

WOMEN’S ROLE IN SRI LANKAN AGRICULTURE: A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY ON SOCIOECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR GENDER-INCLUSIVE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

O. T. D. Silva¹, Y. D. Jayatilleke² and R. K. Withanachchi³

^{1,2&3}Department of Anthropology, University of Sri Jayewardenepura

tharangadsilva6@gmail.com

Abstract

This comprehensive study focuses on the multifaceted roles of women in Sri Lankan agriculture, investigating their socio-economic contributions, challenges, and opportunities for gender-inclusive development. Despite comprising 51% of the population, women’s crucial contributions to the agricultural sector remain underappreciated. The study aims to bridge this knowledge gap by addressing key questions, including the specific socio-economic contributions of women in various stages of agricultural production, the challenges they face, existing opportunities for gender-inclusive development, and how understanding women’s roles can inform policies for sustainable agricultural advancement. In the Kalawana Divisional Secretariat, Ratnapura District, Sabaragamuwa Province, 120 women farmers were randomly selected by representing 10 GN Divisions for the study. The findings reveal significant contributions of women in various agricultural activities, from paddy cultivation to managing Chena lands and other cultivations influencing both income generation and household well-being. Challenges faced by women in different age groups include adapting to technology, financial constraints, and gender-specific barriers. Notably, younger women farmers express a preference for non-agricultural occupations, influenced by societal perceptions. Opportunities for gender-inclusive agricultural development include existing village-level programs and women’s organizations. However, the study highlights perceived inadequacies in government support and the need for equal access to resources, technology adoption, and training programs. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of challenging traditional gender roles, implementing policies promoting inclusivity, and enhancing education and training opportunities for women in agriculture. Finally, changing the perception of the younger generation regarding agriculture’s significance is crucial for the sector’s sustainability and the well-being of society.

Keywords: agriculture gender-inclusivity, women farmers, women labor, women role

Introduction

Agriculture is a crucial sector of the Sri Lankan economy, playing a significant role in contributing to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and in the second quarter of the year 2023, the agriculture sector accounted for 10.4 percent of the GDP at current prices. In the second

quarter of year 2023, the agriculture activities have recorded an expansion of 3.6 percent compared to the same quarter of 2022 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2023). Nevertheless, the role of women in agriculture is a multifaceted and vital aspect of Sri Lanka’s agrarian landscape. Over the years, women in the

country have played a pivotal role in various stages of agricultural production, from tilling the soil to managing household gardens and participating in agribusiness and other agricultural activities. Women comprise a large share of the agricultural labor force in developing countries – e.g., 49% in Africa, 37% in South Asia and 21% in Latin America (FAO, 2011). Women constitute 50.7% of the population and are considered to be a valuable resource potential needed to be in the rural agricultural sector of Sri Lanka (Sireeranhan, 2013). But the agricultural sector in many developing countries is underperforming, in part because women, who represent a crucial resource in agriculture and the rural economy through their roles as farmers, laborers and entrepreneurs, almost everywhere face more severe constraints than men in access to productive resources (SOFA and Doss, 2011).

This research seeks to address this gap by examining the socio-economic contributions of women in Sri Lankan agriculture. It poses questions about the challenges they face and the opportunities that can be harnessed for achieving gender-inclusive agricultural development. The primary purpose of this study is to shed light on the unique and often underappreciated contributions of women in Sri Lankan agriculture. By doing so, the researchers aim to contribute valuable insights that can inform policies, practices, and interventions aimed at fostering gender-inclusive agricultural development in the country. While some studies touch upon the role of women in agriculture, there is a need for a more comprehensive examination that considers the socio-economic dimensions, challenges, and opportunities they encounter within the specific context of Sri Lanka. This study emphasize that understanding and acknowledging the diverse roles of women in Sri Lankan agriculture is not only essential for achieving gender equality but is also crucial for the overall advancement of the agricultural sector

in the country. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses to comprehensively explore the socio-economic contributions, challenges, and opportunities faced by women in Sri Lankan agriculture. The paper is organized into sections that sequentially delve into the background, methodology, research findings, and conclusion, offering a holistic view of women’s roles in Sri Lankan agriculture.

