

The importance of social work as a practising profession to enhance gender mainstreaming in sustainable development in Sri Lanka

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Abstract— This research paper delves into the applicability of gender mainstreaming in the context of Sri Lanka and its crucial role in sustainable development, particularly within the field of social work. Employing content analysis, the study examines secondary data to shed light on this topic. Gender mainstreaming, which seeks to incorporate gender perspectives and foster equality in decision-making and development initiatives, is explored through the lens of UNESCO's guiding principles, including recognition, diversity, equality, empowerment, participation, partnership, and social justice. The paper highlights the necessity for gender mainstreaming within the Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative and assesses the existing policies in Sri Lanka. Although existing policies acknowledge the significance of gender perspectives, the paper underscores the need for heightened awareness and sensitivity in development programmes to prevent the perpetuation of gender disparities. Despite high literacy rates, various challenges, such as social norms and limited economic participation, may impede the effective implementation of gender mainstreaming in sustainable development. The study emphasises the pivotal role of social work in addressing gender-based issues aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals and advocating for inclusivity and empowerment. Additionally, the research addresses the challenges encountered by local social workers, such as non-indigenous education, limited agency support, the self-determination of service users, and the influence of cultural and religious factors. Recognising and addressing these challenges necessitates greater acknowledgment and support for the social work profession and ethical decision-making. Ultimately, the paper concludes by underscoring the significance of gender mainstreaming in social work as a means to achieve inclusivity, equality, and empowerment. It calls for the integration of gender perspectives in policies, programmes, and practises to advance social justice and ensure a more equitable society.

Keywords— Social Work, Sustainable Development, Gender Mainstreaming, Gender Inclusivity

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, Sri Lanka has demonstrated strong growth and development. With average annual per capita GDP growth of 4.4% in the 1990s, 4.2% in the 2000s, and 4.4% in the 2010s, the country has maintained a positive trajectory despite the disruptions caused by the Civil War. This economic growth has contributed to advancements in human development, as indicated by the country's human development index (HDI). From 1990 to 2019, Sri Lanka's HDI increased by more than 24%, rising from 0.629 to 0.782. This places Sri Lanka in the "high human development" category, ranking 72nd out of 189 countries in the 2020 Human Development Report (UNCTAD, 2022). According to UN Women (2022), Member States of the United Nations have supported gender mainstreaming as the primary global approach for achieving gender equality and empowering women since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Over the past 25 years, they have consistently emphasised the significance of this strategy and the urgency of its implementation across all development sectors. Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development strongly emphasises the potential transformative power of gender mainstreaming, calls for its accelerated implementation, and recognises that gender equality and women's rights and empowerment are essential for achieving sustainable development in all areas. The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development aligns with the Post-2015 Development Agenda and aims to address social issues and developmental challenges at both local and global levels. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development serves as a framework for integrating the Global Agenda's commitments into creating a more equitable society. Studies reported in the Special Issue of International Social Work (2014) explore the potential implications of the Global Agenda for social work education and practise (Lombard, 2015). As a client-centred discipline, social work encourages all genders to equally participate in the development of a nation. The research highlights the role of social workers in addressing gender inequalities and integrating gender perspectives into development policies and programmes. By examining the specific context of Sri Lanka, the focus is on understanding how social work can

contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to gender equality and women's empowerment. The aim is to emphasise the essential role of social work in fostering inclusive and gender-responsive sustainable development practices in Sri Lanka.

II. RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this research is to explore and understand the role of social work in mainstreaming gender perspectives for achieving sustainable development goals in Sri Lanka. The research will focus on identifying challenges, opportunities, and strategies for integrating gender equality considerations within the field of social work practice to contribute to the realisation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Research Objectives:

- To assess current gender mainstreaming progress and challenges in Sri Lanka.
- To analyse social work's role in addressing gender inequalities and promoting gender-sensitive development.
- To explore challenges faced by social workers in integrating gender perspectives.
- To advocate for increased recognition of social work's role and contribute to gender-responsive policy dialogues.

