



**Strengthening Women's Economic
Empowerment and Access to Decent Work in
Sri Lanka's Northern Province:**

The ILO's LEED+ Approach



At the current rate of female empowerment it will take 267.6 years to close the gender gap in economic participation and opportunity.*

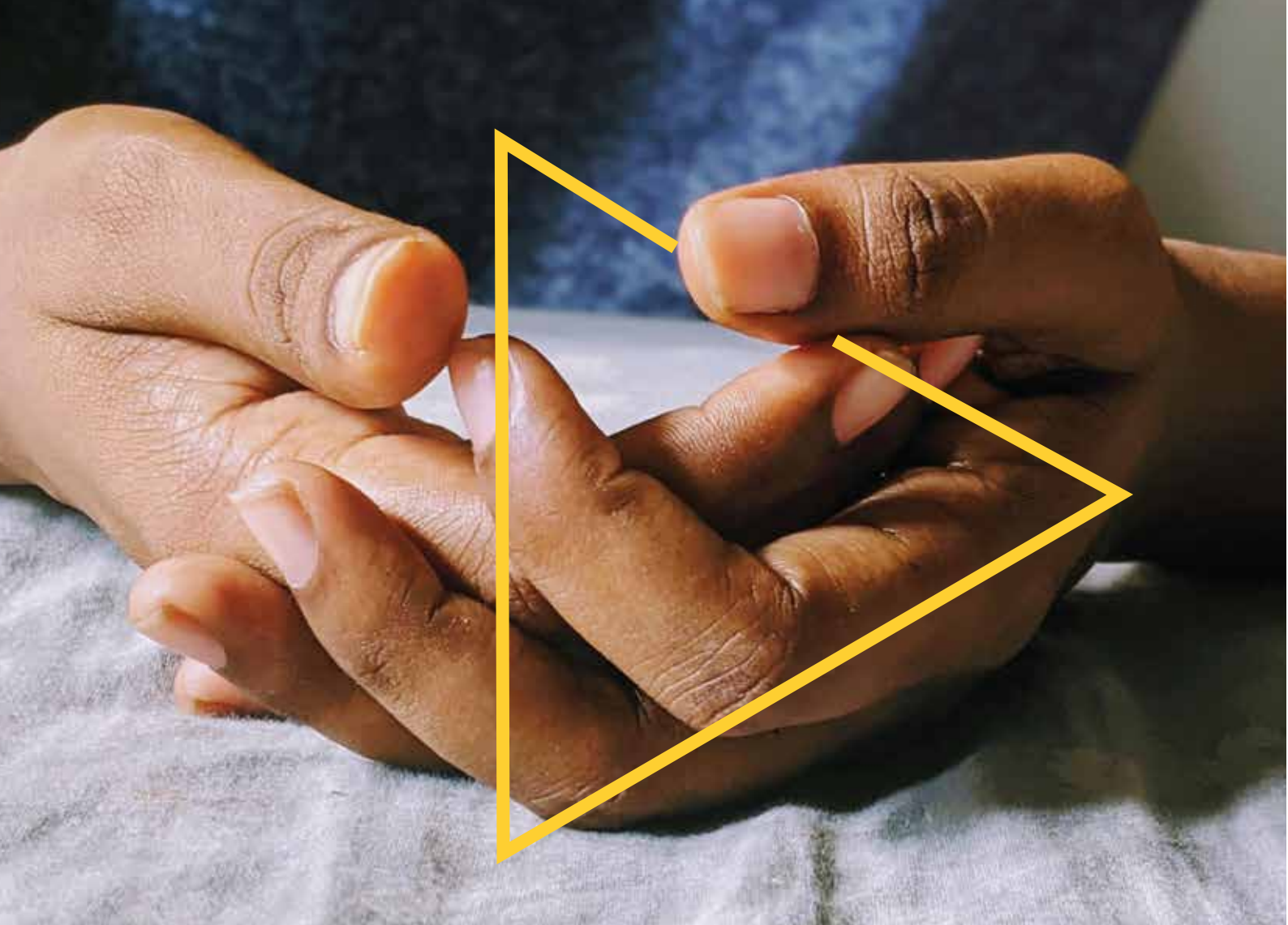
Numerous research findings have indicated that the full participation of women in labour forces would make a significant contribution to national growth rates. Economies with women and girls at the centre will drive better and more sustainable development outcomes for all.