Research Problem

The majority of the population relies on agriculture, with over 82% of people living in rural areas depending directly or indirectly on this sector. Women are integral to agricultural activities, contributing significantly both directly and indirectly, all while fulfilling household duties and socio-cultural obligations. Comprising 50.7% of the population, women are recognized as a valuable resource that should actively participate in the rural agricultural sector of Sri Lanka (Sireeranhan, 2013). Agriculture is the backbone of the developing economies and women are the key figure in their vast agrarian socioeconomic setups, however their participation varies from region to region (Consumer Finance Survey of 2003/2004). Despite the pivotal role played by women in the agricultural sector of Sri Lanka, there exists a significant gap in understanding the nuanced dynamics of their involvement. The research problem at the core of this study is the lack of a comprehensive examination of the socio-economic contributions of women in Sri Lankan agriculture, coupled with an insufficient exploration of the challenges they face and the opportunities that exist for fostering gender-inclusive agricultural development. This gap hinders the development of informed policies and interventions aimed at promoting gender equality and harnessing the full potential of women in shaping a sustainable and inclusive agricultural landscape in Sri Lanka.

Consequently, the research seeks to address the following key questions,

- i. What are the specific socio-economic contributions of women in various stages of agricultural production in Sri Lanka?
- ii. What challenges do women encounter in their roles within the agricultural sector, and how do these challenges impact their overall contributions?
- iii. What opportunities exist for promoting gender-inclusive agricultural development in Sri Lanka, and how can these opportunities be leveraged to enhance women’s participation and influence in the sector?
- iv. How can a better understanding of women roles in Sri Lankan agriculture contribute to the formulation of policies and strategies that foster sustainable and gender-inclusive agricultural development?

By addressing these questions, the research aims to bridge the existing knowledge gap, provide valuable insights into the complexities of women’s roles in Sri Lankan agriculture, and offer a foundation for evidence-based policies and initiatives that empower women and contribute to the advancement of the agricultural sector as a whole.

Objectives

Main Objective

To comprehensively understand and analyze the multifaceted aspects of women’s role in Sri Lankan agriculture, with a focus on their socioeconomic contributions, challenges faced, and opportunities for fostering gender-inclusive agricultural development.

Sub-Objectives

- i. To examine the socioeconomic contributions of women in agriculture, this objective includes exploring and documenting the diverse roles played by women in agricultural activities within Sri Lankan communities.

- ii. To investigate challenges faced by women in agriculture, this objective aims to identify and analyze the primary challenges encountered by women engaged in agriculture in Sri Lanka.
- iii. To explore opportunities for gender-inclusive agricultural development, this objective emphasize investigating existing opportunities for promoting gender-inclusive agricultural development in Sri Lanka.

Literature Review

The Role of Women: The Concept of Triple Role

The concept of triple roles was employed to examine how gender roles are distributed within households. Although both women and men in a household may engage in various activities, the allocation of roles between them is never uniform (Kumara and Weerakkody, 2011). The concept of triple role consists of the productive role, the reproductive role and the community roles.

- i. Productive Roles - These roles encompass tasks that contribute to income generation, involving both men and women in activities performed for monetary compensation or in-kind payments.
- ii. Reproductive Roles - Women are predominantly assigned primary responsibility for reproductive activities, involving the care of children and tasks within the domestic sphere.
- iii. Community Roles - Moser (1989) further categorizes community roles into two segments: community-managing activities and community politics. Community work entails involvement in community organizations, organizing social functions, and participating in activities aimed at enhancing community well-being.

Later, the scholars have expanded on Moser’s work by conducting feminist time-use studies that explore the distribution of time and

responsibilities among women in various contexts. These studies often emphasize the intersectionality of gender with other factors like race, class, and ethnicity.

