the society. The gender pay gap can be considered as a major aspect which needs to investigate in contemporary society [1]. The gender wage gap is, by definition, the difference between the average wages of men and women. It is expressed in mean or median wages and often as the ratio of women's wages to men's or in terms of what percentage of men's earnings do women earn [2]. As a result of that, women are more likely than men to work part-time and given that part-time work usually pays lower wages. On the other hand, at European Union (EU) level, the 'gender pay gap' is defined as the relative difference in the average gross hourly earnings of women and men within the economy as a whole [1]. Particularly, over the past 25 years, the gender pay gap has narrowed dramatically and women have increasingly entered traditionally male occupations [3]. On the other hand, a review of the literature elaborates that some significant gender aspects of informal sector. Authors in [2] noted that, there are outnumber of women than men in the informal sector as a result of the underdevelopment of the local labour markets in developing countries.

Agriculture sector is known as one of the sectors that belong to the informal economy. Over half of all labourers worldwide, however, rely on the agricultural sector. In Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, 70% or more of the labour force works in agriculture. In many regions more women than men are employed in agriculture [4]. Consequently, rural women play a significant role in agricultural and food production and in household food security, both as paid and unpaid labour. Within agriculture, women's labour is valued less than men's labour. When considering the Sri Lankan scenario, women play a major role in both vegetable cultivation and floriculture in the Western and upland Central and Uva provinces being actively involved in land preparation, seeding, planting, weeding, harvesting and preparation for market. In the dry zone areas, they do contribute to seeding, weeding, harvesting and irrigation under agro wells and pump irrigation [5].

The gender wage gap is caused by a number of factors including inequalities between men and women in the average seniority of their roles, the sectors that women are concentrated in being paid less on average, differences in working hours and discrimination [6]. On same accounts, the important role of women in agriculture, customary laws and traditional social norms have been biased in favour of men, which constitute a barrier to women's equitable access to resources. Moreover, though contributing a major part of their lives to providing services and support the opportunity to be placed in decision making roles or have control over assets is limited [5].

The Sri Lankan society is at a rapid change process due to various socio-economic and political reasons. As a result of the change process of the society, the local culture that is practiced by the people especially living in rural villages in the country has been reshaped from its original shape [7]. The present research focuses on the socio-cultural factors contributing to the gender pay gap in the agricultural sector, in the context of rural setting in the capitalist society in Sri Lanka. In line with this context, the study brings a new ground to study the socio-cultural aspect of the gender pay gap because of majority of the studies in this field have focused their attention on the economic factors which contributing to the gender pay gap.

2. Theoretical Aspect of the Gender Pay Gap and Collected Works from the Early Studies

The gender pay gap has now been intensively investigated for a number of decades, however also remains an area of active and innovative research. Particularly, inequities between women and men in earnings often exist as the matter of gender is concentrated in different occupations. Those jobs performed by women are valued less, primarily because they draw on traditionally female skills which are seen as innate abilities rather than acquired skills [8]. Simply it can define the gender pay gap as “the percentage gap between the male average wages and female average wages” [9]. In every country in the world, under every economic system, women face limitations in the realm of paid work simply because they are women: their access to property is typically less than that of men and often mediated through their relationship to men. On the other hand, they face greater social demands on their time than men do (notably to carry out unpaid care work) and they face greater social constraints on their physical mobility than men [10].

Thus, women’s earnings trend on average to be less than men’s throughout all regions of the world is and often cited indicator of gender-based inequality in labour markets. When considering the recent trends and outcomes in the gender pay gap in Western Australia, in 2004 February 2004 quarter the gender wage gap in the full-time labour market was 22.61% [9]. When considering the Asian context, the data shows a significantly wider gap between men’s and women’s earnings than the world average. The average GPG in 2005 for the Asian countries featured 17.6%. The large scale of gender pay gap was reported in Asia due to the nature of the individual country labour markets and there is a more progress in the Middle East and Central Asia than in South and East Asia [11].

