



## Factors affecting on females' employment in the urban informal sector in Colombo district, Sri Lanka

<sup>1</sup> Kanthi Manel, <sup>2</sup> Sunethra Perera

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Social Statistics, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

<sup>2</sup> Senior Lecturer, Department of Demography, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

### Abstract

The study of labour force participation in the informal sector is very useful for implementing and formulating employment opportunities and human resource development policy programs. Contribution of informal sector employment in nonagricultural sector to the labour force of Colombo district is approximately 44 percent in 2013. One important characteristic of the informal sector is that it has become a major employer of the female labour force in non-agricultural sector in urban population in Colombo district. In this view present study was carried out to explore the socio-economic and demographic factors affecting the employment status of women in informal sector economic activities of the urban settlement communities in Colombo district. The primary data was gathered from a cross sectional sample survey in selected urban areas in the Colombo Municipal Council area and the data was collected from 222 females which were selected based on random manner. To achieve the objectives, both descriptive and logistic regression methods were applied for the data analysis. The results show that low level education is one of the important factors affecting women's employ with the self-employments. The qualitative findings also discovered that most women of the urban communities have faced environmental factors and poverty, lack of awareness and encouragement to the education and other skills, lack of resources and facilities to start an own business. These findings suggest that efforts to address the problem of women's access to the self-employment or formal sector occupation in urban labour market.

**Keywords:** labour force, socio-economic, self-employments, informal sector, formal sector

### 1. Introduction

Informal sector employment is rising rapidly in all regions of the world and many developing countries. At the beginning economic picture of a work place was the shop, the office and the factory. At present reality of a work place is often the street vending, small business, self-employment or unpaid family work at home. Economic declines and government reduces to social spending are some of the factors that push people especially females into the informal sector employments. However, currently women have made impressive participation to the labour force in various and professions, women dominate the informal economic sector. In the developed countries, females' contribution is fairly dominant in the formal sector of the economy while in the developing countries their presence is mostly felt in the informal sector (Khan & Alikhan, 2009; Mohapatra, K., 2012; Sarwar & Abbasi, 2013) [18, 27, 23]. Gender discrimination, cultural, religious and socio-economic factors are largely affected for the female labour force participation to the informal sector.

Although, many people engage in the informal sector, there was no accurate academic meaning for informal sector until 1971. Hart (1973, 1971) [14] a social anthropologist, was the first one to bring the term 'informal sector' into the academic field. He introduced the concept of the 'informal sector' as a part of the urban labour force, which takes place outside of the formal labour market. Moreover, Hart considered the 'informal sector' as almost synonymous for the categories of small self-employed. Further, in 1972, International Labour

Organization (ILO) introduced the term 'informal sector' at the 15<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Labour Statisticians. According to the previous studies, there are many characteristics have to identify differences between formal sector and informal sector. Generally, the formal sector has formal entry method, formal wage system, wage-earning employment opportunities, more welfare facilities, employment security conditions, trade unions, government regulations and taxes. Nevertheless, informal sector workers do not receive health protection, overtime payment, a minimum wage, and worker benefits such as paid vacation, sick leave, health insurance, unemployment insurance, maternity benefits and parental leave. Therefore the informal economic sector has terminological confusions and it appeared that no single definition for informal sector or informal economy (Harding & Jenkins, 1989) [12]. Therefore, researchers gave up trying to formulate a unique definition based on several criteria, to define the informal sector in accordance with the problem at hand.

However, the informal economic sector plays a vital role in Sri Lankan economy too (Nisha & Jayawardene, 2010; Gunatilaka, 2008) [8, 25]. Informal sector labour force participation rate was more than sixty percent to the total labour force participation in 2013 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2013) [7]. Gunatilaka (2008) [8] has found more than two third of employers among all employed persons in Sri Lanka engaged in informal sector. Further it was revealed that comparing with the agricultural informal employment (28 percent) people are more likely to join with the non-

agricultural informal employment (39 percent).