However, gender discrimination often results in women facing unique barriers including over-representation in low-skilled, low wage jobs, facing a higher likelihood of living in extreme working poverty, and being disproportionately affected by exploitation including sexual harassment.



Approximately 1 in 4 households in the Northern Province are female-headed.*

A key concern among the group is limited income generation opportunities, and studies indicate that female heads of households are more vulnerable and have on average lower incomes.



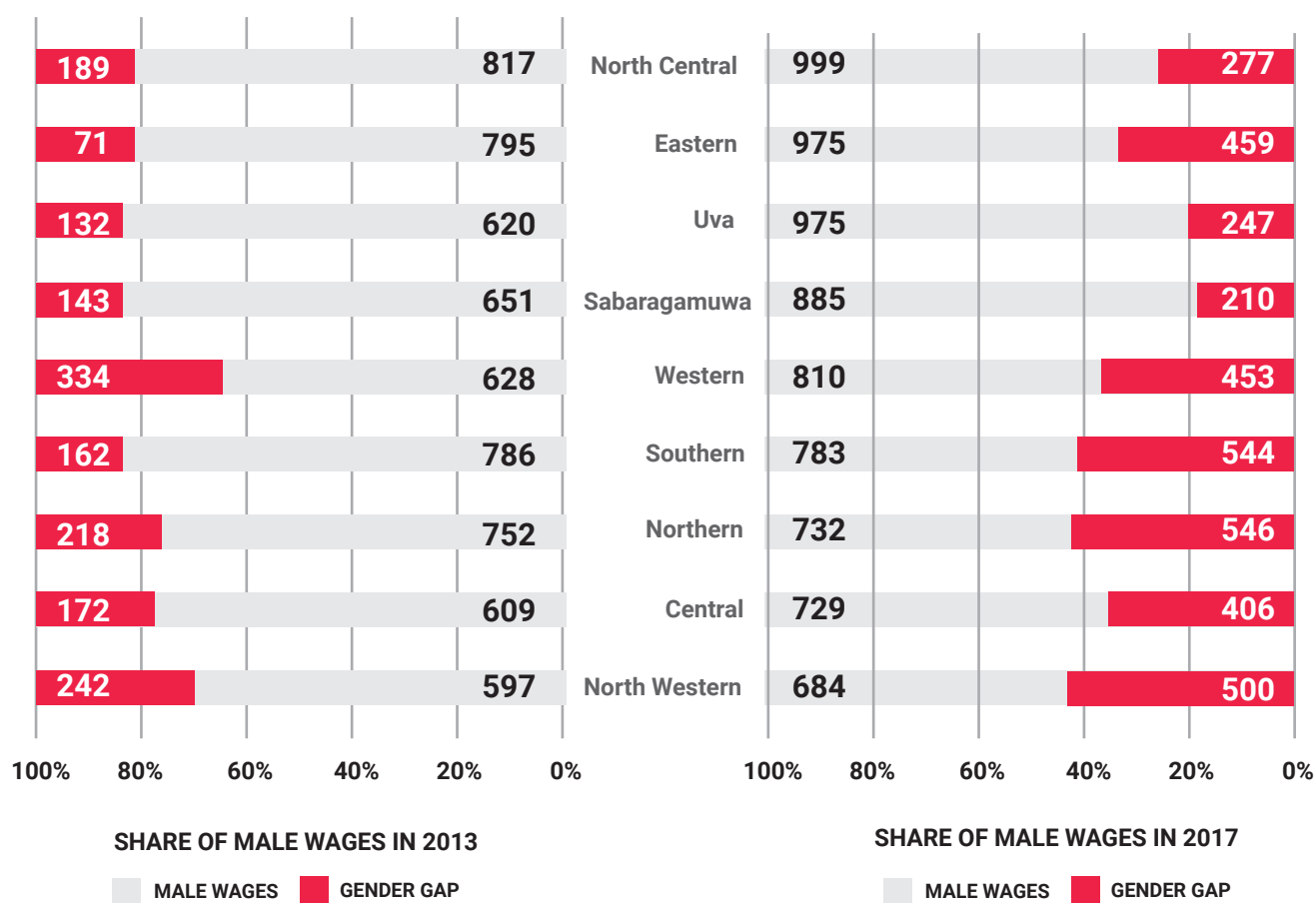
Sexual harassment, violence, and fear of violence remain barriers to economic empowerment of women.