III. METHODOLOGY AND EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

This qualitative secondary study is conducted with the main objective of understanding how gender mainstreaming could be incorporated into the sustainable development of Sri Lanka within the scope of Social Work. Data collection involves the identification and retrieval of relevant secondary data sources. In this research, a comprehensive array of secondary data sources has been consulted to acquire pertinent information about gender mainstreaming and sustainable development in Sri Lanka. These sources encompass academic and government databases, reports, and publications. Noteworthy references include Archibong et al. (2018), addressing gender mainstreaming and sustainable development in Nigeria. The Asian Development Bank's (2015) updated Country Gender Assessment for Sri Lanka offers insights into local gender dynamics. Jamil et al. (2020) contribute insights into South Asian gender mainstreaming in various domains. Studies by Jayasooria (2016), Lombard (2015), Messing (2020), and Wijesekera (2020) delve into the role of social work in sustainable development. UNCTAD's report (2022) highlights gender mainstreaming cases in Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. UN Women's

resources, including the Handbook on Gender Mainstreaming (2022) and online documents, provide a global perspective. The Sustainable Development Report 2023 by Sachs et al. (2023) enriches the assessment by contextualising sustainable development efforts. Content analysis is employed as the primary method for analysing the collected secondary data. A coding scheme is developed to systematically categorise and classify the content based on relevant themes and variables related to gender mainstreaming and sustainable development. Ethical considerations focus on ensuring the appropriate use of secondary data sources. Data confidentiality is maintained, and copyright regulations are adhered to. Any potential biases or limitations inherent in the secondary data are acknowledged and addressed. The scarcity of research on gender mainstreaming in social work practice highlights a potential limitation regarding the availability of secondary data. This study aims to shed light on the importance of engaging in social work across various domains to promote gender-sensitive sustainable development.

IV RESULTS

A. Gender Mainstreaming and Social Work

As UN Women (n.d.) states, mainstreaming involves ensuring that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality are central to all activities: policy development, research, advocacy and dialogue, legislation, resource allocation, and planning, implementation, and monitoring of programmes and projects. Gender mainstreaming, as explained by Archibong et al. (2018), is a policy strategy that seeks to incorporate women in all areas of decision-making and development programmes. Its goal is to bring gender issues into the mainstream of society and promote gender equality. This strategy aims to ensure that women are included and represented in all spheres of society on an equal footing with men (Kanjere & Rachid, 2014). The goal of achieving gender equality on an international and global scale is to ensure that women and men are equally valued for their behaviours, aspirations, and opinions and that their rights, responsibilities, and opportunities are not determined by their gender differences, which are socially constructed identities (Elegbede, 2012). This means that men and women should have equal status, entitlements, rights, and access to assets and services, free from limitations imposed by gender norms and stereotypes. Gender norms and roles shape expectations around power positions, resource access, and decision-making in areas such as reproduction, sexuality, family planning, marriage, and household labour. Recognising and understanding these realities is crucial for addressing violations of women's rights and reducing constraints on equal rights, choices, and opportunities for women and

girls (Acha, 2016). The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare is in charge of the Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative, which aims to solve the most important issues facing society. While the initiative covers a wide range of topics, including poverty, health, and climate change, it fails to explicitly include gender in its titles or descriptions.

Given that women experience social issues being addressed disproportionately, this special issue emphasises the need to mainstream a gender perspective within the grand challenges. To identify and address gender inequalities and advance social justice, gender mainstreaming—which is influenced by intersectional and feminist theories—is crucial. By focusing on gender equality in research practice and policy recommendations, the grand challenges can truly advance the profession and contribute to a more equitable society (Messing, 2020).

B. Guiding Principles for Gender-Mainstreaming

Archibong et al. (2018) point out the eight guiding principles established by UNESCO (2007) for its gender mainstreaming policy. These serve as a framework for UNESCO's commitment to gender mainstreaming and promoting gender equality in all its endeavours:

- 1) *Recognition*: Gender issues are present in all aspects of international cooperation, including management systems, policies, culture, and work methods. Acknowledging these issues is crucial to addressing systemic barriers to gender equality.
- 2) *Diversity and intersection*: Different policies and programmes affect men and women differently, and within each gender, specific sub-groups may experience distinct forms of discrimination and marginalisation that need to be acknowledged and addressed.
- 3) *Equality*: Gender equality necessitates protecting and promoting the human rights of all individuals, regardless of age or gender, and ensuring equal opportunities for everyone.
- 4) *Equity*: Measures should be designed to eliminate disparities, stereotypes, and discrimination between genders, with a focus on supporting the most disadvantaged sex. Equity compensates for unequal opportunities and ensures fairness in programmes.
- 5) *Empowerment and agency*: Empowering individuals, including boys, girls, women, and men, is crucial to meeting their immediate needs and long-term goals. UNESCO supports processes that enhance self-

confidence, self-reliance, and self-determination for both genders.

