



INTERNATIONAL  
CENTRE FOR  
ETHNIC STUDIES

# Tracking Social Exclusion in Sri Lanka

**Viyanga Gunasekera**  
**Ranmini Vithanagama**



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**International Centre for Ethnic Studies  
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## Tracking Social Exclusion in Sri Lanka

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## Introduction

When people can participate fully in their community and the wider society, they are better able to realize their potential and gain their rights. When they cannot do so – because they are systematically excluded from services, resources and opportunities accessible to others – the consequences are predictable: increased poverty, insecurity and conflict.

The concept of social exclusion has been predominantly used in development discourse in terms of its relationship to poverty (Jackson 2003). For example, poverty can be interpreted both as an outcome and a driver of economic and social exclusion. Similarly, social exclusion can lead to economic exclusion and vice versa.

Research suggests that it is difficult to distinguish between social exclusion and poverty because definitions of poverty tend to incorporate elements of social exclusion (Levitas 2006). While indicators of exclusion are connected to indicators of poverty, examining social exclusion offers a broader understanding of issues related to the role of institutional structures and processes in promoting or impeding rights and responsibilities (Saunders, Naidoo, and Griffiths 2008).

Social exclusion is seen as “the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from participation in the society in which they live” (Rawal 2008). It denies people a say in important decisions that affect their lives.

Disadvantage and deprivation can be based on factors such as age, ethnicity, religion, location, citizenship status, disability, gender and sexual orientation. People are excluded not only by structures and systems but also by attitudes and beliefs that are inherently discriminatory. Jackson (1999), citing Gore and Figueiredo (1997), presents social exclusion as being:

- A negative state or process that entails more engagement than resource allocation.
- About power relations, agency, culture, and social identity.
- Both a subjective and objective experience.
- A description of individual disadvantages.
- Manifested in recurrent patterns of social relationships where individuals or groups are denied access to goods, services, activities and resources which are associated with citizenship.

Examining social exclusion allows for the comprehension of a wide range of inequalities and injustices prevailing in a society. According to Levitas (2006), the key objectives of understanding exclusion would be to “facilitate participation in employment and access by all to resources, rights, goods and services; prevent risks of exclusion; help the most vulnerable; and mobilize all relevant bodies in overcoming exclusion.”

Social inclusion is at the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by member states of the United Nations in September 2015. It promises to leave no one behind, as development is recognized to be sustainable only if it is inclusive. The agenda defines social inclusion as the “process of improving the terms of participation in society for people who are disadvantaged based on age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, and economic and migration status” (UN 2016 1).

## Making Public Policy More Inclusive

The inclusion of citizens and the adoption of participatory approaches in policy-making and public programme implementation enable the incorporation of ideas and values of the general public in addition to those of politicians, experts, and bureaucrats. Such engagement can result in alternative and more effective models for policy action to address development challenges. Egonmwan (1991) argues that policies often fail or lack their intended effect because the public is not engaged in policy formation. This is particularly true when it comes to marginalized people.

This point is extended in a recent United Nations report on participatory policy-making processes, which states that such processes “can be meaningless and counterproductive if conducted in an unstructured way. Without proper organization and mechanisms to take account of feedback, they may lead to ‘stakeholder fatigue’ when participants feel that their contribution does not change anything, that their voices are not being heard, or that their opinions and contributions serve other vested purposes” (UNIDO, 2022). The report also notes that **“the participatory process should draw on a wide variety of qualitative and quantitative data, which requires substantive computational efforts for their evaluation.”**

## **The Study**

Measuring social exclusion in all its complexity is deemed a crucial but difficult task that requires an objective assessment of people's access to services, resources and social relations, as well as a review of their more subjective perceptions and experiences of being excluded.

There is considerable unease in Sri Lanka today about the consequences of deprivation and the lack of social justice. This study brings forth the voices of marginalized groups of people and makes observations on how they feel sidelined in socio-political and economic scenarios. We believe that such insights will convey a more nuanced understanding of both the material and non-material dimensions of social exclusion. This is especially relevant in the context of Sri Lanka's current socio-economic crisis and continuing ethno-religious tensions.

## **Approach and Methodology**

The study used the theoretical framework on social exclusion provided by the 1999 Millennium Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) Survey in Britain, which was adapted to suit the local context, and employed quantitative and qualitative methods. The survey used the following four indicators of social exclusion:

- Impoverishment or exclusion from resources
- Exclusion from the labour market
- Service exclusion
- Exclusion from social relations

The research followed a mixed methods approach, evaluating experiences and perceptions across several markers of social exclusion within economic, political and social spheres. While the quantitative analysis focused on the economic and social spheres, the qualitative analysis looked at all three domains.

### **The Quantitative Survey**

The quantitative survey studied the extent of social exclusion of the sample as a whole over different markers of social exclusion: (i) gender, (ii) age group, (iii) education, (iv) religion, (v) own and household income, and (vi) household socioeconomic status (SES).

The quantitative analysis was limited to descriptive statistical analysis. Economic exclusion was proxied by five constituents: (i) financial security, (ii) resources, (iii) reasonable pay, (iv) decent work, and (v) safe work. Social exclusion was proxied by three constituents: (i) services, (ii) social relations, and (iii) personal safety and security.

The quantitative component surveyed a sample of 1,000 respondents in the Colombo, Badulla, and Batticaloa districts covering the Western Province, the Uva Province and the Eastern Province respectively. The locations were selected to capture the main ethno-religious groups, as well as different service sectors and social groups.