When considering the Sri Lankan scenario, it is scarce of studies in the field of gender pay gap in Sri Lanka. Due to the changes of the economic system of the country from agricultural to the market driven, both mothers and fathers were taking responsibilities of maintaining family’s economy [12]. Author in [13] has conducted a research on gender inequality in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, Sri Lankan traditional women have less social, domestic, economic and political power than men. Anyhow, they play a major role inside their family. Particularly, rural women spend most of the time every day on agricultural and household tasks. As paid or unpaid labour, women may spend up to 19 hours a day performing essential responsibilities such as sowing, weeding, harvesting, animal husbandry, cleaning, fetching water and firewood, cooking, child rearing, etc. Moreover, researcher found that women still tend to be conducted traditionally feminine occupations and to earn less than men even though they may engage in similar works. The data which related to this study indicates that the majority of the women in the lowest income level are engaged in unskilled manual operations and seasonal jobs [13].

Author in [14] has examined the gender wage gap among agricultural labourers in rural Sri Lanka. This study is an empirical study and it is conducted in the informal agricultural sector of dry zone of Southern Sri Lanka. Thus, the study focused on three aspects of gender inequality including, measuring the potential gender wage gap, explaining the root causes for it and assessing the relative impact of the issue on the living standard of labour households. Moreover, this study was observed that the behavioural factor of women labourers such as preference for part-time work and flexible workplace, lack of bargaining power; informal labour market

characteristics such as sex segregation in work, less competition due to excess labour supply; social factors such as the undervaluation of women’s work and family responsibilities are associating with the wage difference between males and females in the sector [14]. Thus, this study has revealed that gender wage gap is a negative impact on the female labourers in the agricultural sector. Consequently, it is clear that wages of women remain very low in all most all the regions in the world and it is equally clear that there is a persistent and large gap in earnings between women and men.

3. Methodological Aspect of the Study

The study used a mixed method design with both qualitative and quantitative research designs. Quantitative research design was applied to collect the demographic data of the women and men labourers in the agricultural sector and the qualitative research design was used to accumulate the experiences of female labourer’s in the agricultural sector toward the less payment rather than male labourers and to gather the details about socio-cultural factors which base on the gender wage gap. Study location of the research was Liyangastota Grama Niladhari Division in Ambalantota Divisional Secretariat Division of Hambantota District in Sri Lanka. Moreover, Female and male labourers in the agricultural sector were taken as the study population of the study and 56 families out of 375 families in the Liyangastota GN division (Karambagalmulla, Liyangastota and Ahabadavila) were selected using the simple random sampling method as the sample of the study. Moreover, ten respondents (both male and female) representing each and every village were selected for the purpose of qualitative data under the judgmental sampling design.

Table 1: Distribution of the Sample

Name of the Village	Number of Families	Quantitative	Qualitative	
			Female	Male
Karambagalmulla	175	26	4	1
Liyangastota	118	18	2	1
Ahabadavila	82	12	1	1
Total	375	56	7	3

Particularly, the researcher used a structured questionnaire with following interview. Moreover, case study method used to accumulate more in-depth information about the study area, experiences of female and male labourers, and respondent’s different perspectives from their own words. The non-participant observation employed to understand the nature of women employment in the agricultural sector and their attitudes. Additionally, secondary data was collected through the government publications, census reports, previous research in which qualitative data and quantitative data was collected.

4. Key Findings of the Study

4.1. Effects of Social Factors on Gender Pay Gap

The gender wage gap is caused by a number of factors including inequalities between men and women in the average seniority of their roles, the sectors that women are concentrated in being paid less on average, differences in working hours and discrimination [6]. Thus, the study attempted to elaborate the social factors which affect to gender wage disparity in the agricultural sector and key findings of the study are as follows:

4.1.1. Under-valuation of Female Labour

Women's skills and competences are often undervalued, especially in occupations where they represent the majority. This results in lower rates of pay for women. Seasonality is a common feature in the domestic agricultural sector. This is categorized into two sections as *Yala* and *Maha*. During these seasons, women's labour is utilised to accomplish the labour shortage in the agricultural sector. Moreover, women in rural Sri Lanka play a significant role in their families. In order to meet her family responsibilities, a woman is more likely to choose the part-time and soft works that is available in the labour market. Often such work is outside of the government regulations or labour laws; hence women's labour can easily be undervalued. On the other hand, male laborers are more multi-skilled than females in the agricultural sector. This means that males can do most of the things that females do in the production process. Accordingly, the lack of skills of women than men is the next factor affecting the under-valuation of women laborers in the informal agricultural sector. However, in a study on military war widows in post-war Sri Lanka, it has highlighted that there are much more social and psychological as well as economic consequences attached to widowhood and it arises from the social structures as well and widows have their own coping strategies in continuing the life [15]. Thus, factors such as female labour reserves for the seasonal works, family responsibilities and lack of skills of women labourers than male labourers are mostly influenced to undervalue the female labourers in this sector and these factors are determined less wage rate for the females than males.