In the past decades especially in rural areas female workers play a vital role in agriculture based economy in Sri Lanka. At present they participate in non-agricultural informal activities besides domestic and agricultural work. However, proportionately more females than males of urban areas participate to the informal labour force (Gunatilaka, 2008) [8]. According to the Department of Census and Statistics, both male and female contribution of non-agricultural informal sector of Colombo district is approximately 44 percent (Department of Census & Statistics, 2013) [7]. Although, the women are largely contributed to the national economy through participating informal economic activities, there is no evaluation or estimation method in proper way due to mostly women are involved in home-based informal economic activities. Therefore, the contribution of the female employment to the informal sector couldn't be compared with other economies, due to lack of reported statistics and information of the informal sector in Sri Lanka. Previous studies have largely focused on common economic aspects of urban informal sector and inadequately discussed the importance of female participation of informal sector to the labour force and issues of current manpower. Hence, this study attempts to identify the factors related to the females' employment status of the urban informal sector.

## 2. Literature Survey

Literature on females' labour force participation have focused on formal sector as well as informal sector employments. Women share in both formal and informal labour market has become much importance while share in informal sector is gradually increased at national and international level (Gunatilaka, 2013) [10]. In the developed countries segment of females' labour force participation is equal whereas in developing world this situation is different. In China context, one study has explored (Chen, Shao, Murtaza, & Zhao, 2014) [14] that the both individual factors (age, education) and family factors (husband employment, child care and family size) influenced to determine women participation to the informal sector employments. Khan & Alikhan (2009) [18] analyzed that how many women are struggling for family survival. In this study has shown that what are the factors influenced to women's contribution to the employments in the urban informal setting. Unemployment, poverty and less skills, lower education status of husband highly motivated to engage females' employments. Furthermore, this study also has identified that factors like household size, education, ownership of assets, head of family status and household poverty positively influenced to the females' employment participation in the informal sector especially in developing countries. Karunaratne & Kumara (2003) [16] has focused on small businesses in the urban informal sector in Colombo urban area in Sri Lanka. The study explored that both males and females are engaged in the small business as self-employments due to several factors such as high population growth rate, migration ratio, and landlessness, lack of capital low educational and professional qualifications, high unemployment and poverty.

According to the literature on females employment related on the urban informal sector, do not take into account the

difference of the economic behavior related to gender differences in micro level. When consider the economic theories, all assumptions have been built up on the assumption that there is no difference between males and females in terms of their contribution to economic activities especially labour force participation. However, a few researchers have shown that women are different from men in participation to the informal economic sector. Emphasizing on the employment participation to the informal sector in some developing countries such as sub-Saharan Africa and Asian countries, researchers highlight that females are more likely to employ in the urban non-agricultural economic activities in the informal sector. For example, International Labour Organization, (2002) [15] showed that women are over re-presented in the informal sector worldwide. Further, it reveals that most of women who are in low income families engage in the informal economic activities such as sell or produce goods from their homes, making garments, producing paper bags, cleaning services. Similarly, Atieno, (2010) [4] found that more women have joined the informal sector due to barriers of enter to the formal labour market and less opportunities in the formal sector since their low level education, religious and cultural constraints and etc. Furthermore, several studies show that women's education, marital status, child caring, male domain household system make a positive impact on participating formal sector employments (Mohapatra. K., 2012; Atieno, 2010; Khan & Alikhan, 2009) [18, 4, 23]. However, non-agricultural informal employments are rear in rural areas in the developing countries. Therefore, rural to urban migration happen based on a number of socio-economic factors especially gender difference, wage differences, employment issues, accessing resources and infrastructure facilities at the origin places. As a result of increasing density of urban community, most females tend to employ with the informal economic activities than their male counterparts (Misra & Alam, 2014) [22].