The sample size was proportionate to the population distribution in the selected districts. The number of respondents from each religion was also based on the

district-wise religious composition. Only individuals aged over 18 years were surveyed. The sample selection within this framework was random. Accordingly, the survey was administered to respondents from 500 households in Colombo, 300 households in Batticaloa, and 200 households in Badulla.

The sample consisted of individuals aged 18-78, with men making up 57% of the sample and women 43%. A little over half the respondents were from municipal council areas, the rest from pradeshiya sabha areas. The majority were Sinhala (43%) and Buddhist (35%). Tamils (37%) and Muslims (19%) made up most of the remainder.

### *The Qualitative Survey*

Fifty-eight key informant interviews from different social groups captured the more nuanced and detailed experiences of exclusion of different groups of people. The informants were selected based on their capacity to represent the concerns of particular social groups.

The sample was selected from the three study locations and included people representing the main ethno-religious groups, persons with disabilities, and migrant workers in order to compare and contrast their experiences of exclusion. Some groups predominantly located in specific areas were selected from each district. For example, in the Batticaloa District, the study captured the voices of the fishing community, the farming community, former combatants, and people considered low-caste. In Badulla District, interviews were conducted with representatives from the farming community, plantation workers, and low-caste households. In Colombo District, key informants were selected from unskilled workers and underserved communities. Members of the LGBTQI+ community were interviewed in Batticaloa and Colombo.

## Overview of the Findings from the Quantitative Survey

### *Assessing Economic Exclusion*

#### **Financial security**

The large majority of the sample have a moderate sense of financial security (Table 1). However, a higher share of respondents feels financially insecure more frequently (37.9%) than those who feel financially secure more often (19.8%). The gender-disaggregated data shows that, although slightly more women (20.8%) than men (19.1%) tend to feel financially secure, more women (39.7%) than men (36.5%) tend to feel financially insecure more often. The share of respondents who never feel financially secure is discernibly higher for women compared to men.

*Table 1: Perceptions of financial security, overall, by gender and by age group*

	<b>Overall</b>	<b>By gender</b>		<b>By age group</b>				
		<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>18-29</b>	<b>30-39</b>	<b>40-49</b>	<b>50-59</b>	<b>60 or more</b>
Always	2.6	2.5	2.8	1.7	1.9	3.4	1.1	6.4
Often	17.2	16.6	18.0	15.7	19.9	14.8	18.5	16.5
Sometimes	42.3	44.4	39.5	47.2	45.8	39.0	42.7	33.0
Hardly	24.6	24.7	24.5	19.1	20.7	29.6	27.0	27.5
Never	13.3	11.8	15.2	16.3	11.8	13.3	10.7	16.5

Irrespective of the age category, most respondents feel moderately financially secure. In the oldest cohort, a little over 6% tend to always feel financially secure (Table 2). There is also a sizeable share of older respondents who never feel financially secure. By and large, in all age groups, more respondents tend to feel insecure more frequently than those who feel secure often.

Table 2: Perceptions of financial security, by level of education

	Education level				Religion				
	None or primary	Up to O/L	Up to A/L	> A/L	Buddhist	Hindu	Non-RC Christian	RC	Muslim
Always	0.6	2.7	0.7	12.0	2.0	3.7	4.3	0.0	2.1
Often	11.5	14.9	27.7	36.0	20.2	16.7	10.0	24.6	12.8
Sometimes	32.5	44.1	48.2	34.0	56.9	34.3	50.0	33.9	29.7
Hardly	34.4	26.2	11.7	8.0	16.8	25.0	21.4	26.2	38.5
Never	21.0	12.0	11.7	10.0	4.1	20.4	14.3	15.4	16.9

As perceptions of financial insecurity are emblematic of underlying issues of social exclusion, it is important to look at the gendered, age-wise patterns among respondents who believe they hardly or never feel financially secure (Figure 1). That more men than women feel financially insecure is somewhat counterintuitive. However, such perceptions perhaps underscore the disproportionately large burden placed on men for providing for households in their traditional gender roles as primary breadwinners of the family (Figure 1: Panel A).

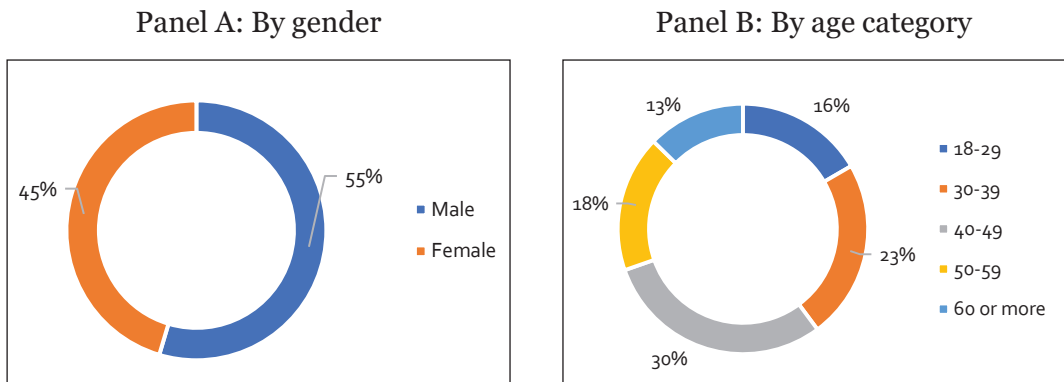


Figure 1: Gendered and age category-wise composition of respondents who hardly or never feel financially secure

The composition of respondents who feel financially insecure in terms of educational attainments is symptomatic of structural issues in the labour market (Figure 2: Panel A). It is concerning, but perhaps not surprising, that respondents with education only up to GCE Ordinary Level (O/L) examination make up most of those who feel financially insecure. Although respondents with education up to GCE O/L earn more income than those with no or only primary education, it

is possible that their better educational attainments may make them have higher aspirations, which may not be commensurate with their income level.