“Many women, especially female heads of households, mentioned facing sexual harassment by employers, community members, and resource-granting officers.” *

At the core of women’s economic empowerment is access and agency; while access to skills, resources, services and market opportunities is one aspect of advancement, the other, agency is about the power of decision-making and acting on those decisions. In the previous phase, the LEED project contributed to the economic empowerment of women through their increased participation in livelihood activities. The project also focused on some elements of gender inclusion, the impact of which was very prominent in the fisheries sector, which showed greater involvement of women in what is traditionally seen as a male-dominated space.

However, multiple research, including the final assessment of the LEED project, and the Gender Gap Assessment of the LEED+ project indicate that economic empowerment and participation does not always translate to social empowerment and inclusion. The latter is highly dependent on the deconstruction of deeply rooted informal and formal gendered social constructs that reinforce power imbalances.

Daily Average Wages of Informal Workers in Paddy Cultivation (2013 & 2017)



Average Daily Wages for Hired Labour for Agriculture Work

REGION	FEMALE WAGES (RS.)	MALE WAGES (RS.)	GENDER PAY GAP
Oddusuddan, Mullaitivu	700 - 800	1,200	400 - 500
Vavuniya North, Vavuniya	800	1,200	400
Palali, Jaffna	800	1,200 - 3,000	400 - 2200

Adverse gender norms continue to prevail in the community, devaluing contribution and performance of women.

Focus group discussions in the region found that men justify existing gender pay gap because they see themselves as more hardworking, and performing difficult jobs than female counterparts. Whereas female focus groups perceived that women work equally hard in similar if not the same jobs as men, and are still getting paid less.*



LEED+ Approach to Gender Equality

Inclusive economic growth is about equality of opportunity and participation in growth by all. In expanding a nation's economy and development, these hold especially true with regards to reaching the most vulnerable groups, especially women and Persons with Disabilities (PWDs).

The LEED+ project has outcomes that focus specifically on 'improved decent work opportunities for targeted communities including women and PWDs' and 'enhanced participation in decision-making by women and PWDs within the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), and Cooperatives (Coops) in fruit, vegetable, fishery and processed food sectors and community'.

While taking into consideration the unique cultural and social nuances of the Northern region, where patriarchy is largely the prevailing norm, LEED+ continues to implement and explore practical, context-specific, and innovative approaches for gender inclusion.

Strengthening women's economic empowerment and access to decent work

Economic empowerment is critical to achieving gender equality. Women are enormous contributors to the economy, but as described previously, they are disproportionately affected in the ability to secure decent work, access to economic resources, the burden of unpaid care work, and facing poverty.

The Approach in Action

Facilitating women's employment, as the first step LEED+ worked with MSME owners in the North to address business expansion challenges in processes, management, technology, access to markets and occupational safety and health standards (OSH). Then, women who lacked access to employment opportunities were linked with these businesses, making use of the new job opportunities created through successful expansion.

Enhancing women's income in the agriculture and fisheries sector, LEED+ provided training for women farmers on improving the quality of products, efficiency, OSH, supply chain management, and technical knowledge. For women in aquaculture related operations, among others, this included training in farm management, nursery upkeep, and other technological advancements, whereas those in agriculture benefited from learnings in crop and post-harvest management, and new machinery usage. Women farmers were also assisted with establishing links with appropriate government and private sector Business Development Service (BDS) providers.

Working with Coops towards women's economic empowerment, LEED+ assisted women's entry into pre-identified, high-potential supply chains such as coir, groundnuts, black grams, maize, and sea cucumber. The project also strengthened Coops to provide their women members with necessary technical inputs, negotiate with buyers, facilitate market access, and improve financial literacy.

These were delivered through both private sector and government partners such as the department of cooperative and department of agriculture.