Current Status of the Women in Sri Lanka

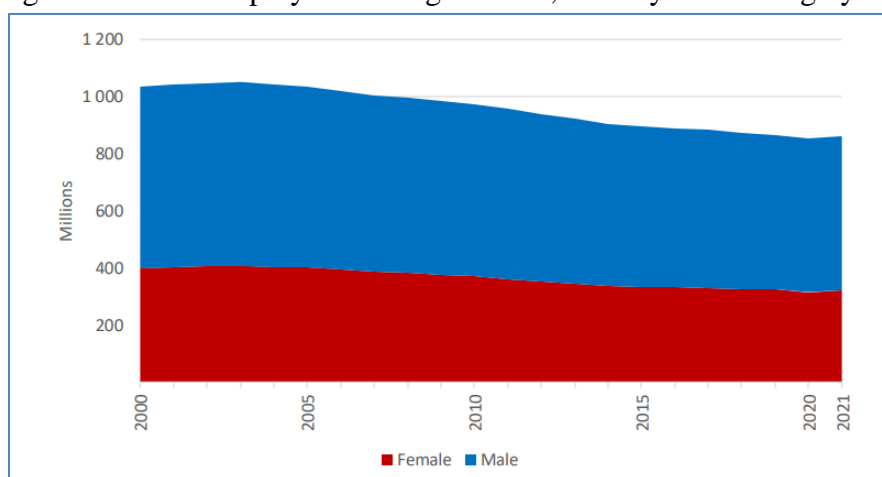
The island wide 2011/12 National Census reported a population of 20,271,464 of whom 51.5% were women. The sex ratio was in favor of women, with 106 women to 100 men (Country Gender Assessment; Sri Lanka, 2015), population, female in Sri Lanka was reported at 11,498,234 Persons in 2022, according to the World Bank collection of development indicators, compiled from officially recognized sources (Female population is based on the de facto definition of population, which counts all female residents regardless of legal status or citizenship) (Trading Economics, 2024). Women in Sri Lanka have a relatively satisfactory position compared with women in other South Asian countries but are yet to achieve gender equality or be fully empowered in line with

international standards set by, among others, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and some of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Country Gender Assessment; Sri Lanka, 2015). Sri Lanka has made major strides in achieving parity in female education and increasing women’s access to health services by providing free and universal schooling and healthcare (Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis USAID/Sri Lanka, 2020).

Agricultural Labor Force and Gender

Global employment in agriculture, forestry, and fishing decreased from 1 billion in 2000 to 866 million in 2021, hitting a low of 856 million in 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic affected men and women differently, with the number of women employed in 2021 lower than in 2019, resulting in a decline in the share of women in the sector to 37% in 2021.

Figure 1: World employment in agriculture, forestry and fishing by sex

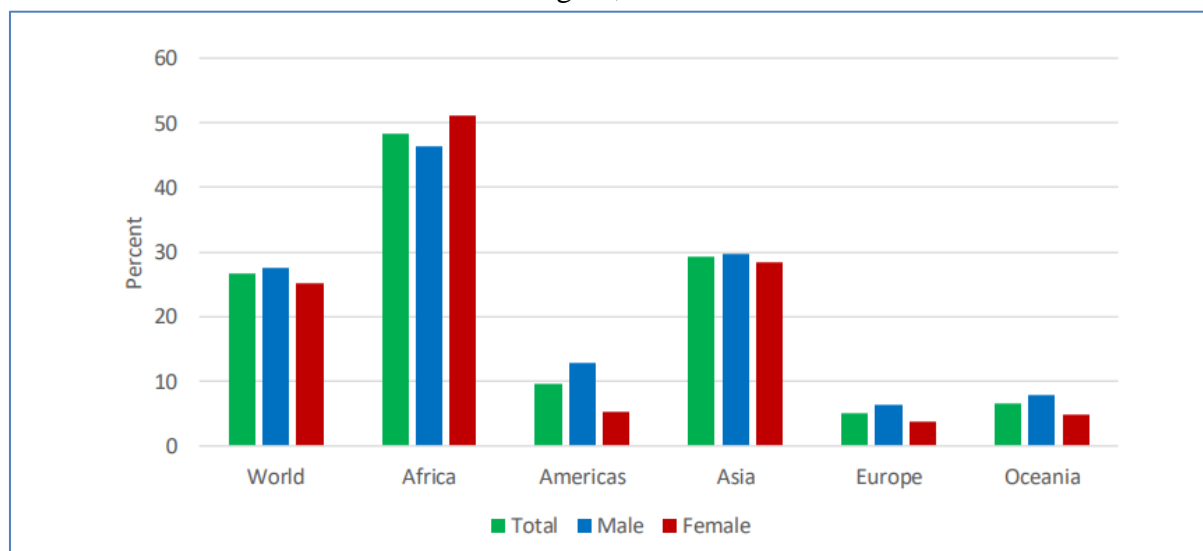


Source: FAO. 2022. FAOSTAT: Employment Indicators: Agriculture. In: FAO. Rome. Cited November 2022. <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/OEA>