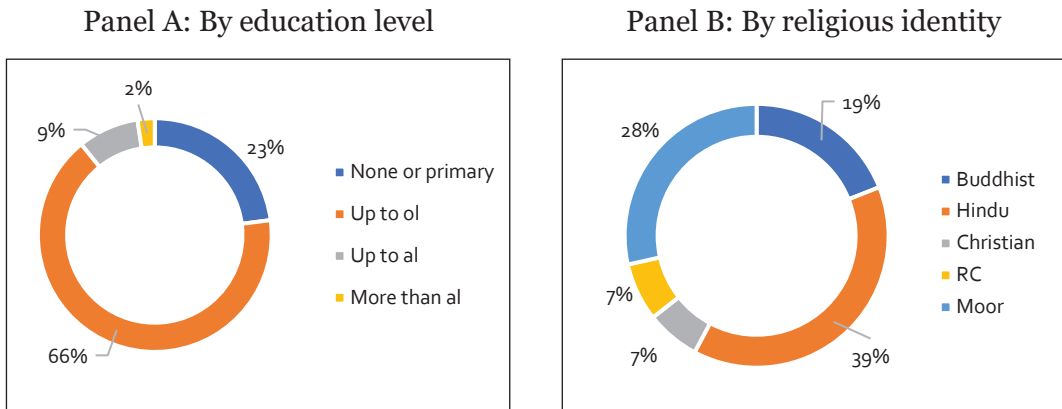


Figure 2: Education and religious identity-wise composition of respondents who hardly or never feel financially secure

### Availability of resources

Respondents appear to always or often have the resources they need for their income-generating activities (Table 4). However, a little over a tenth of the respondents rarely or never have such access to resources. The share of women is higher at both extremes compared to men, i.e., while 28% of women compared to 25.8% of men agree that they have resources readily available for them, 4.8% of women compared to 2.6% of men feel that they rarely have the resources required for their livelihood activities. The difficulty in accessing resources increases as age advances. For example, compared to only 5.3% in the 18-29 age group, 10.3% aged 60 or more feel that they rarely have the resources needed for their economic activities.

*Table 4: Perceptions of access to resources, overall, by gender and age category*

	<b>Overall</b>	<b>By gender</b>		<b>By age category</b>				
	<b>Overall</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>18-29</b>	<b>30-39</b>	<b>40-49</b>	<b>50-59</b>	<b>60 or more</b>
Always	26.7	25.8	28.0	35.3	29.1	25.2	18.6	24.4
Mostly	39.5	38.6	41.0	43.3	37.8	41.6	38.3	33.3
Sometimes	22.9	25.7	18.4	15.3	24.5	21.9	27.5	25.6
Rarely	7.6	7.4	7.8	5.3	6.2	7.1	10.8	10.3
Never	3.4	2.6	4.8	0.7	2.5	4.2	4.8	6.4

Irrespective of the level of educational attainment, most of the respondents tend to have access to the resources required for their livelihoods always or most of the time. Among the respondents with the highest educational qualifications, only about 2% have difficulties securing the resources required for their livelihoods. However, this share is as high as 16.1% for respondents with no education or only primary education, and 12.4% among those with education only up to GCE O/L. On the other hand, the share of respondents who always have the resources required for their income-generating work increases steadily as the level of education advances. Together, these patterns underscore the importance of education in how readily and easily available the required resources for a person to earn an income are .

The patterns of access to resources by one's religion also bring to light some telling insights. Again, as with education, the majority of respondents tend to have access to the resources they need for their jobs. It is concerning, however, that 17.3% of Hindu respondents rarely or never have access to the resources required to make a living. This share is substantially lower among Muslims (4.9%), non-RC Christians (8%), and Buddhists (10.6%). Moreover, the share of respondents who always have access to resources is also lower among Hindus, compared to respondents from other religious backgrounds.

### **Reasonable pay**

Overall, only a little over a tenth of the respondents consider the income they earn for their work to be reasonable. A little over a third consider it to be fair, while a little below a fifth are neutral about their pay. Importantly, however, about 35% consider their pay to be unreasonable or very unreasonable. The gendered breakdown shows that more women than men consider their pay to be very unfair.

There are also relatively fewer women (40.5%) than men (48.1%) who consider their pay to be reasonable. These findings corroborate the evidence on the gender pay gap in Sri Lanka's labour market that several other empirical studies have observed (Solotaroff et al. 2020; Gunewardena 2004).

### **Decent work<sup>1</sup>**

Close to half of the overall sample perceives their employment to always consist of decent work and a little less than a third perceive their work to be decent most of the time. More women than men consider their employment to always consist of decent work. However, the share of women is also higher among respondents who believe that their work is hardly or never decent. By age group, similar patterns are observed among the oldest respondents. While 60% of the respondents consider their employment to be decent work always, 11.6% think their work is hardly or never decent. Those who consider their work to be hardly or never decent are lowest in the youngest cohort, and this share gradually increases as the age group advances. These trends allude to the idea that, as age advances and possibly related health issues increase, it is likely to be progressively difficult for people to secure what they consider to be decent work.