In Sri Lankan context, nearly, 18.5 percent of Sri Lankan population lives in urban areas and out of total population around 15 percent lives in Colombo Municipal Council (MC) areas (Department of Census & Statistics, 2012) [7]. Approximately, 16000 families are living in these settlement communities (USDA, 2013). The key issues facing the urban community people in Sri Lanka like other developing countries are found to be urban unemployment, underemployment, poverty and unequal distribution of resources (ILO, 2012; Todaro, 1976) [28]. Although, the human capital is plenty for informal agricultural economic activities in rural areas, with the starting of economic revolution, youth population migrated to the urban areas for seeking non-agricultural employment opportunities (Harris & Todaro, 1970) [13]. However, males' participation in the labour force is higher including formal sector both rural and urban areas in many aspects as a bread winner of the family. Although, informal jobs have inadequate security due to lack of basic social security or legal protections, and other employment benefits, most urban migrant females engage in informal economic activities. In the local context, it can be identified that the existing literature that reviews female labour force participation mostly analyses the macro level based on informal sector (Arunatilaka & Jayewardene, 2010;

Gunatilake, 2008; Balasooriya, 2007)<sup>[3, 11, 5]</sup>. On the other hand, those studies also had not taken into account the factors **affecting urban community female's participation to the informal sector economic activities**. Accordingly, this study **attempts to find what factors that are affecting female's employment status of urban informal sector in Sri Lankan context**.

### 3. Objectives of the study

The main objective of the study is to investigate factors **affecting women's' employment status in urban settlement communities in Colombo district, focusing on the informal sector**. Other specific objective of the study is to draw policy **conclusions for measures needed to improve women's access to self-employment opportunities in the economy**.

### 4. Materials and methods

The study is based on quantitative data which gathered from selected Municipal Council (MC) areas; Nawagampura and Nineteenth lane in Colombo district. The sample size for this study was 222 females who were between 16-59 ages and employed during the reference period (since six month prior to the survey date in 2015). Multistage sampling technique was applied to select the sample of this study. The purposive sampling method was used to select the Colombo MC areas out of the five MC areas in Colombo district since of this study use only highly urbanized and settlement community areas. The next step was to select migrant locations within the selected Municipal Council areas by using Grama Niladhari (GN) household list. Even though, there was no separated household list for the urban settlement community households, a sample frame was prepared related to urban households by using GN households name list. Finally, the sample size of the study was selected as covering 222 urban females in a random manner. Data were gathered by using interviewer administered questionnaire. Individual questionnaire included demographic and socio-economic characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, age, marital status, levels of education, monthly income, savings, ability to invest, number of dependents of the family, indebtedness etc. and some open ended questions as well.

#### 4.1 Analyses

This study was conducted within the framework of positivist paradigm that uses quantitative analytical techniques. The data obtained were subjected to descriptive analyses and both descriptive and parametric (logistic regression) analyses. Descriptive statistical methods were primarily used to identify the socio-economic and demographic background of the **sample and also it used to examine the female's participation to the informal sector employments**.

A Logistic regression analysis was done to identify socio-economic factors and demographic characteristics affect to the **female's employment status and related issues of self-employment**. In the logistic regression model the dependent variable is dichotomous variable and it has two outcomes, (a) self-employment and (b) other employment. Other employments mean informal employments except self-employment such as daily payment employments (kulee weda), cleaning services, road vendors, unpaid family works

and formal employments. According to the sample information most females like to engage with other informal employments due to some kind of reasons. The respondents were asked whether they engaged in self-employment and **value '1' was assigned when the answer was 'yes' while it was '0' other employments in the formal and informal sector**. The explanatory variables are ethnicity, age, religion, levels of education, marital status, household size, indebtedness, investment ability, employment security, health condition, monthly income, ownership of the land and number of school age children of the family. Levels of education, land ownership, monthly income, indebtedness, employment security, health condition, investment and savings of females were taken as socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. Moreover, household size, number of school age children of the family were taken as household characteristics. **Respondents' age, marital status, ethnicity and religion were considered as demographic variables**. All these independent variables represent respondents who are in both formal and **informal sector**. **Respondents' age, household size, monthly income and number of school age children were considered as interval scale data**. All other variables were taken as categorical variables. Religion of the respondents was divided into two categories as Buddhist and non-Buddhist. Ethnicity of urban community females was taken as two groups such as Sinhalese and non-Sinhalese (Tamils, Moors, and other nationalities who live in the study area). Marital status of the **women's was divided into four categories such as currently married, never married, divorced and separated and widowed**. Four dummy variables were generated to identify the effect of **women's marital status** to their employment status. Education is generally used in the model as a categorical variable. This study divided education into five categories such as; illiterate, primary school education, secondary school education, above secondary level education and graduate and above. Hence five dummy variables were used to identify the impact of the level of education of the urban settlement community females. **Other dichotomous variables related to respondents' indebtedness, investment ability, employment security, health condition and ownership of the land were considered as dummy variables asking questions whether they have taken a loan, have an employment security, ability to invest for the own business, have suffered any diseases due to their employment and have an ownership of the land and value '1' was assigned when the answer was 'yes' while it was '0' answer was no**.

