Country Profile

According to the World Bank Group & the Asian Development Bank (2020), Sri Lanka has been recognized as a country that is highly vulnerable to climate change, and has consistently been ranked among the top ten countries at risk of extreme weather related events by the Global Climate Index (Eckstein et al, 2018). As stated in a 2020 World Bank report titled "Contingent Liabilities from Natural Disasters: Sri Lanka," Sri Lanka, on average spends LKR 50 billion (USD 313 million) in annual disaster losses linked to housing, infrastructure, agriculture and relief. Of this LKR 32 billion is accounted for by losses from floods, while cyclones or high winds account for LKR 11 billion. Droughts and landslides account for LKR 5.2 billion and LKR 1.8 billion, respectively.

These financial losses not only strain Sri Lanka's economy but reveal how unequipped the country is in the face of an escalating climate crisis. The Sixth Assessment Report by Working Group II of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC AR6 WGII) highlights that Sri Lanka's heavy reliance on climate-sensitive livelihoods – including rural, non-industrialized agrarianism, fisheries, aquaculture, tea plantations and forestry – are disrupted by monsoons, altered rainfall, other weather induced events and natural disasters, of which floods, cyclones, droughts and sea erosion are cited as the main causes for concern. Additionally, long-term changes to the monsoon pattern, mega-droughts, and shifting of ecological regions are some of the climate change projections listed in climate science publications (Krinner et al, 2013). All these ultimately implicate the physical and social health of local communities and undermine their capacity to respond and adapt to crisis and climate challenges.

Sri Lanka is considered a low-carbon emitting country, emitting around 1.02 tonnes/per person. Despite this, and Sri Lanka's commitment to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 (Ministry of Environment, 2023), its proximity to the climate crisis has not lessened. It is both noted and forecasted that the intensity and frequency of extreme weather events and natural disasters too will increase, posing significant threats to communities directly affected, healthcare workers, relief networks, etc (De Alwis & Noy, 2019). It has been reported that mean daytime maximum and mean night time minimum air temperatures have increased (Jayawardene et al., 2018). Most researchers agree that rainfall variability has intensified over time, particularly during the Yala season (Alahacoon & Edirisinghe, 2021).

According to the Climate Risk Country Profile by the World Bank Group, the number of consecutive dry days have also risen, while extended wet periods have notably diminished. Further, while the research done on the effects of the rising sea level on coastal Sri Lanka is relatively scarce (Palamakumbure et al., 2020), there is acknowledgment in available research publications, that this is an issue of grave concern, particularly in the South and Southwestern parts of Sri Lanka. Rising sea levels will see mass displacement of coastal communities, damage

to coastal ecosystems, infrastructure vulnerabilities, water scarcity and a detrimental impact on agriculture, among other things.

Sri Lanka's Response

As a country that ratified the Paris Agreement in 2016, Sri Lanka has committed to support global efforts to tackle climate change. Sri Lanka's initial Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) were submitted in 2016, but were updated in 2020 to include mitigation and adaptation measures for the next decade (2021-2030). As per the NDC's Sri Lanka is:

- Focused on building resilience across all vulnerable sectors.
- Committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 in electricity generation
- Achieve 70% renewable energy in electricity generation by 2030
- No capacity addition of Coal power plants

In accordance, Sri Lanka has launched the following major initiatives:

- Adopting 'Colombo Declaration on Sustainable Nitrogen Management' with an ambition to halve nitrogen waste by 2030
- Banning agro-chemicals and chemical fertilizer
- Promoting organic fertilizer and farming
- Banning single-use plastics
- Promoting E-mobility
- Promoting circular economy

Sri Lanka's NDC's are divided into 2 categories: conditional and unconditional[1]. The conditional NDC's are heavily reliant on international support in climate financing and technology transfer support. This support will be crucial to address key areas like developing and refining energy resources and storage systems, upgrading electricity networks, modernizing public transport, etc. Unconditional NDC's are tackled by the Government of Sri Lanka, which work to address climate vulnerability and the impacts of weather-related hazards on lives and livelihoods. These include investments in developing/fortifying the eroding coastline, developing meteorological capacity and early warning capacity for floods/landslides and resettlement of communities living in landslide and flood prone areas.