### **Safe work**

A gender-wise breakdown shows that men are more likely to perceive their work to be unsafe than women. However, significantly more women (34%) than men (26%) consider their work to be very safe. The gender ideologies that assign the breadwinner role to men might partly explain why more men than women would take up work that they consider to be unsafe. On the other hand, the same ideologies suggest that women might be discouraged from taking up work that is considered unsafe, as they are not expected to bring home an income.

The patterns of perceptions of work safety across different age groups broadly follow those observed in relation to perceptions of decent work.

Perceptions of safety in relation to the own income quantile are rather intriguing. Relatively fewer respondents from the second and third quantiles think of their

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<sup>1</sup> The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines decent work as “productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity.”

work as being very safe compared to the lowest and highest quantiles. Although there is a decline in the share of respondents who feel that their work is unsafe or very unsafe as the own income quantile increases, this share is still rather sizeable across all own income quantiles. This begs the question of whether there is an income-safety trade-off that respondents have to grapple with, i.e., higher-risk work pushes them into higher income quantiles. This trend holds true even at the household level. However, when the household SES improves, there are fewer respondents who have taken up work that they believe is unsafe.

## ***Assessment of Social Exclusion***

### **Access to services**

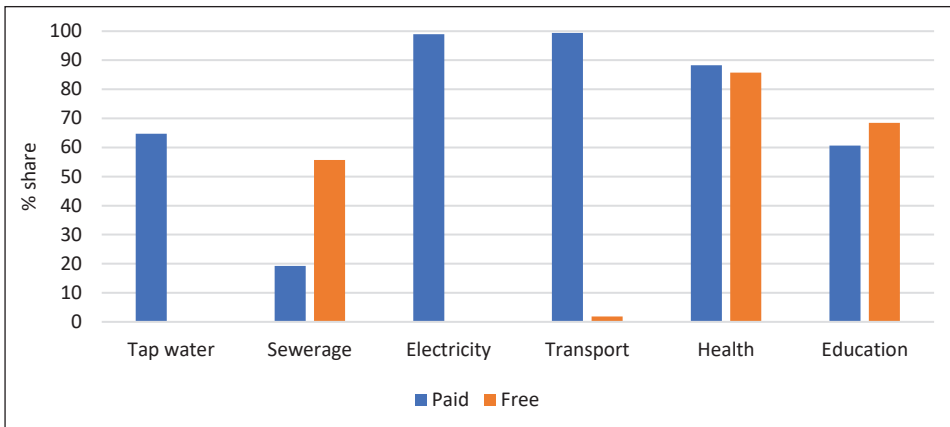
The survey gathered information about access to six types of services that underpin the achievement of at least 11 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These include access to clean tap water, sanitation, electricity, transportation, health and education. It is encouraging to observe that health and transportation facilities are available to all respondents. Only a very negligible 0.4% do not have access to education. A further 0.6% do not have access to electricity, and about 34% of the respondents do not have access to clean tap water. However, this is not surprising, given that the National Water Supply and Drainage Board covers only about 30% of Sri Lanka's geography.<sup>2</sup> A more pertinent question is whether households have access to safe drinking water. According to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (2019), conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics (2022), 88.5% of households have access to safe drinking water. A little over a quarter of the respondents do not have sanitation facilities. These statistics mimic the national trends, where 90.2% of households do not have access to gully bowser facilities.

Next, we looked at whether respondents pay for these services or access them free of charge (Figure 3). Tap water and electricity are almost entirely paid for. So is transportation. Over 50% of the respondents obtain sewerage facilities free of charge. A little less than 20% pay for such facilities. While more respondents have access to free education (68%), a little over 60% also pay for education. While respondents have access to both paid and free healthcare services, slightly more

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<sup>2</sup> See details at [http://www.waterboard.lk/web/images/contents/publications/corp\\_plans/corporate\\_plan\\_2007\\_2011.pdf](http://www.waterboard.lk/web/images/contents/publications/corp_plans/corporate_plan_2007_2011.pdf)

pay for such services. However, information about the quality and accessibility of education and health indicates that, irrespective of whether these services are paid for or not, the large majority of the respondents (close to 98% for education and a little over 80% for health) are satisfied with such services.



*Figure 3: Percentage share of respondents who pay for services and access them free of charge*

## Social relations

This dimension explored the strength of the respondents' association with their friends, social network and the community at large. The majority of respondents agree that they have strong social capital. For example, 54% of them agree or strongly agree that they have a large and active social network. About 79% often meet with friends, colleagues and relatives. A similar share of respondents feels connected to their community. However, there is a sizeable share of respondents who believes they do not have an active social network. In contrast, the share of those who feel they are not connected to the community or do not socialize with friends, relatives, or colleagues is much less. The gendered patterns in perceptions of the strength of social networks are rather conspicuous. Much fewer women (46%) than men (61%) agree or strongly agree that they have a large and active social network.

The patterns observed in relation to education suggest that higher educational attainments seem to support creating large and active social networks. Compared to only 41% of the respondents from the lowest educational attainment, about 84% from the highest educational level agree or strongly agree that they have a large

and active social network. Irrespective of the level of educational attainment, over 80% of the respondents from all educational backgrounds agree that they have a sense of belonging to their community.

### **Personal safety and security**

More women (27%) than men (22%) feel unsafe or very unsafe in their area of residence. Close to a fourth of the respondents from all groups, except the 50-59 age group, tends to feel unsafe in their area of residence. Education-wise, there is clearly a much higher share of respondents with up to GCE A/L education or more who feel very safe or safe in their neighbourhood. However, this share is relatively less (around 66%) for respondents with lower educational attainments. By religion, Muslims and Hindu respondents appear to feel the safest in the areas they live in. They also feel strongly connected to the community, which may underpin their feelings of safety.