- 6) *Participation and parity*: Achieving gender equality requires equal participation of men and women as agents of change in economic, social, and political processes.
- 7) *Partnership between women and men*: Empowering women does not mean excluding men; it involves establishing partnerships that empower both genders and provide them with equally pivotal roles in creating more equal societies.
- 8) *Social Justice*: Poverty reduction efforts alone are insufficient to address gender inequalities. Combating gender inequality is essential, along with poverty reduction, to achieve true effectiveness and social justice. All these guiding principles align with the core values and principles of social work, including promoting human rights, addressing social inequalities, and working towards inclusive and equitable societies.

C. Gender Mainstreaming in Sri Lankan Social Work

The integration of gender mainstreaming approaches, as emphasised by UN Women (2022), is of great importance. This integrated approach focuses on ensuring that gender equality is effectively addressed in all aspects of development policy and practice, including policies, programmes, activities, outcomes, and results. The primary objective is to promote gender equality and attain favourable outcomes. By aligning these approaches with the fundamental principles of social work, sustainable development can be effectively pursued.

- 1) *Approach 1- Address gender equality in all sectors and policy areas*
- 2) *Approach 2: Institutionalise attention to gender equality within organisations when using the integrated approach to gender mainstreaming*
- 3) *Approach 3: Give attention to gender equality from the initial stages, using gender analysis*
- 4) *Approach 4: Focus on gender equality results through transformative change in policies, processes, and outcomes*
- 5) *Approach 5: Broaden and strengthen women's equal participation in decision-making and enhance their leadership roles*

D. Policies Related to Gender Mainstreaming in Sri Lanka

Gender mainstreaming has been addressed in several sectoral policies in Sri Lanka. Specifically, the National Human Resources and Employment Policy and the

National Policy Framework for Social Integration have recognised the importance of gender as a cross-cutting issue. The former policy highlights the importance of gender mainstreaming in employment, with the objective of promoting women's participation in the labour market and improving job opportunities. It proposes a range of measures to address gaps in practises and attitudes, including support services for childcare and elderly care, flexible work arrangements, and training for higher-skilled positions. These policies highlight the need to incorporate gender perspectives and promote gender equality in their respective sectors. By acknowledging gender as a key factor, these policies contribute to the overall efforts of gender mainstreaming in Sri Lanka (Asian Development Bank, 2015). However, the report further points out that Development programmes in Sri Lanka often suffer from a lack of sufficient gender awareness and sensitivity in their design, implementation, and monitoring processes. This means that gender perspectives and considerations are not adequately integrated into these programmes. As a result, gender inequalities and issues may not be effectively addressed, leading to limited impact and the potential perpetuation of gender disparities. It is crucial to enhance gender awareness and sensitivity in the development sector to ensure that programmes are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the specific needs and experiences of all genders.

E. Social work as a practise profession to tackle gender-based issues in development

According to the Sustainable Development Report (2023), Sri Lanka has major challenges to remain in gender equality (SDG5) since its score is stagnating or increasing at less than 50% of the required rate. Speaking of SDG 5 indicators, the following information is reported:

- 1) *Indicator 1: Demand for family planning is satisfied by modern methods* - Challenges remain, with scores stagnating or increasing at less than 50% of the required rate.
- 2) *Indicator 2: Ratio of female-to-male mean years of education received* - SDG achieved, on track or maintaining SDG achievement
- 3) *Indicator 3: Ratio of female-to-male labour force participation rate* - major challenges remain with a decreasing score
- 4) *Indicator 4: Seats held by women in national parliament* - Major challenges remain, with scores stagnating or increasing at less than 50% of required rate. So there is a major controversy between the education level and the economic participation of males and females in the country.