In addition to the NDCs, Sri Lanka has introduced several national policies and strategies, such as the National Policy on Climate Change (2023), National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy for Sri Lanka (2011-2016), the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) for climate change impacts in Sri Lanka (2016-2025), Carbon Net Zero 2050 Roadmap and Strategic Plan (2023) Technology

[1] Unconditional policy responses are actional that have been identified in national plans, programmes, prioritised for domestic investments (public and private), while conditional policy responses require external aid, including in financing, technology transfer and, capacity building.

Needs Assessment and Technology Action Plans for Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation (2014), Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions (NAMA) for energy, and Climate Change Sector Vulnerability Profiles (2010) in order to address climate change-induced impacts.

Presently, Sri Lanka's climate change policies have geared towards mitigation (reducing/preventing the escalation of climate change) and adaptation[2] (building resilience), with a primary focus on mainstreaming climate change policy into key sectors. Power, urban planning, waste, transport, coastal and marine, forestry, water, health, tourism, biodiversity, agriculture, are some sectors that have incorporated climate change risks and commitments[3]. This has included water resource management, disaster risk reduction, coastal protection, renewable energy transition, reforestation, biodiversity conservation, among other things.

While Sri Lanka has robust policy frameworks in place that address sectoral adaptation, disaster management and resilience, the driving rationale for adaptation efforts is notably economic. Consequently, in such frameworks, vulnerable communities – those who bear the brunt of climate impacts – are side-lined. Many key policies such as the National Policy on Climate Change 2023, and the National Adaptation Plan for Climate Change Impacts in Sri Lanka 2016-2025, and even the Nationally Determined Contributions broadly identify women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities, low-income communities, especially those engaged in agriculture and fisheries, coastal communities, smallholder farmers and fisherfolk as vulnerable communities.

In order to identify the impact of climate change on communities who face disproportionate risks that would further deepen inequality, there is a crucial need for gender disaggregated and cross sectional data – in addition to economic figures. Further, there is a necessity to enhance the coordination between institutions and processes.

While economic resilience is pivotal in shaping climate policy -- particularly in the developing world -- centering the economy as the focal point in climate research and policymaking is a narrow approach that presents significant challenges. An economic focus reduces individuals and communities to their economic value, and therefore can marginalise vulnerable populations, particularly in the processes of data collection and research, and ultimately in policymaking.

With its rapid escalation and disproportionate impact, the severity of climate change is not one that can be measured through a single metric. It is an issue that requires an acknowledgement of unique regional factors that determine local consequences of climate change, and critically,

[2] Given the recent unprecedented nature and frequency of natural disasters in Sri Lanka, development investments intended to mitigate have fallen through and so, the National Climate Change Policy of Sri Lanka places significantly more emphasis on adaptation.

[3] Some examples of preliminary sectoral adaptation: Long-Term Electricity Generation Expansion Plan 2018-2037, the National Policy on Waste Management (2019), the National Policy on Sustainable Consumption and Production for Sri Lanka (2019), Strategic Action Plan for Adaptation of Irrigation and Water Resources Sector for Climate Change 2018, Sri Lanka Disaster Management Plan 2018-2030.

recognition of the fact that climate change is an issue that affects no person, community or country the same way.

Gender and Climate Change

At the core of human-centred policy making is the principle that no one should be left behind. "Leave no one behind" (LNOB) is also the ideology shaping the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It signals the need to prioritise the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, calling for equity-driven solutions. Within the context of climate action, the framework of a Just Transition becomes crucial. Rooted in the concept of intersectionality, a Just Transition describes the process of greening the economy in a way that is fair and inclusive to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no vulnerable worker or region behind. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), a Just Transition maximises the social/economic opportunities of climate action, while minimising and managing any challenges through effective social dialogue among all groups impacted. Fundamentally, it serves as a framework for placing vulnerable communities at the heart of economic policy.

Sri Lanka's NDCs identify several vulnerable groups that are at risk from the impacts of climate change and among these groups, women stand out as a particularly vulnerable group. According to a publication titled 'Gender and Climate Change in Sri Lanka' by SLYCAN Trust (2023), climate risks disproportionately affect women, especially pregnant women, mothers, those from poor or marginalised communities, girls and LGBIQ+ individuals. While women's labour force participation is lower than that of men, there is a high demand for women workers in agriculture, with women making up 33-34% of the rural sector (SLYCAN Trust, 2023).