## Overview of the Findings

from the Qualitative Survey

### *Exclusion from Access to Resources*

The plantation community has legal constraints in acquiring and accessing land, and therefore their exclusion needs special attention. Persons with disabilities and the LGBTQI+<sup>3</sup> community are often excluded from acquiring land due to misconceptions and discriminatory attitudes that prevail in society. The disability community is also excluded because of the dearth of infrastructure for them to access these resources safely. For underserved communities, it is somewhat different, as exclusion is mainly due to the lack of income or financial resources to acquire land.

Findings also show a trend of ethno-religious social groups excluding the “other” from acquiring land that they perceive to belong to their own ethnicity and religion. This form of exclusion is regarded as racism and discrimination on the one hand and as an age-old tradition on the other.

*We live in the Uva Province. I belong to the community of Indian origin. So, we have no land in Sri Lanka. Still, we are struggling for land rights and land ownership. People are living in the plantations as plantation workers. So, as a community, we are struggling for land and houses.*

Male, Plantation Community, Badulla

*To get a tap line water connection to my house, I have to ask permission from the estate management. Without their permission, we can't do anything.*

Female, Plantation Community, Badulla

*We are not denied entrance to public places. But, essentially, a wheelchair person like me cannot access public places because we don't have the support and facilities to do so.*

Female, Disability Community, Colombo

<sup>3</sup> Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons.

*Yes, we have sufficient access [to digital resources], but we do not have the freedom to use them. We are traced and watched. Our every movement is noticed. Our social media usage is also monitored by someone or other.*

Female, Ex-combatant, Batticaloa

*The majority of our community have lost their houses. When parents and family get to know about our gender identity, they always chase us away from home. They do not think about their own children, they only think about the community.*

Transgender, LGBTQI+ Community, Batticaloa

### ***Exclusion from the Labour Market***

#### **Exclusion from engagement in the employment of choice**

A lack of education is a main factor in the exclusion of many from the labour market from engaging in employment of their choice. This is mainly the case for low-income groups, such as the underserved and plantation communities. In contrast, the LGBTQI+ community and the ethno-religious “other” are excluded from the labour market due to discriminatory attitudes of employers and institutions. The disability community lacks sufficient access to the labour market due to the paucity of infrastructure in workplaces to accommodate their specific needs. In contrast, the fishing and farming communities articulate a degree of independence and flexibility in their employment.

*I don't go to work. I am staying at home. My husband goes to work for a daily wage. Both of us are not educated. I have three children. The eldest son is in jail for drug use. One of the other sons is loitering around town with friends. My daughter is studying in Grade 8.*

Female, Underserved Community, Colombo

*Getting the desired job is the most difficult thing for many in my community. Society treats us all like people from another planet. Many do not understand that we are ordinary human beings. No one comes forward to offer us jobs. Society thinks that we should only do things like hairdressing, working in a hotel or sex work.*

Lesbian, LGBTQI+ Community, Colombo

*I think there is less opportunity for our people because those who work in the government, the highest officials, belong to a different ethnicity. They do not consider our people's aspirations. That's why we are denied getting our preferred jobs.*

Male, Tamil Christian, Batticaloa

### **Exclusion in the workplace by peers and superiors**

Unskilled workers face exclusion in their workplaces, where they are informally excluded from office functions, promotions and common courtesies extended to higher-level employees. Low-caste people, ethno-religious minorities and the LGBTQI+ community share experiences of exclusion due to their avowed and ascribed identities. The disability community's exclusion is mainly due to the unavailability of a disability-friendly office environment and a lack of confidence in their abilities. The farming and fishing communities feel less excluded at work as they are employed in their own territories and communities.

*Plantation people can't sit or speak in front of their superiors. If they want to say something, first they have to ask permission from them. A "kangani" plays a main role in the estate. If you have a good relationship with him, he treats you well. If not, you have to face many problems. Sometimes you may even lose your job.*

Female, Plantation Community, Badulla

*At work, some superiors treat you like servants working in their homes. I was asked to do many jobs that are not in my job profile. We are always like the backbone when important events or meetings take place in the office. But they do not invite us to special occasions, festivals or celebrations held in the office. We are also not given anything like a bonus allowance.*

Male, Unskilled Worker, Colombo

### **Exclusion from equal wage opportunities**

Social groups like unskilled workers and other underserved communities are excluded from equal wage opportunities because their type of employment is not perceived to be worthy of merit by employers, and also because promotions and increments are given based on paper qualifications and not on work experience

and skills gained through years of work. Equal wages are denied to the LGBTQI+ community, persons with disabilities, and migrant workers, exploiting their vulnerability. The exclusion of plantation workers from equal wages is an age-old practice that they continue to challenge to date.

### **Exclusion from safe working conditions**

Different social groups experience different forms of exclusion from safe working conditions. Most working situations do not have a proper set of safety protocols in place.

While the farming and plantation communities face risks of wild animal attacks, the fishing community faces risks related to climate change. Underserved communities are prone to roadside accidents and health risks, with no compensation for their losses. Furthermore, LGBTQI+ persons and some migrant workers face sexual/physical abuse and harassment at the hands of peers and superiors because they lack social protection and their rights are not acknowledged or respected. For the disability community, the exclusion takes the form of not being able to work in conducive environments with proper infrastructure that meets their specific needs.