### 5. Results and discussion

#### 5.1 Employment status of urban community females

The urban labour market are two-fold: formal and informal. Self-employments also include in to the informal sector. Informal economic activities are referred as transactions sometimes daily payment that does not follow strict rules and regulations to enter to the informal labour market. Mostly, formal employments are authorized by the government. Nevertheless, in the local context private sector also offer formal employment opportunities including rules and regulations related to the employments. Even though, formal sector including government or private sector have higher payments, security and other benefits, it is difficult to find a

suitable employments without educational qualifications and relevant experiences. According to the sample information, self-employment participation rate of females (46.85 percent) are less than the other employments (53.15 percent) such as any employments are in the formal or informal sector. Previous studies (Mel, Mckenzie, & Woodruff, 2013; Khan & Alikhan, 2009; Acharya & Cervantes, 2009) <sup>[18, 20, 1]</sup> have **shown women's education and ownership of assets, household poverty, loans availed, their marital status and low levels of business skills** by women have a positive effect on their labour force participation.

**5.2 Religion, Ethnicity and employment status of urban women**

Minns & Rizov (2004) <sup>[21]</sup> found that the religion of people may have had a direct impact on their own business, self-employments or entrepreneurship. Further, religious connection of the people has given some opportunities to enter to the self-employments as well as own business (Akenson, 1988) <sup>[2]</sup>. Although, it can be seen in the world, most non-Buddhist females in our country would not allowed to access employment opportunities due to their restrictions of religion especially among Islamic religions. Approximately half of females of the sample, both Buddhist (47.8 percent) and non-Buddhist (46.5 percent) females of these urban

locations have less intention to access self-employments. Ethnic composition also significantly effect on the employment status. Especially, in Sri Lankan context Islamic females are not allowed to engage with the employments due to their religious affiliations. With the economic crisis, currently educated females would like to do jobs in any field. However, low educated other ethnic females (moor and Tamil) less likely to access to self-employments or own business comparatively to Sinhalese females.

**5.3 Age and employment status**

The findings revealed that among those aged between 16-59 years the women's mean age is 34 years. As shown in Table 1 employment participation rates of females in urban areas of Colombo district differ according to age. Women aged 16-20 years have low employment participation rate to the self-employments comparatively other employments. Most self-employed women (24%) are in age between 46-59 years due to their experience and less number of dependents of the family especially schooling age children are less. Females who are in the age group between 16- 30 years of the sample are engaged in other employment activities in both formal and informal sectors. However, majority of females in urban locations engage in street vending, cleaning services, daily payment activities (Kulee wada) and unpaid family works.

**Table 1:** Employment participation rate for different age groups of females

Age groups	Employment status	
	Self-employments (%)	Other employments (%)
16-20	5.8	18.6
21-25	13.5	14.4
26-30	11.5	15.3
31-35	18.3	8.5
36-40	15.4	11.9
41-45	11.5	9.3
46>	24.0	22.0
Total	100	100

Source: Based on field survey, 2014

**5.4 Effect of education on employment participation**

The likelihood of woman being in a given employment also varies with their education qualification. Among female self-employees 81.8 percent have secondary and below secondary education and among other employees 74.6 percent have secondary and up to above graduate levels of education. As

shown in Table 2 there are more women with illiterate engaged in both self-employment and other informal economic activities in the urban informal sector. Although this applies to both self-employments and other employments, self-employments are more affected by lack of education than other employments in the urban labour market.