Globally, rural women are recognised as the driving force behind food systems, poverty reduction, climate resilience, and the overall well-being of rural communities. Despite their contributions however, they remain invisible, underrepresented and/or structurally excluded in national data and policy frameworks in Sri Lanka (UNDP, 2023; SLYCAN Trust, n.d.). These inequalities are further exacerbated with climate change as most of these women depend on cultivation related activities for livelihood and for combating food insecurity. Many women grow crops on family-owned land to feed their families, selling any surplus, while others work as farm labourers, however, as floods and droughts become more frequent – and as rain patterns and temperatures change, crop losses too become regular (Attanayake, 2024).

Moreover, with the cumulative impacts of climate change on the climate-sensitive crop cultivation upon which the rural economy depends, smallholder farmers tend to migrate towards urban centres in search of alternative income sources. In a majority of these cases, it is men who migrate while women, children, youth and the elderly stay behind and face adverse climate impacts on additional livelihood burdens (SLYCAN Trust, 2020). The challenges women face in this context are multidimensional and include the triple burden of household and childcare duties, agricultural responsibilities, and a need for additional income and food generation.

The work around caring for the planet and caring for people are closely linked, and this is reflected in the role women have played in both arenas. As mentioned, women play pivotal, and yet unrecognised roles in food systems and perform highly diverse work for family sustenance. In addition, they are also knowledge holders and custodians of ecosystems, nutrition, healthcare, traditional pest control and sustainable resource management (SLYCAN Trust, 2024). Additionally, 76.2% of care work[4] is performed by women globally, especially women belonging to groups at risk of social, economic, and environmental vulnerability (OECD/ILO, 2019).

According to a study conducted by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), women often bear the brunt of environmental degradation and resource scarcity, due to their roles and responsibilities around managing household water, agriculture and food security. Climate change intensifies these responsibilities, particularly in disaster-prone areas, forcing women to devise strategies to compensate for the lack of public services while spending more time on caregiving tasks. Further, the increased workloads reduce income opportunities and further limit their access to education, healthcare, and crucial decision-making processes, among other things (UNCCD, 2022). For example, when droughts or floods impact food production, women often must spend more time sourcing water, food, and firewood. In addition to this, they may also care for family members who fall ill due to malnutrition, poor sanitation, or climate-related health issues.

With economic value being placed at the forefront of adaptation efforts, the vital care work done by women, while unrecognised and undervalued, poses a significant roadblock to the Just Transition agenda. The framework rooted in the LNOB principle will not be possible if women and the importance of care work is not recognized, and unless initiatives are developed for it to be distributed fairly and channels for participation and leadership are opened for caregivers. The Just Transition framework that recognises the role of women in climate action, would address the barriers that women face from accessing paid work, in addition to improving the conditions of all care workers, which leads to an improvement in the quality of care for both; communities and the environment.

A Just Transition in Sri Lanka must prioritise these women, ensuring their inclusion in economic planning, social protection, and access to sustainable livelihood opportunities. By addressing gender inequalities and placing vulnerable groups at the centre of climate action, we can truly achieve a just and equitable transformation that leaves no one behind.

[4] Care work includes both, the paid and unpaid labour involved in caring for others, and is often performed by women and girls. Care work, across the world, remains undervalued and void of benefits and protections, low wages and non-compensation.

Key Gaps and Critical Areas

Need for gender-disaggregated and cross-sectional data - There is a significant gap in gender-sensitive, context-specific data, which is essential for evidence-based policymaking and for identifying key gaps and challenges.

Shift mitigatory and adaptive focal points from purely economic resilience - Climate policy and research must move beyond economic-centric approaches and adopt an intersectional approach that accounts for interconnected forms of socio-environmental injustices.

Highlight women's contributions to climate action and resilience - Women's roles in agriculture, food systems, and care work must be recognized and valued in national data and policy frameworks, in addition to a gender mainstreaming into areas such as risk management, land management and resource allocation.

Address the "triple burden" on women - Policies should consider the multidimensional challenges women face, including household duties, agricultural work, and access to income generation, particularly as climate change exacerbates these burdens.

Promote women's leadership, participation and representation in climate action - Women, particularly in rural areas, should be empowered and included in decision-making processes related to climate policy and sustainable livelihood opportunities.

Recognise and redistribute care work - Care work, often performed by women, needs to be recognized and valued within climate policies, with initiatives to distribute this work fairly.

Incorporate a Just Transition framework - Sri Lanka's climate action must prioritise vulnerable women and ensure equitable access to economic planning, social protection, and sustainable livelihoods, in line with the "Leave No One Behind" principle.

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