*In my previous workplace, I faced a lot of physical harassment by men. Since ladies don't allow me to use their toilets, sometimes I use the men's toilet in an emergency. Inside these toilets, many men have physically abused me.*

Transgender, LGBTQI+ Community, Colombo

### **Exclusion from Services**

#### **Exclusion from reasonable access to healthcare**

Many respondents perceive Sri Lanka's healthcare system to be reasonably accessible and adequate. Some structural issues that exclude certain social groups are: high costs in private health facilities, ill-treatment by the service staff in the hospitals, delays in getting treatment, lack of resources in government facilities, and inadequate health services in rural villages. The disability and LGBTQI+ communities feel they are excluded from specific healthcare needs. In contrast to such structural barriers, the Muslim respondents indicate blatant exclusion from

health services due to recent ethno-religious tensions and Islamophobic sentiments towards their social group.

*There are government hospitals in town. But not all estates are near the town. So there should be health services managed by estate management. There are also no emergency medical assistance or ambulance facilities for the plantation community.*

Male, Plantations Community, Badulla

*After the Easter attack,<sup>4</sup> I went to the hospital for my monthly check-up with my daughter. I wear a scarf (it covers my hair), but at the gate, the watchman didn't allow me to enter the hospital because of it. He said, "If you want to enter you must remove your scarf." I said no and I argued with him. But he didn't allow me. I returned home without seeing a doctor.*

Female, Muslim, Badulla

### **Exclusion from reasonable access to education**

The majority of respondents have shared concerns about exclusion from what they perceive as reasonable access to education. For the plantation community, the inadequacy of facilities and ambiguous citizenship and legal rights continue to pose problems. For the underserved community, financial difficulty is what has impeded generations from education, leading young people to drug abuse and early marriages. While the LGBTQI+ community faces exclusion due to their individual identities, the ethnoreligious minorities in the study districts face exclusion from education due to their collective identities. Children of low-caste and unskilled workers tend to be excluded from education due to their caste identity and the socioeconomic status of their parents. While the disability community faces practical problems in accessing education, certain other groups believe that the government is providing an equal and fair education.

<sup>4</sup> The suicide bombings on Easter Sunday 2019 which killed nearly 270 people.

*A Tamil boy studied in the Sinhala medium in the village school. He got the best results at the GCE O/L. His parents decided to admit him to the town's best school. He passed the interview well, but the school management said that they don't admit plantations people to the school.*

Female, Plantation Community, Badulla

*We don't have land or house rights, so we don't have proper addresses for our homes. This means we can't get letters on time. For instance, I know 18 students who were selected for university admission, but they didn't get the UGC letter on time. So they couldn't go to university.*

Male, Plantation Community, Badulla

*My daughter is in a government school. But she is not going for tuition classes because we don't have the money. I want so much to educate her. Both of my sons didn't study. They dropped out of school and became addicted to drugs. Many children in my area don't go to school. The reason for this is the lack of money.*

Female, Underserved Community, Colombo

## **Exclusion from reasonable access to public transportation and sanitation**

Most social groups do not feel excluded from reasonable access to public transportation and sanitation. Where they are excluded, it is mostly due to the lack of infrastructure and facilities, as well as due to discriminatory attitudes in society. Public transportation is especially problematic for persons with disabilities, as their specific needs are barely accommodated. Some respondents have stated that bus drivers and conductors are reluctant to let them get on the buses and are unwilling to support or provide special attention to them. Indeed, accessibility for wheelchair passengers in both busses and trains in Sri Lanka is non-existent. Rural respondents experience transportation problems due to inadequate bus and train services.

In terms of exclusion from sanitation facilities, some respondents from the plantation, disability, LGBTQI+ and underserved social groups highlight the lack of proper toilets for their communities.

## **Exclusion from reasonable access to financial services**

The study queried access to or exclusion from savings and credit societies, banks and insurance services. Where exclusion takes place, it is mainly due to structural inequalities, and perceptions and practices that amplify such inequalities. While a majority of respondents have said they are not excluded from these services, disability and ex-combatant groups tend to be excluded from insurance services due to the perception that they would be unable to repay the loans.

*“Once, a loan officer came to our village to give group loans. I went there to ask about the loan and he immediately replied that they do not provide loans to persons with disabilities. This is how we are excluded on the financial side.”*

Male, Disability Community, Batticaloa

## ***Exclusion from Social Relations***

### **Isolation and non-participation in common social activities**

The findings indicate non-participation in community and religious activities due to perceived discrimination as well as due to other personal reasons. Some respondents indicate personal reasons such as feelings of embarrassment (related to disability, for example), working hours impeding time spent on social activities (plantation workers and the fishing community), being employed away from one’s community (migrant workers), the fear of associating with large numbers of people (ex-combatants), and the unaffordability of certain social activities like weddings (the underserved community). All these instances also lead to isolation from the community. Apart from such subjective reasons, about half of the respondents interviewed speak of exclusion from common social and religious activities due to discriminatory practices or attitudes. Findings point to the exclusion of low-caste communities from common social activities. Respondents from these communities from both Badulla and Batticaloa state that they face exclusion at wedding functions, birthday parties, and when visiting higher-caste houses.

Caste-based discrimination and exclusion in social and religious activities are still in place, sometimes quite prominently, even though, according to the literature, it is supposed to be declining. The exclusion is done at both the individual level by upper-caste households and at the institutional level by religious temples.

Similar to the lower-caste members, the ex-combatants too face exclusion due to their communal identity, and this too is at the individual level (by community members) and institutional level (by the police and armed forces). For both social groups, while this identity of either “caste” or “combatant” is more a reference to the past than the present, their exclusion is persistent. Both social groups feel that discrimination is less now compared to earlier, but their experiences indicate significant instances of exclusion.