Gender mainstreaming is a crucial aspect of both the SDGs and social work values. As mentioned by Jayasooria (2016), the SDGs emphasise human dignity,

inclusivity, equality, and empowerment, which align with the principles social workers adhere to in their practise. Additionally, the target groups identified in the SDG agenda, such as women, children, and youths, highlight the importance of addressing gender-related issues. By integrating a gender mainstreaming approach, social workers can effectively advocate for and empower marginalised groups, including women, to ensure their rights and needs are met in achieving the SDGs. The GAD (Gender and Development) approach, as highlighted by Jamil et al. (2020), draws on the theoretical foundations of socialist feminism. It underscores that the successful implementation of gender mainstreaming hinges upon the unrestricted expression and agency of both genders within societal spheres. Applying this to the field of social work in Sri Lanka, this necessitates active engagement from families, religious leaders, and other social actors in fostering an inclusive environment that enables individuals, regardless of gender, to freely pursue their preferences without the fear of reprisal or harassment. While state policies, economic advancements, and civil society advocacy can facilitate the process of gender mainstreaming and empower women, true progress can only be realised when the social context actively supports and facilitates such freedoms. Without a nurturing social milieu, the empowerment of women and the achievement of gender equality will remain distant aspirations.

F. Challenges Faced by Local Social Workers in Mainstreaming Gender in Sustainable Development

While Sri Lanka has made notable progress in closing gender gaps in education and health, challenges persist in achieving gender equality. Women's Human Development Index (HDI) reached 0.759 in 2019, slightly lower than men's HDI at 0.794. One significant challenge lies in women's low economic participation, with an employment rate of just 31.2% in 2019. This rate has remained nearly unchanged over the past 30 years, significantly below the employment rate for men, which stood at 71.5% in 2019. Limited participation in the labour market restricts women's empowerment and their potential contributions to economic growth and development. Scholars attribute women's persistently low labour force participation to social norms that govern their roles in family and care work, creating barriers to women's entry into the labour market. Analysing the challenge of gender inequality in labour markets within Sri Lanka's structural transformation and aggregate labour productivity growth becomes crucial in addressing these issues (UNCTAD, 2022).

Confronting these gender concerns in development, Sri Lanka grapples with the challenge of establishing Social Work as a dynamic presence across social, economic, and

political domains. Wijesekera (2020) conducted an empirical investigation using 10 faculty members and 20 students from the Sri Lanka School of Social Work. Data was collected through interviews using a semi-structured approach. The findings revealed that 72% of the field supervisors acknowledged the influence of non-indigenous social work education and the Western orientation of the curriculum on the understanding of social problems in Sri Lanka. They observed that the curriculum, instructional strategies, textbooks, lecturers, and backgrounds in higher education all show a strong influence of Western models on social work education in Sri Lanka. The field supervisors expressed a strong belief in the need for indigenization of social work education to address contemporary social issues effectively within the Sri Lankan context. Nanayakkara & Jayawardana (2018) further pointed out the challenges related to social work ethics in fieldwork practise. These challenges are also evident when it comes to comprehending gender mainstreaming in the context of Sri Lankan social work.

- 1) *Lack of recognition for the social work profession in Sri Lanka:* Despite the presence of an acknowledged social work education program, the recognition of social work as a profession is limited in Sri Lanka. In the same vein, the significance of gender mainstreaming within this profession lacks widespread acknowledgment in the country. This lack of recognition acts as an obstacle to the progression of social work ethics and the establishment of an ethical code tailored to gender equality considerations.
- 2) *Limited support from field agencies:* Social work practitioners face challenges in applying social work ethics due to the rules and regulations imposed by field agencies. This can restrict their ability to practise ethically, particularly in terms of maintaining client confidentiality.
- 3) *Challenges to self-determination of service users:* The right to self-determination, a core principle in social work, is often violated in settings such as children's homes, elder care facilities, and hospitals. Professionals tend to make decisions for clients rather than empower them to make their own choices. In Sri Lanka, gender equality and service user empowerment barriers are evident. Sources like the UN Women's report on "Gender Disparities and Labour Market Challenges" reveal how workplaces hinder women's equal job access due to various factors, including employers' biases (UN Women, 2022). Additionally, domestic violence shelters face operational challenges, potentially jeopardising survivor protection due to resource constraints

(Sunday Island, 2022). These instances illustrate barriers to gender equality and service user empowerment in the Sri Lankan context.