- ▶ Focusing on upward mobility of women earning income through low-skill, low-wage jobs (eg. mending and cleaning nets, collecting fish) LEED+ collaborated with the blue-swimmer crab industry to secure their employment in seafood processing centres. Simultaneously, the project worked with management on upskilling through training on seafood processing, quality maintenance etc. This saw many from the initial cohort, progressing to supervisory, and even managerial positions at the company. A similar approach was followed in coir and other agriculture sectors.
- ▶ Supporting women entrepreneurs through several targeted interventions, LEED+ helped develop and implement business plans for each of the selected entrepreneurs, and provided financial support to expand their businesses through a cost-shared approach. In addition to these, the project connected the enterprises to a network of necessary service provider, while also providing assistance to gain knowledge and skills in business growth, inclusion, and OSH.

Women have to be economically independent for the betterment of the nation; for that, every employer has the responsibility to create safe and trustworthy environment for them.”

Subaskaran, Owner, Queen Products - Mullaitivu, Sri Lanka

With crèche facilities, financial assistance for women, especially female heads of households caught in the debt trap, and a safe working environment, Queen Products; an MSE supported by LEED+, is making a change in work place culture as well as steps towards increasing women's access to decent work.



Promoting inclusion through affirmative actions

Affirmative actions help to propel change towards real and effective equality, where the underprivileged or marginalised situations that certain group of people find themselves in can be rectified. In a society where wide asymmetries exist between men and women, affirmative action creates access through the adoption of special measures. Thereby helping overcome social, structural, and economic disadvantages, exclusion, neutralise prejudices, and allow for representation. However, widespread acceptance and practice of affirmative action require an attitudinal change at all levels of the society.

The Approach in Action

- ▶ In the LEED+ assessment of potential partnerships with MSMEs, private companies, and Coops, 'gender' is considered an important selection criterion. Specific actions, roles, and responsibilities in mainstreaming gender are explicitly stated in the 12 partnership agreements signed thus far. More promisingly, a separate budget line for affirmative actions has been included in all the agreements.
- ▶ Taking into consideration the barriers in the participation of women in leadership positions, LEED+ initiated discussions to adjust meeting times of the Pandathiriuppu coop from morning to evening hours, and schedule it during weekends. This change meant that meetings did not conflict with time allocated by women for household chores and care responsibilities, thereby encouraging their increased and regular participation in meetings, which also enhanced opportunity for women leaders in the Coop board.
- ▶ Similarly, LEED+ also provided support to the Malarambomi Coop to find a teacher during school holidays as women were finding it difficult to manage child care needs while engaging in income generation activities.



Addressing social attitudes and strengthening the standing of women in their communities

The history of women in many aspects has been one of marginalization. Even today, cultural, social, and economic discrimination of women continues to be viewed as justified behaviour. Tackling the root causes of exclusion and reshaping unequal power dynamics requires a collective shift in a society's thinking. Knowledge sharing is a key tool that can be used to trigger this transformational change.

The Approach in Action

- ▶ Addressing attitudes at the institutional level, and to sustain the knowledge transfer process, LEED+ conducted ToT (Training of Trainers) sessions for Government staff on women's economic empowerment.
- ▶ Enhancing the leadership role of women, an initiative on providing mentoring support to women in MSMEs, Coops, as well as those involved in social work is in the pipeline.
- ▶ Creating a platform for dialogue, LEED+ facilitated provincial level discussion forums, with participation from Coop board, members, staff as well as commissioners. This provided an opportunity for conversations around increasing women's participation in the economy, unique challenges faced by women business owners, as well as experience sharing by successful women entrepreneurs.
- ▶ Expanding knowledge and skills of women in Coops and social enterprises, LEED+ arranged exposure visits for them to agriculture and fisheries processing and value addition units in the Western Province. While helping gain valuable skills, the interaction with other women also provided room for exchange of ideas, networking, and gain confidence.

“Despite the social barriers, women like me who are running village level SMEs feel proud about the fact that we are supporting other women to become independent.”

Sharmila, Owner, STR Industries - Killinochchi, Sri Lanka

A woman entrepreneur, Sharmila broke many barriers in starting her own business, and is both an inspiration and role model. LEED+ has supported her efforts to strengthen her business in several ways, including assistance for occupational health and safety standards, as well as mentorship.

Identifying and addressing institutional and systemic barriers

Women face multiple barriers in the public sphere, which compound existing inequalities. Developing gender sensitive responses and interventions to address these barriers is vital.