4.1.2. Occupational Segregation

One of the largest driving factors of the gender pay gap is the fact that men and women work in different industries and occupations. Generally, most of the people believe that woman workers cannot be able to engage in hard works and this misperception might be influenced to bind the female labourers in soft works. In line with this, female labourers have lack of opportunities to compete with male labourers in the labour market and to increase their payments as well. Accordingly, particular tasks are done on agriculture sector by men and women have certain common patterns. In general, men take on the heavy physical labour of land preparation and jobs which are specific to distant locations. Moreover, women carry out the repetitious, time consuming tasks like weeding and those which are located close to their home. Thus the study found that occupational segregation is a phenomenon that exists in different forms and this is one of the major factors that persisting gender pay gap in agricultural sector.

4.1.3. Lack of Work-skills of the Female Labourers

Women's skills are always undervalued because they are seen to reflect female characteristics rather than acquired skills and competencies. Particularly, female labourers cannot be able to compete with male labourers

in the agricultural labour market because female tasks are categorized as less skill tasks and therefore land owners can justify lower wages to the female labourers. Furthermore, the society often believes that males are multi-skilled in agricultural production process because they employ in hard works than soft works in this sector. Table -02 has highlighted field data on this subject. In fact, the exclusion of women labourers from the new technological reforms leads to reduce the women’s existing skills of agriculture sector and women may be unable to grab the new technological knowledge because local political and legislative attitudes make women less creditworthy and less skillful than men. It is obvious that, lack of work-skills of females is one of the factors that contribute to gender pay gap in the agricultural sector.

Table 2: Work-skills of the counterpart labourer in same type of works in the same sector

Response	Frequency	Percent
Work skills of both are homogenous	2	3.6
Work skills of male labourers are higher than females	37	66.1
Male labourers are multi-skilled in agriculture than females	13	23.2
Other	4	7.1
Total	56	100.0

4.1.4. The Effects of Part-time and Casual Works

Women in agricultural areas also contribute a considerable amount of energy to family survival from their household-based work. However, women not only work in different occupations, but they also work fewer hours in the workplace. Most of the women who interviewed are employed in part-time and casual works in the labour market by means hiring their labour. Moreover, part-time and casual nature of employments comes with a low bargaining power and low earnings. This means that, majority of woman laborers in the study area are not full-time workers, but part-time or casual in nature. This category of labour is outside the existing labour policy, regulations or laws in the country and easier to discriminate against in the labour market. Even though, majority of women engage in the part-time labour, they have contributed to fulfill the expenditure of their household. However, part-time and casual works are affected to less demand and fewer wage for female labourers in the labour market and as a result of that, contribution of female labourers in the agricultural sector is devalued in the labour market as well as in the society. In line with this, the effects of part-time and casual works can be one of the major reasons for persisting gender pay gap in the labour market.

4.1.5. Labour Market Related Factors

The study found that the labour market related factors also contribute to the gender pay gap among agricultural labourers. Particularly, the labour market related factors include level of competition in the market, job segregation, institutional norms, nature of the job, new-agro technological inputs, level of labour policy and regulations and economic policy in the country. Meantime alienation from the natural world alongside the commodification of such elements of their culture for global cultural consumption reflects the integration of life into rationalistic modern systems of knowledge, economic exchange, and governance, which have replaced the sources of authority and knowledge that previously sustained traditional institutions [16]. Generally, women have been increasingly employed in formerly male tasks as a direct consequence of their cheapness. Therefore, the competition between male and female for jobs is thus weakening with the growth of wage rate of female labourers. The research attempted to identify the factors limiting the women’s labour market. Accordingly, the research found various factors that directly contribute to limit the access and mobility of women to the labour market. Therefore, female labourers cannot access to a good market for their labour supply. All these reasons have contributed significantly towards women looking for labour jobs in nearness to their homes. Moreover, the use of machinery in the agricultural sector especially in paddy cultivation has huge impacts on the women’s labour market (Figure, 02).