In 2021, the global employment share in agriculture was 26.6%, but this average varies significantly among regions. Africa had the highest share at 48.8%, followed by Asia (29.6%), the Americas (9.6%), Oceania (6.5%), and Europe (5.1%). Notably, Africa is the only

region where more women work in agriculture than men (51.1% vs. 46.4%). In contrast, the Americas exhibit the largest gender gap, with 12.8% of men working in agriculture compared to 5.3% of women.

Figure 2: Share of employment in agriculture, forestry and fishing in total employment, by sex and region, 2021



Source: FAO. 2022. FAOSTAT: Employment Indicators: Agriculture. In: FAO. Rome. Cited November 2022. <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/OEA>

Women in the Agriculture Labor Force

Female labor force participation is important for an economy for many reasons. It indicates the utilization of labor in an economy (and in turn influences the growth potential); relates to income/poverty status; and acts as a signal of the economic empowerment of women (Attygalle, K., et al., 2014). In 2019, women’s labor force participation in Sri Lanka was notably low at 37.8%, contrasting with the higher rate of 79.1% for men (World Bank, 2021d). In terms of employment, agriculture constituted 23.6% for men and 27.6% for women (World Bank, 2021d). It is crucial to enhance the income-generating prospects for women in the agricultural sector, especially considering that many of them serve as unpaid family workers. Additionally, women face limited opportunities to engage in nonfarm activities due to household and caregiving responsibilities (World Bank, 2021c).

According to the report titled ‘Rural Women’s Participation and Recognition in Sustainable Agricultural Livelihoods across Their Life-

Course, In Post-War Sri Lanka’ (2018), women’s labor contribution to agriculture was made up of:

- i. Paid or compensated labor in the production of food as day labor or in commercial farms
- ii. Unpaid labor in food production in family-owned cultivations
- iii. Subsistence labor (e.g. home gardening)
- iv. Unpaid labor such as care work (cooking, cleaning, child rearing) alongside other social reproductive work such as community work and political canvassing.

Status and the Role of Women in Agriculture in Sri Lanka

Women make up only one third of the workforce and have double the unemployment rate of men in Sri Lanka. A plurality of women enjoy formal work in the services industry; however, women still play a large role in the informal workforce, particularly in agriculture related jobs (Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis USAID/Sri Lanka, 2020). In Asian farm households, both men and women actively contribute to agricultural production, with evidence highlighting the significant role played by women in these endeavors. Gunawardena’s time allocation study

in Udawalawe in 1995 provides data illustrating the crucial contributions of women in both domestic and productive spheres of their lives. In regions where agriculture is the primary economic activity, women can be observed engaging in various tasks in paddy fields or Chenas, including planting, transplanting, manuring, weeding, irrigating, harvesting, and post-harvest activities. Throughout history, women have worked alongside men in paddy fields, with specific activities traditionally designated for women, as noted by Jayatilleke (1990) and Siriwardena (1990). Some authors show that in the initial settlement schemes, women’s contribution in Chena was mainly restricted to harvesting and processing of the produce as there were traditional rituals which debarred them due to the belief that they could add to pollution in certain circumstances (Kumara and Weerakkody, 2011). As mentioned by Molen (2001),

‘There is a myth about the threshing floor explaining why women are not participating on the threshing floor. The farmers have an agreement with god Pulliyar not to allow women on the threshing floor. Pulliyar did not have a female partner and therefore he did not like women. The threshing floor is thus considered to be a sacred area and women are afraid that if something happens to their family (e.g., death, illnesses, private problems) and they have been on the threshing floor, men will blame them for that reason (that they caused the anger of god Pulliyar)’ (field notes, Punchikuluma, 1999).

Despite this lack of recognition of women’s role in agriculture, the successful execution of agricultural tasks relies on the complementary efforts of both men and women. The failure to acknowledge their contributions has resulted in imbalanced policies and programs, heightened levels of poverty, increased food and nutrition insecurity, and a decline in agricultural output.