The Approach in Action

- ▶ Changing the largely male-centric culture and decision-making in Coops from the fisheries sector, LEED+ worked towards creating a shift. In Coops, the majority of the decisions on memberships, resource allocation, members' economic participation, and services made by men do not benefit women members, as their perspectives are not taken into consideration. Through awareness sessions for members and the board, as well as provincial level discussions the project worked towards changing this. While policy decisions were made to include more women members, continued lobbying and advocacy efforts saw increased participation of women in Coop boards – this representation allowed for influencing changes in provision of coop services, allocation of resources, and increasing women's economic participation.
- ▶ Addressing the lack of support to the large number of women engaged in agriculture in the Puthukkudiyurupu DS Division, LEED+ assisted them to establish the Puthukkudiyiruppu Women Entrepreneurs Cooperative Society Ltd. With many of war-affected women and FHH being excluded from existing Coops in the area that were predominantly managed by men, this new entity created a space for women to participate in management and leadership roles, develop new business partnerships, and discuss their needs and concerns. It also helped break gendered perceptions in the community about women's abilities.
- ▶ Recognizing that fishing was the primary source of livelihood in Valaipadu, LEED+ worked on ensuring women's participation in both the economic activity and in the Valaipadu Fishereis Coops through a two-pronged approach. Initially organizing separate discussion forums for women and men – wherein women had the opportunity to collectively discuss issues they faced, while also being encouraged and motivated to speak up, while forums for men were also used to raise awareness about gender inclusion and importance of women's participation in fisheries, the project then brought them together to voice their concerns. This resulted in increased dialogue, and elimination of certain barriers, paving the way for women's participation in fisheries and membership in the Coop.

“There must be more women at the cooperative board level to raise collective voice and it is the responsibility of all the women to make this happen.”

Kalaichelvi, President, Puthukkudiyiruppu Women Entrepreneurs' Cooperative Society

PTK, supported by LEED+, is the first all women Coop in the Mullaitivu District, in the north of Sri Lanka. Through it, women entrepreneurs are able to enjoy all the advantages of collective purchasing and marketing while gaining access to credit facilities and social welfare programs.



Strengthening the systemic structures of the province to mainstream gender

At present, the Northern Province does not have a separate unit or resource allocation to provide support services towards improving women's social participation. Women at the grassroots also face difficulties in accessing many of the existing services and programmes such as financial, market information, technical support, skills and training. To mitigate these challenges, the Women's Affairs Ministry of the Northern Provincial Council has initiated efforts to develop a Gender Policy for the province. In addition to helping ensure gender mainstreaming at the meso-level, and enhancing women's participation as well as access to services, the policy will also allow for sustaining gender mainstreaming initiatives taken at the grass-root level.

The Approach in Action

- ▶ Facilitating a participatory approach in the development of the gender policy, LEED+ is providing financial support towards conducting consultative workshops and meetings at all districts in the province. Such discussion allows for contributions from various stakeholders including at the community level.
- ▶ Assisting with the drafting of the policy, LEED+ is procuring expertise on behalf of the Ministry, including legal consultants, and also providing technical inputs

“The gender policy for the Northern Province is an essential tool that will help us to mainstream gender at department level and thereby reach community level changes”

**Nirubaraj Lahini, Assistant Secretary,
Ministry of Women's Affairs, Rehabilitations,
Social Services, Cooperatives, Food Supply &
Distributions, Industries & Enterprises
Promotion and Trade & Commerce -
Northern Province**

“Transformational change takes time, but what LEED+ is doing is creating the building blocks for these changes, and already there are indications of positive signals.”

**Dr. Thomas Kring, Chief Technical
Advisor, ILO Sri Lanka, LEED+ Project**

Supported by the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Government of Norway, the LEED+ (Local Empowerment through Economic Development and Reconciliation) project is part of the ILO's Global Jobs for Peace and Resilience programme.

For further information, contact:

Dr. Thomas Kring,
Chief Technical Advisor,
ILO, Sri Lanka
kring@ilo.org

Mehala Sabeswaran,
Gender and Disability Officer – LEED+,
ILO, Sri Lanka
sabeswaran@ilo.org

Kaushalya Kathireson
Communication and
Public Information Officer – LEED+,
ILO, Sri Lanka
kathireson@ilo.org