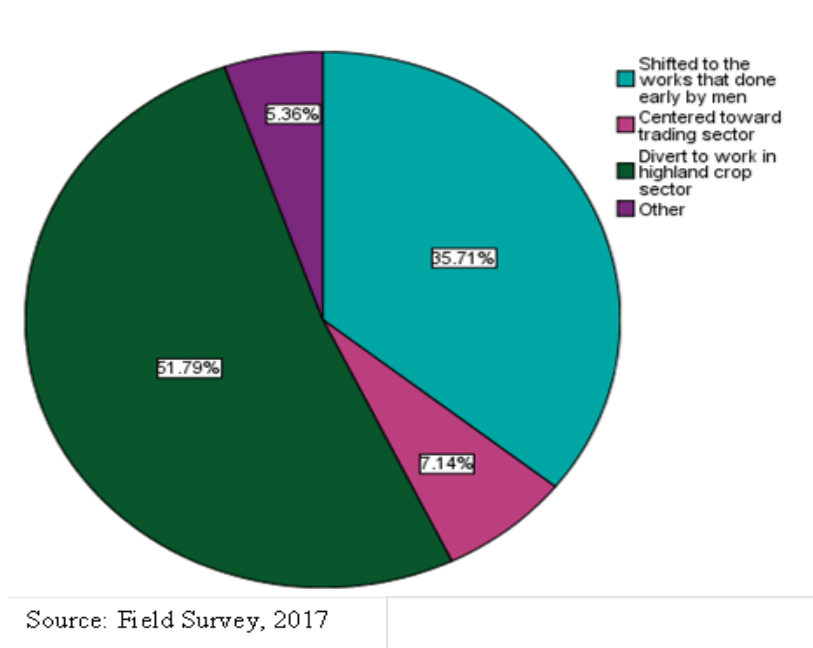


Figure1: Respondents reactions on the labour saving agro-technology

In fact, the use of the high technology in the agriculture sector has reduced labour opportunities for both men and women without discrimination; anyhow the study found that the impacts of this are more affected for women than men. Consequently, this result in the male labour market is being relatively more competitive and hence men are having more bargaining power on the amount they are paid than women. However, the above social factors have largely contributed to the disparity of wages between men and women in the agricultural sector.

4.2. Effects of Cultural Factors on Gender Pay Gap

The gender pay gap is a complex issue caused by a number of interrelated factors. It still exists today due to wider gender inequalities across the economy and in the society. Obviously, women have to engage in low-paid sectors and roles, women also tend to earn less for doing the same types of jobs as men. Moreover, female labourers have to engage in reserve tasks in agriculture sector and as a result of that, their wages are less than men's wages. Accordingly, it is better to understand the cultural factors that affect for the gender pay gap in the agricultural sector.

4.2.1. Family Responsibilities of the Female Labourers

As per the research findings, family responsibilities result in significant pressures on female's participation in paid work. It is obvious that, women's obligations to their reproductive roles such as child bearing and child caring roles and other household related works are led to determine a lower wage for female labourers and it is considered as one of the major factors that affect to the gender pay gap in the labour market. Particularly, women have been assigned in society to play the reproductive role and its associated tasks. Anyhow, these household related works has limited the engagement of women in other works. Women have been influenced to undertake labour work, as a result of inadequate household income from the earnings of male members, for the survival of their families. Thus, the research found that in general, women are willing to find works in nearness to their home due to their family obligations. They need some time each morning and evening to engage in these works. Consequently, all these reasons have affected towards women looking for labour jobs in close to their homes. This result is to the land owners who demand labour are also aware that women in the villages are easily available for work and can be employed at a lower cost than men. In fact, it should be noted that family responsibilities of the females is one of the cultural factors that contribute to the gender pay gap in the agricultural labour market.