Gunawardena (1990) highlights that the invisibility of women stems from the nature of their household work and the diverse range of responsibilities they undertake on the farm. In Sri Lanka, women not only remain absent from conventional statistics, but there is also a significant lack of data or research documenting their role in agriculture and their socioeconomic contributions, challenges, and opportunities as women farmers. Consequently, this study endeavors to address this gap by shedding light on the experiences and realities of women, aiming to contribute valuable insights into an area that has been largely unknown and undocumented.

Methodology

The research focused on the Kalawana Divisional Secretariat, situated within the Ratnapura District of the Sabaragamuwa Province, Sri Lanka. Comprising 32 Grama Niladhari (GN) divisions, Kalawana DS Division is characterized as a suburban area. The research targeted women farmers within this division, and a sample frame was created for the study. To ensure a representative sample, 10 GN divisions - specifically, Kalawana East Samanpura, Kudawela, Pothupitiya North, Koswattha, Illumbakanda, Pothupitiya South, Thapassarakanda, Delgoda West, Jathuwangoda, and Kalawana West - were randomly selected from the total of 32. In this study, 12 women farmers were randomly chosen to participate, with each representing a distinct GN division. This approach resulted in a total sample size of 120 participants. The primary data collection methods employed included structured interview schedules and group discussions. The data collection period spanned from February to June 2023. Prior to the main study, a pilot study was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the interview schedule in eliciting the required information, achieving the research objectives, and ensuring clarity in the data collection

process. For analysis, descriptive methods such as frequency distribution and simple percentages were utilized to interpret the gathered data.

Results

Basic Socio-economic Factors of the Respondents

The study examined key socio-economic factors among women farmers, including age, education level, marital status, monthly income, farmland size, ownership, and farming experience. The data analysis revealed that a significant proportion of women fall within the middle age category (40 – 59 years) and have completed their education up to the secondary level. In terms of marital status, the majority of women are married, accounting for 102 (85%) participants. Concerning monthly income, most women fall within the middle-income bracket (20,000 – 40,000 LKR), and the predominant farmland size is between 0.5 to 1.0 acres.

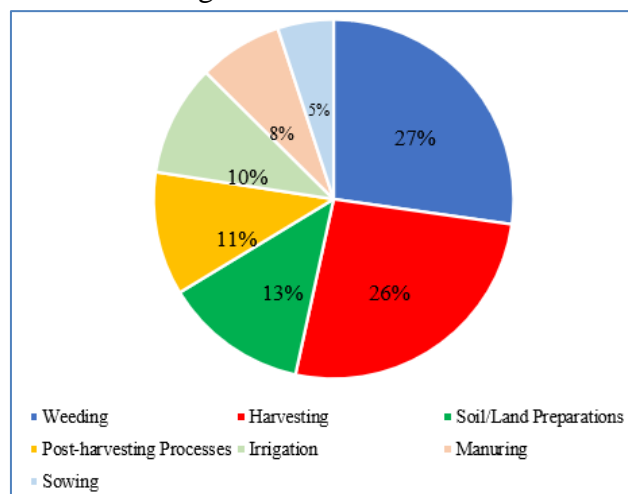
Analysis of farmland ownership indicates that a majority work on family-owned lands, while others engage in sharecropping, lease, or mortgage arrangements. In terms of farming experience, a significant portion of women (51%) have accumulated 10 to 20 years of experience. Given the nature of agricultural activities, the study revealed that, traditionally, many women primarily contribute to their family’s agricultural work as supportive members rather than engaging in full-time farming. However, there is a notable and significant increase in the trend of women taking on full-time agricultural roles, akin to becoming the main breadwinners for their families. This is often due to additional responsibilities they have been assigned beyond farming activities.

Socio-economic Contributions of the Women in Agriculture

As per the research findings, women assume diverse roles in agricultural activities, actively

participating in various stages of both paddy and other crop cultivation. Their involvement spans tasks such as soil and land preparation, sowing, manuring, irrigation, weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest processes, including storage and transportation. Additionally, women often manage small-scale Chena lands, vegetable farms, gardens, and engage in poultry farming, making substantial contributions to overall agricultural productivity. The recorded total number of respondents actively involved in agriculture is 279. Among them, the majority participate in weeding (27%), followed by harvesting (26%), soil/land preparation (13%), post-harvesting processes (11%), irrigation (10%), manuring (8%), and sowing (5%).