- 4) *Cultural and religious impacts:* Cultural and religious beliefs can pose ethical challenges for social workers. Controversial issues such as commercial sex work, abortions, reproductive rights and LGBT rights can create value dilemmas for social workers who may feel conflicted due to cultural or religious beliefs. It is important for social workers to navigate these issues ethically, respecting different beliefs while ensuring the well-being of service users and the sustainable development of the country.

Tackling these profession-related obstacles holds potential to surmount contextual socio-economic barriers from a local standpoint. In sum, these challenges underscore the requirement for increased acknowledgment and backing of the social work field in Sri Lanka, alongside addressing ethical decision-making involving cultural and religious elements.

V DISCUSSION

Social work is a profession working at three levels: micro, mezzo, and macro. Gender mainstreaming requires the inter-relationship between all these levels since it is equally important to consider individual, institutional, and policy level interventions to facilitate gender equality in all dimensions. As a country that ranks 83rd in the Sustainable Development Index 2022 with an overall score of 69.40 out of 100 (Sustainable Development Report, 2023), Sri Lanka is halfway there to achieving overall sustainability by 2030. Compared with the past two decades, which scored 63.86 in 2000, 66.46 in 2010, and 69.4 in 2022, the country had a slight increase in ranking overall but has fluctuated in the past few years (69.58 in 2019, 70.05 in 2020, 70.19 in 2021, and 69.4 in 2022) with the economic crisis. With the economic crisis in Sri Lanka at present, this has become even more challenging, leaving the achievement of the SDG at a low pace compared to other South Asian developing countries like Bhutan (72.34) and the Maldives (71.27). Therefore, the importance of social work as a practice discipline is crucial in this context, especially to incorporate its professional tools and create a gender-inclusive society to achieve sustainability by 2030. In order to achieve this, collaboration between all the other goals and SDG 5 (gender equality) is highly important, since inequalities in gender in a country significantly affect its overall development.

VI CONCLUSION

In conclusion, gender mainstreaming and social work play crucial roles in achieving sustainable development and gender equality in Sri Lanka. The integration of gender perspectives and attention to gender equality in all sectors and policy areas is essential to ensuring the effective implementation of development policies and programmes. By adhering to the guiding principles of gender mainstreaming, such as recognition, diversity, equality, empowerment, participation, and social justice, social work can contribute to creating inclusive and equitable societies.

Sri Lanka has recognised the importance of gender mainstreaming in various sectoral policies, such as employment and social integration. However, there is a need for enhanced gender awareness and sensitivity in development programmes to effectively address gender inequalities and promote equitable outcomes. Local social workers face challenges in mainstreaming gender in sustainable development, including low women's economic participation, social norms governing gender roles, and limited recognition and support for the social work profession, despite the fact that women have high literacy levels in the country.

To overcome these challenges, it is crucial to indigenize social work education, align it with the Sri Lankan context, and develop a code of ethics that upholds the principles of social work. Additionally, promoting the rights of self-determination for service users, addressing cultural and religious impacts, and fostering partnerships between different stakeholders are essential for ethical decision-making in social work practice.

By addressing these challenges and integrating gender mainstreaming approaches, Sri Lanka can make further progress in closing gender gaps and achieving sustainable development. Social workers, in collaboration with other sectors and actors, have a significant role to play in advocating for gender equality, empowering marginalised groups, and creating a society that respects and upholds the rights and needs of all genders.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND SPECIFIC SYMBOLS

GAD	Gender and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my lecturers for their constant encouragement, insightful feedback, and expertise, which have pushed me to strive for excellence. I am also indebted to my family for their unwavering love, understanding, and belief in me. Their support has been a constant source of motivation, and I am truly grateful for their presence in my academic journey.

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