**Table 2:** Employment status for females' educational groups

Levels of education	Employment status	
	Self-Employments (%)	Other Employments (%)
Illiterate	8.7	9.3
Primary education	23.1	16.1
Secondary education	57.7	61.9
Above secondary	10.6	11.0
Graduate & above	0.00	1.7
Total	100	100

Source: Based on field survey, 2014

**5.5 Marital status and women employment participation**

The marital status; never married, currently married and divorce/ separated/ widowed seem to be defined in the

employment status of urban females. Three fourths of currently married females are engaged in the self-employments. According to the descriptive statistics of

females' employments, totally other employment percentage is less than the self-employments. Around 25 percent never married females are more likely to engage with other employments than the self-employments and employees who are divorced or separated and widowed females interested with the self-employments. According to this study, around one fifth of females (18.5 percent) are divorced, separated and widowed at the age 41 and up to 59 years. In this stage especially, migrated urban females are unable to join with the other occupations except work as an unpaid family worker or a self-employer. Therefore, they would like to start an own small business or join with a self-employment.

### 5.6 Land ownership and informal employments

With the increasing urban population people have to face several issues related to accessing land and housing facilities, infrastructure facilities, traffic jams, environmental pollution

and etc. According to the qualitative information, most young females like to start a small business or self-employment such as sewing clothes, doormats, making toys and bags etc. Although, they would like to produce these items as their own products, they have to face some barriers such as lack of spaces, lack of marketing knowledge and facilities, obtaining raw materials and technology. Even though, more than half of respondents who engage in the self-employments have a small land, it is not enough to establish a self-employment or own business plant in their residency.

### 5.7 Factors contributing to participation for self-employment of urban females

The model presented in Table. 3 include the eleven predictors such as variables related to demographic, socio-economic and household level factors.

**Table 3: Logistic regression estimation of females' employment status and socio-demographic and economic factors**

Factors	Odds ratio	Significant Level
Ethnicity (Reference: Non-Sinhalese)	0.217*	0.036
Religion (Reference: Non-Buddhist)	4.347*	0.044
Age		
16-20 years (Reference)	-	-
21-25 years	0.215**	0.002
26-30 years	0.941	0.898
31-35 years	0.605	0.304
36-40 years	1.664	0.310
41-45 years	1.000	1.000
46-59 years	0.844	0.750
Education		
No education (Reference)	-	-
Up to O/L	0.768*	0.050
Above O/L	1.532	0.387
Health condition (Reference: good)	0.486	0.141
Indebtedness (Reference: No)	1.187	0.569
Marital status		
Currently married (Reference)		
Never married	1.058	0.952
Divorce/ separated/ widowed	0.506	0.403
Employment security (Reference: No)	1.068	0.803
Land ownership (Reference: No)	0.529*	0.034
School age children (Reference: No)	0.538*	0.012
Health condition (Reference: No)	0.510	0.181
Constant	1.509	0.521

\*\*Significant at 1%, \* Significant at 5%

Ethnicity and religion of respondents' have positive effects on the females' employment status who are in urban settlement communities and both variables are significant at 0.05 level. Age variable has seven categories and higher than one, 21-25 aged group related with employment category, 88 percent less likely to reference category of 16-20 aged group, at 0.05 significant level. Land ownership of the respondents and children belongs to school age were positively affect with the women's employment status. Although, education level which is up to Ordinary Level was significantly influenced to the self-employment participation of urban females.

Those who owns lands are approximately 53 percent to employment status of females' than those who are not ownership of lands. Health condition of respondents' on the employment status was quite ambiguous as females' health condition had not made any significant impact on the

employment status of urban settlement females'. Employment security status and marital status of women's had not predicted women's employment status; especially participation in self-employment. According to the qualitative information, most respondents have primary income sources to earn money for managing their daily life without long time indebtedness. Nevertheless, most of respondents had not planned to enrich their future life through investing money. According to the logistic regression results in Table. 03, urban women's participation on self-employments which was determined independently from the model.