Figure 3: Active Involvement of Women in Agricultural Activities



The engagement of women in agriculture holds pivotal importance for both income generation and household well-being, as emphasized by a majority of the respondents. Notably, 77 individuals underscored that their participation is primarily seen as a means of supporting household well-being rather than solely a method for income generation, a sentiment echoed by 43 participants. When exploring the active involvement of women farmers in agricultural activities, there is a growing concern about their role being supportive for income generation. The

findings suggest that women contribute significantly to the family income through their participation in farming and related activities. This dual role not only enhances the economic stability of households but also plays a crucial role in meeting fundamental needs such as ensuring food security, facilitating access to education, and supporting healthcare expenses.

The distinction between viewing women’s involvement as support for household well-being and income generation is indicative of the multifaceted nature of their contributions. While their primary motivation may be centered on supporting the overall well-being of the household, the inherent economic impact of their activities is acknowledged and has tangible effects on the financial stability and basic needs fulfillment within the family. Beyond their involvement in paddy cultivation, these women frequently specialize in cultivating a variety of other crops, including vegetables, fruits, herbs, and flowers (commercial purposes).

This diversification underscores the expanding and multifaceted role that women play in traditional agriculture, extending beyond conventional farming practices. Moreover, the research findings elucidate that women’s active participation in agriculture has yielded substantial positive impacts on community development. In addition to their economic contributions, their involvement has contributed to enhancing food security, addressing the challenge of potential food scarcity, mitigating poverty, and alleviating unemployment in the country.

Challenges Faced by Women in Agriculture

The challenges faced by women farmers in the age group of 20 to 39 years in this region are multifaceted. Firstly, there is a struggle with adapting to modern agricultural technologies, as the rapid advancements in this field require

continuous learning and adjustment. Additionally, the lack of traditional agricultural knowledge poses difficulties in adapting to new practices and hampers effective decision-making processes. Financial constraints emerge as another significant challenge, limiting the ability of women in this age category to invest in necessary resources and tools. The younger generations exhibit a reluctance to engage in farming or paddy field activities. Many of these younger farmers have entered agricultural pursuits not out of preference, but rather due to the lack of alternative job opportunities, financial constraints, and familial responsibilities. Interestingly, their inclination is towards urban employment, such as working in salons, indicating a preference for non-agricultural occupations and urban settings. A significant number of these younger farmers express a desire to pursue further education.

However, financial constraints and familial responsibilities present formidable barriers, leaving them with limited options to fulfill this aspiration. Despite their willingness to continue their education, the challenging circumstances they face hinder their ability to pursue alternative opportunities. Moreover, the absence of innovative knowledge and technical experience further impedes their capacity to optimize farming practices and explore new, more efficient methods. Issues related to land ownership and the marketing of their agricultural products pose additional hurdles. Limited access to and control over land can restrict the scope of their agricultural activities, while challenges in marketing contribute to difficulties in reaching wider markets and obtaining fair value for their produce.

The challenges specific to women farmers aged 40 to 59 include limited access to resources, a deficiency in technical knowledge, and health issues such as arthritis and other common non-

communicable diseases (NCDs) that pose threats to their continued engagement in agricultural work. Despite possessing considerable experience and traditional knowledge in agriculture, this age group exhibits less adaptability to technology and innovation, creating additional hurdles in navigating the evolving landscape of modern farming practices. Women farmers aged above 59 encounter challenges that align with those identified in other age categories. These challenges primarily encompass financial difficulties, health problems, and issues related to government support.

A notable common challenge is the lack of familiarity with technological devices, hindering these farmers from staying updated on modern agricultural practices. While facing challenges similar to those of other age groups, women in this category also experience gender-specific issues. In the context of modern society, young women farmers often perceive themselves as marginalized due to their involvement in agriculture and they feel compelled to transition into other occupations, such as those in the service or industry sectors, as a response to societal perceptions and gender roles. Consequently, due to the challenges faced by the younger women farmers and their perceived marginalization in agricultural activities, there is a growing inclination among their parents or the second generation to consider relinquishing engagement in agricultural pursuits.