The disability and LGBTQI+ communities are excluded due to their physical and avowed identities, and their experiences of discrimination are similar to what was discussed in other indicators of exclusion. However, one LGBTQI+ respondent highlights perceptions of religious dynamics by indicating that the Hindu religion is more tolerant towards them than any other religion in Sri Lanka.

*If they [higher castes] invite us, we'll go. Otherwise not. But I have to mention that marriages between higher-caste and lower-caste are still discouraged. For instance, matrimonial advertisements specify the caste.*

Female, Low-caste, Badulla

*In wedding functions, we have a separate time to participate and have a meal. They do not like it when they see us when they step out to go to work or on a special occasion. They also do not like to use the things that are used by us.*

Female, Low-caste, Batticaloa

*On the religious side, the caste is strictly maintained by Hindus. If a temple is opened for its rituals and celebrations, they do not allow us inside the temple where the God's image is kept; we have limited access from the entrance. In some temples, they have allocated a particular day for us to do the rituals; not only for us but also for all the castes separately.*

Female, Low-caste, Batticaloa

## **Lack of support**

Many social groups and their members believe they are not excluded from receiving support from various institutions such as civil societies, religious institutions, the police, the judiciary, independent commissions, government institutions (such as local government officials, provincial councils, local MPs, DS offices, etc.), and

private sector institutions (such as shopping malls and restaurants). However, there are nuanced ways in which certain groups lack access to adequate support from these institutions. For example, migrant workers and underserved communities are excluded from the support of civil society organizations, as there seems to be insufficient civil society interaction with and interventions for these communities.

Despite a language policy recognizing both Sinhala and Tamil as national and official languages, many police stations and government offices seem to function only in the language of the majority ethnic group in the area. This excludes the minority communities, and leaves them unable to access the support they need.

The judiciary and independent commissions are two institutions where most people are perceived to be treated equally and fairly, despite certain limitations. One major issue with the independent commissions, set up under the Constitutional Council primarily aimed at depoliticizing the state and public service, is that many are not aware of its mandate, functions and activities.<sup>5</sup>

*I am excluded because of my ethnicity. I can speak and read Sinhala but I can't write well. One day, I went to the DS office and the lady there gave me a form to fill. It was only in Sinhala. I can understand what they ask. But I can't write. So I asked the lady, "Shall I fill this form in English?" She asked why, and I said I can't write in Sinhala.*

Female, Tamil Christian, Badulla

*Most of our people don't know about the independent commissions. They have no idea what they are because there hasn't been any effective awareness programmes in our area. Yes, we have been seeking help from various commissions regarding justice for forcibly disappeared people. It is an unresolved problem in the Tamil community.*

Female, Tamil Hindu, Batticaloa

<sup>5</sup> <http://constitutionalreforms.org/2016/05/10/chapter-7-the-constitutional-council-and-the-independent-commissions-the-new-framework-for-depoliticising-governance/>

## Disengagement

A majority of respondents have said that their communities take part in regular voting, political campaigns and trade unions, and engage in peaceful protests. Despite the scenarios of notable exclusion we saw in the other indicators of the study, it is inspiring to note that the instances of people being excluded or disengaged from political activity is not as significant. However, some groups, such as persons with disabilities and migrant workers, tend to be excluded from voting because there are no effective mechanisms in place to ensure voting opportunities that meet their special needs and circumstances.

*Yes, we vote in elections. But there is a problem for the visually impaired. We can't see or mark the ballot paper. We need help from someone. Therefore, an officer helps us. The problem is I don't know whether he or she does it correctly.*

Female, Disability Community, Badulla

*No, we do not belong to any trade unions and there is no committee to solve our salary issues or personal issues*

Female, Migrant Worker, Batticaloa

## Confinement

It is concerning to note that close to half of the respondents have indicated that they are confined due to perceived intimidation and harassment from various parties. The LGBTQI+ community is rejected and intimidated by society through its objection to a vital aspect of this group's identity. They experience the most grievances as they are socially outcast due to the non-acceptance of their identities and preferences. Both legally and socially, the gender spectrum and sexual orientations are not acknowledged and the community is excluded from social relations. Many LGBTQI+ persons generally confine themselves to their homes due to fear of being harassed.

Ex-combatants are also confined, but in their case it is due to fear of the military and its attached forces, as their once-held identity as LTTE combatants still dictates how they are perceived by the State. While intimidation and harassment of these groups are consistent, the intimidation of the Muslims and their resultant confinement is

somewhat different and sporadic, as these incidents more commonly take place when there are ethno-religious tensions in the country.

Other respondents have pointed to experiences of confinement due to fear of wild animals, natural disasters and a lack of facilities. These references point to some of the crucial problems that specific social groups silently face in their day-to-day lives that are largely ignored by others. For example, the wild elephant attacks on farmers, the recurrent flooding in slums, and accessibility issues for the disability groups are life-and-death problems for those particular communities, even though they are not adequately reflected in state policy.

## **Conclusions**

Some significant patterns related to social exclusion in Sri Lanka were brought to light in the study through quantitative and qualitative analyses. Consistent and comprehensive surveying makes it possible for changes relating to specific groups and situations to be monitored and tracked over time. Indeed, social exclusion is a situation and process that is multi-dimensional, context-specific and, to varying degrees, shifting.

## **Work**

Social exclusion encompasses both material deprivation and the absence of the ability to make decisions. It is a leading cause of insecurity. The large majority of the study sample have a moderate sense of financial security. However, a higher share of respondents tend to feel financially insecure, as opposed to financially secure, more often. Although men tend to feel economic exclusion more intensely than women do, more women than men feel financially insecure more often. The share of respondents who never feel financially secure is discernibly higher for women than men.