According to the qualitative findings of this study, most female migrants in this urban locations engage in the informal sector employments and face for the issues when they engage with the jobs. Several woman explained the situation;

In 2004, my husband and I came to this area seeking employments. We faced more difficulties in searching jobs. I go to school for grade five. My husband was joined with the cleaning service center and I started to make fast foods. After dying my husband, I have faced many issues regarding our lives. Now I live with my children without permanent income source except my street vending selling income. The government has donated a small cart. I like to start a small business in my living place but there is no enough space. (Household head, age 54, F)

I am a street vendor. I have two children and they do not like to go to school. They support to sell foods in my small boutique. Early in the morning I prepare sort-eats and fill into my cart and sell them. I earn money to cover the expenses our family. But long time cannot do this business because more people engage with the street vending job.

In regarding this case studies, females are more likely to do their jobs in the informal sector because of most of them are low educated people. Even though, lack of basic needs and skills are discouraged to start a self-employments or small business. Findings from the in-depth interviews provide some useful information to identify the reasons and the difficulties of informal sector employments.

#### One of key informant said

“Most ladies in this area had concentrated on the school of children. In these families, have more children at school age. Since parents have not secured their employments, children dropped-up the school without completing their compulsory education. Next, these children add to the labour force at younger age and tended to addict illegal business to earn money. Several parents are also engage with the illegal business. Therefore, parents’ aspiration of children’s education is more worth to increase our community standard and reduce the poverty of the community”

(Youth society Officer, age 35, M).

These findings confirm that low education, lack of spaces, less skills and awareness of the employments and poverty are mainly influence to determine their employments. According to the results of qualitative information provide a clear picture of unexplained areas by the quantitative data. Comparatively, people belongs to the low educated and poor economic background have had negative influence on the settlement communities as well as own households due to drug addiction, quarreling, gambling and involving other underworld activities.

#### 6. Conclusions

This study tried to achieve one objective. In response to the objective, the study identified that the several factors significantly affect to the females’ employed in self-employments when considering all demographic, socio-economic and household level factors. In this paper we employed logistic regression analysis method to estimate the factors which affect females’ employment participation. In particular we examined differences in the employment

participation of urban women using logistic regression model that suggests self-employments are distributed according to **individual characteristics such as respondent’s ethnicity**, religion, age and land ownership. Results of this analysis indicate that urban migrant females who are in non-Sinhalese and non-Buddhist among Sinhalese and Buddhist females lag behind engaging self-employments than the other employments. In terms of the specific objective; **policy conclusions for measures needed to improve women’s access** to self-employment opportunities, the study found that improving their attitudes, skills and knowledge through secondary and tertiary education. In this study identified that the urban settlement community females are increasingly entering the informal economic activities as a result of economic liberalization in 1977. According to the findings, more than two third of self-employed females state that they have not enough spaces or owned land to establish a firm. **Increases in women’s education, self-confidence**, awareness and skills in particular may prove useful in increasing their participation of self-employments in urban informal sector. This is in line with previous studies regarding informal sector (Arunatilaka & Jayewardene, 2010; Gunatilaka, 2008; Richard & Hein, 1985)<sup>[3, 8]</sup> that show skills, training and education are associated with higher employment participation in the informal sector.

Hence, a number of policy relevant actions can be drawn from these results. It would be very important to encourage women for small scale income earning opportunities, in which they employ within the self-employment than the engage in other informal employments. Therefore, it should be taken actions to increase awareness and implementing training programs related to self-employments should focus on empowering women who are in urban settlement communities. Furthermore age level, marital status of population, education composition, investment ability and methods of saving need to be taken into consideration when addressing employment status and related issues in these communities due to the quality of human capital in the form of education, knowledge of investment and savings are significant in determining **women’s successful access to the employment opportunities**. **This means that policy intended at increasing female’s** participation in the labour market, especially in the formal sector activities or self-employment opportunities, should address their access to secondary and higher education. However, it is very important that it should be addressed by giving opportunities to access at least tertiary education after dropping out their primary education before entering the informal sector. Furthermore, addressing female participation of self-employment in the informal sector may require addressing the sales and demand side of the labour market in **addition to the factors expected to determine female’s** participation.

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