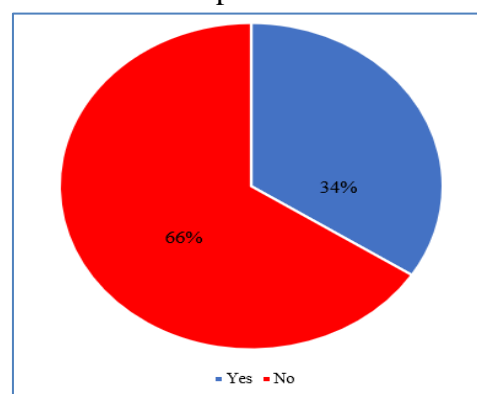
In addition to the challenges previously identified, this community grapples with persistent gender-specific barriers that hinder women’s full engagement in agriculture. Traditional gender roles often confine women to specific tasks, restricting their participation in crucial decision-making processes and limiting access to essential resources. Furthermore, cultural perceptions may exist, suggesting that

certain types of farming are more suitable for men, thereby creating barriers for women seeking to diversify their agricultural activities. These gender-related challenges underscore the need for broader societal shifts and targeted interventions to promote inclusivity and equal opportunities for women in agriculture.

Opportunities for Gender-Inclusive Agricultural Development

In addition to the existing village-level development programs, such as cooperative societies, agricultural societies, death-aid societies, and village development societies, the research identified specific gender-inclusive agricultural development programs, such as women’s organizations/societies (*kantha samiti*) at the village level. Moreover, there are several opportunities for promoting gender-inclusive agricultural development in Sri Lanka. Initiatives that prioritize equal access to resources, including land, credit, and agricultural inputs, have the potential to empower women in farming. Encouraging the adoption of technology, providing training in modern agricultural practices, and facilitating the active participation of women in decision-making processes within agricultural cooperatives are crucial steps toward achieving gender-inclusive development in the agricultural sector.

Figure 4: Agricultural Knowledge of the Respondents



While not necessarily holding specific formal education, a significant number of women

farmers have acquired training through various short-term workshops conducted by different government initiatives. However, these women highlight that the current level of government support and assistance is perceived as inadequate. The insufficiency in support and assistance could be attributed to various factors, such as limited resources, inadequate outreach, or gaps in the implementation of support programs, contributing to the challenges faced by women in accessing the necessary resources and assistance for their agricultural activities.

Conclusion

The overall perception of gender roles in agriculture within community tends to be influenced by traditional norms. Historically, certain tasks have been assigned based on gender, with men often involved in larger-scale farming activities and women primarily engaged in smaller, household-based agricultural tasks. However, there is a growing awareness of the need to challenge these stereotypes and recognize the diverse contributions that both men and women can make to the agricultural sector. Policymakers, government organizations, private organizations, NGOs, and other stakeholders can contribute significantly by implementing and advocating for policies that address gender disparities in agriculture. This includes ensuring equal access to resources, providing financial support and training programs tailored to women, and promoting women’s participation in agricultural extension services. Additionally, creating platforms for dialogue and collaboration between stakeholders and women farmers can help address specific challenges and tailor interventions accordingly. Education and training play a crucial role in enhancing the skills and capabilities of women in agriculture. Formal education can provide a foundation, while targeted training programs can offer practical skills in modern farming techniques, agribusiness management, and financial literacy.

Furthermore, by promoting education and training opportunities, women can gain the knowledge and confidence needed to adopt innovative practices, diversify their agricultural activities, and actively contribute to the sustainable development of the agricultural sector.

Changing the perception of the younger generation of both male and female regarding agricultural activities is crucial, considering agriculture’s pivotal role as an essential industry for our country and the survival of mankind. Agriculture is the foundation of our food production system, providing sustenance and nourishment for the growing population. However, the female younger generation often perceives agriculture as a less attractive or less lucrative career option compared to other sectors. By recognizing agriculture from school levels, as an essential industry, it emphasizes its significance in ensuring food security, supporting the economy, and contributing to the overall well-being of society. This shift in perception can encourage young individuals to view agriculture not just as a traditional occupation but as a dynamic and vital sector that plays a fundamental role in addressing global challenges such as hunger and ensuring a sustainable future.

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Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the Research Council [ASP/01/RE/HSS/2022/01], University of Sri Jayawardenepura.