4.2.2. Gender-based Discrimination

The study found that in certain cases, women and men are not paid the same wages although they carry out the same work or work of equal value. This may be the result of discrimination where women are simply treated less favourably than men. Consequently, it should be noted that women in the domestic agriculture sector also participate in the labour market as an adjusting factor to fill the labour shortage in the short-run. Hence, female labourers have to encounter more disadvantage and unfair situations than males and this result to direct discrimination against females in the labour market. Furthermore, there is a clear division of labour by gender in this sector and this leads to create the discrimination based treatments for female labourers. It can be highlighted that males are generally engaging in more physically demanding works, while females are involved in soft works. This perception has labeled as women do not have capacity to engage in heavy works, therefore they exclude from the male related works even though they can do. The cumulative effect of the discrimination against female labourers results in the adoption of reserved labour army and reduces the competitiveness of the informal labour market in the region. In line with this, gender-based discrimination can be considered as one of the factors that contribute to the gender pay gap in the agricultural sector.

4.2.3. Gender-based Stereotypes and Cultural Norms

Society and culture are assigned different status and roles for each and every person in the society. This leads to build up variety of perceptions on the females and males separately. Accordingly, society is widely accepted that male labourers are multi-skilled and they are engaged in more physically demanding works, while females are engaged in soft works and they are less skilled to manage heavy equipment which is used in the agriculture sector. Furthermore, Sri Lankan society is a patriarchal society and this society believes women should engage in the family related works therefore they do not need to contribute for income earning tasks. Variety of these negative stereotypes has affected to determine that women are less skillful, less powerful group in the society. The most significant cultural factor that contributes to low payments for women is the cultural norms prevailing in the general society. The majority in the society has been led to think that the productivity and corresponding value of women's work is low. Therefore, contribution of females' to the economic production is undervalued due to these social norms. It should be noted that gender-based stereotypes and social norms are significantly contributed to determine low wages for female labourers than male labourers.

4.2.4. Marital Status of the Female Labourers

Moreover, the marked effect of marital status on market work can be seen in the much lower, age specific participation rates of married women than those of unmarried women. Particularly, male labourers use their wives to carry out the household works, through that male labourers can continue their career. As a result, female labourers have to commit their labour jobs. Consequently, marital status has also influenced to the persisting wage disparity in the agricultural production sector. On the other hand, male bias attitudes lead to have less powerful, less bargain and subordinate conditions on the female labourers. Particularly, male members are not being in favour of sending their wives and daughters to distant places for labour jobs due to social and cultural attitudes prevailing in the society those women should not travel alone. Moreover, women ride bicycles to some extent and motorcycles as well to a lesser degree, they are not willing to use these modes of transport for long distances. Traditional attitudes and lack of practice for women in using such transport has contributed to this situation. Thus, it is obvious that male bias attitudes can be one of the factors that affect to the gender pay disparity in the agriculture sector. However, the above cultural factors have largely contributed to the disparity of wages between men and women in the agricultural sector.

4.2.5. Male Biased Attitudes of the Society

Women in agricultural and rural areas have less access than men to productive resources and opportunities. Accordingly, several barriers affecting women's participation in agricultural activities have been identified in the study.

It is obvious that, women are inhibited from practicing activities they desire and their rights are denied them by the social norms and customs of their traditional societies.

It can be noted that gender based biases or inequalities are one of the major issues limiting women in engaging and accessing agriculture related works. Moreover, patriarchy and other socio-cultural practices and traditions play fundamental roles in shaping the structure of wages female and male labourers in the agricultural sector.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the key findings of the study, it can be concluded that the persisting gender pay gap is determined by the variety of socio-cultural factors that have been taken place in the society and culture as well. Thus, disadvantages and marginalization of women and discrimination against them is a socio-cultural phenomenon. In Sri Lankan context traditional women have less social, economic and domestic power than men. Anyhow, they have played significant role inside the family and in the agricultural sector as well.

On the other hand, causes of the gender pay gap are complex and finding solution is challenging. In fact, during the field visit, researcher observed that different methods of labour supply exist in the agricultural sector. These include *attama*, voluntary based labour, contract based labour, family labour, self-account labour, part-time and casual labour, etc. With these differentiations, a formal labour market structure does not exist in the region. In addition, there is excess labour supply and demand for labour is seasonal (*Yala, Maha*). Consequently, underemployment exists on an annual basis. Given these facts, the labour market can be considered as an informal market within an informal sector. Thus, formalization of the labour market in the sector to some extent is essential in order to address the gender pay gap. In this formalization effort, the government would play a dominant role and non-government sector, private institutions can involve in this effort as well.

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