Exclusion from the labour market takes different forms for different social groups. While the low-income groups are excluded because of their lack of educational qualifications and non-acknowledgement by the State and employers of their services, LGBTQI+, low-caste and ethno-religious minority communities tend to be excluded because of their identity. Furthermore, the vulnerability of social groups like LGBTQI+, persons with disabilities, plantation workers and migrant workers is abused to deny them equal wages.

## **Land**

Exclusion from acquiring land is an issue for many social groups. The reasons for this vary, as some cannot acquire land due to legal constraints. For example, although Sri Lankan law has a provision that grants legal ownership and a deed to anyone who continuously occupies a piece of land for a minimum of 10 years, such benefits are not granted to the plantation community as they come under separate and discriminatory legal frameworks. Exclusion from other resources, such as water bodies and vegetation, seems to be largely due to existing power relations.

## **Services and support**

While health services are limited for the LGBTQI+ and disability communities in terms of the provision of specialized care, education services seem limited for many groups, largely because of high costs as well as exclusion based on individual and collective identity. Despite the free education system in Sri Lanka, most of the respondents, including those who said they were not excluded from education services, commonly stated that the cost of education was a serious issue. Exclusion from public transportation, sanitation and financial services, when it occurs, is largely due to the lack of infrastructure as well as structural inequalities. Public transportation is especially problematic for persons with disabilities, as their specific needs are barely accommodated. Additionally, the 'language barrier' precludes Tamil-speaking ethnic minority groups from accessing adequate services from state institutions, including the police.

## **Social relations and people's rights**

Exclusion from social relations due to confinement takes many forms and it is concerning that about half of the respondents in the study have indicated confinement due to some form of perceived fear or discrimination. The LGBTQI+ and ex-combatant communities tend to be confined for fear of intimidation and reprimand. Anti-Muslim hate and violence are incited at the slightest provocation, confining Muslims to their homes and communal neighbourhoods. Experiences of confinement due to fear of wild animals, natural disasters and a lack of facilities have also been indicated.

## **Recourse**

The judiciary and independent commissions, set up to promote the independence and effectiveness of the country's democratic institutions, are generally perceived to act equally and fairly, despite certain limitations. However, most people are not aware of the mandate, functions and activities of the commissions.

## **Civic and political participation**

It is noteworthy that all social groups, except for certain individual circumstances, do not feel excluded from political or civic activities such as regular voting, and taking part in political campaigns, trade unions and peaceful protests. Furthermore, peaceful protests are an activity where people from all walks of life get together, with no one excluded on the basis of identity. The recent public protests in Sri Lanka show the capacity of people to come together in a time of grave crisis, rejecting practices of exclusion and discrimination that otherwise inform their perceptions and behaviour towards the "other".

\* \* \*

Overall, the findings suggest that certain social groups tend to be excluded from almost all indicators that were studied and that the State has failed to provide the mechanisms needed to enhance social inclusion for vulnerable people in Sri Lanka. For example, the LGBTQI+ community is excluded from having full citizenship rights, basic services and fundamental social relations. The plantation community comes close, but their civic participation is higher and confinement is lower when compared to the LGBTQI+ community. The experiences of ex-combatants are also unique, as their exclusion is mainly a result of fear of persecution by communities as well as the State. The disability community too faces many forms of exclusion, mostly as a result of a lack of infrastructure and services to meet their special needs. These exclusions need further exploration.

## **Looking Forward**

Sri Lanka needs to prioritize the drafting of a policy to address social exclusion, taking into account the complex and nuanced nature of its prevalence and its potential to polarize people and trigger violence. Such an initiative would explicitly acknowledge, with examples, the link between social exclusion and poverty, and the connection between social and economic insecurity and violence.

The policy should encapsulate the social, cultural, economic and political dimensions of exclusion and adopt a dynamic format to reflect the country's changing context and direction, using regularly-updated, disaggregated data. It should acknowledge and tackle the insidious roots of social exclusion which are based on prejudice and discrimination. The state should broaden and deepen its engagement with civil society to address this challenge.

Legal and regulatory mechanisms that promote social inclusion would be essential to substantially and effectively reduce the many aspects of inequality and vulnerability that bear upon the well-being of people. Moreover, it is vital to develop institutional capacity to ensure policy implementation and put in place accountability measures. Equally critical to achieving the consequential objectives is a mechanism to ensure policy continuity across regime change.

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# Tracking Social Exclusion in Sri Lanka

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This report delves into the dynamics of social exclusion in Sri Lanka, where systemic barriers rooted in ethnicity, gender, economic status, and other variables prevent vulnerable communities from fully participating in society. Drawing on the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals, plantation workers, ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities, it examines the multifaceted processes of exclusion ranging from limited access to education and public services to disparities in employment and land ownership. Highlighting the persistence of these issues despite national commitments to free education and efforts toward fairness in legal processes, the report underscores the enduring challenge of dismantling structural barriers and prejudices.

Going beyond statistics, the report explores exclusion as both a state and a process, emphasizing the subjective and objective dimensions of marginalized experiences. Based on the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it identifies actionable strategies for fostering inclusion and belonging. It calls for public policies that are co-created with marginalized groups, recognizing that meaningful inclusion not only alleviates inequality but also strengthens the fabric of democracy and society. In a time of global and local calls for justice and equity, this report serves as a critical resource for policymakers, activists, and citizens committed to leaving no one behind.



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