

# A Historical Analysis of Women's Participation in Sri Lanka's Economic Development and Sustainability (Based on the Rajarata Civilization)

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## ABSTRACT

The past Sri Lankan ruler maintained a strong political, social, religious, and economic structure, and through the protection of gender equality, the obedience of the people and the loyalty to the ruler were developed. To this end, the ruler adopted policies to protect gender equality, which in turn contributed to the sustainable existence of his state. This policy of the king also helped women to rise to a higher level in society as mothers, daughters, wives, and sisters by providing equal privileges to everyone. Because women inherited such freedoms in Sri Lankan society, they were able to participate efficiently and effectively in the economic development of the country. The research problem is to study the impact of women's participation on the sustainable economic development of the state. The primary objective of the research is to analyze the contribution of women to the economic development of the country from a historical perspective. In collecting data for this research, conclusions were reached through a comparative analysis of data collected from primary and secondary sources, including library studies and the examination of newspapers and magazines. Taking the teachings of the Buddha himself on the importance of giving women equality as a basis, ancient rulers worked to protect the gender balance, provided women with education and employment opportunities, and promoted gender equality in society. In particular, giving women the right to inherit property and assets, providing women with access to education and training, taking steps to ensure women's health and well-being, including access to medical treatment, allowing women to participate in political and decision-making processes, and providing women with the opportunity to achieve professional and economic independence, etc., can be considered important. It can also be noted that those policies directly led to sustainable economic development.

**Keywords:** economy, gender, promotion, sustainable, women's participation,

## Research Introduction

Sri Lankan women have been able to contribute effectively to the governance of the country as well as to the socio-economic and economic development of the country without any hindrance due to the rights and privileges they have inherited in the country's socio-economic structure. Most of the historical evidence on how they have participated in various situations, especially for sustainable economic development, is available from Sri Lankan primary sources. Women's participation was seen to the maximum in the main aspects of the economy such as agriculture, trade, various industries and animal husbandry, and there is a lot of information that they were involved in activities such as rice cultivation, providing food to the paddy fields, guarding the paddy fields, harvesting, drying and threshing the paddy, engaging in vegetable and fruit cultivation, engaging in trade activities, animal husbandry, sugarcane industry, pottery industry, cotton industry, weaving cloth, cooking, as well as other professions such as garland weaving, escorts, and slave labor. This research article has conducted a historical analysis of women's participation in the sustainability of economic development in Sri Lanka.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methodology was used as the research methodology in this study. In data collection, primary literary sources, archaeological sources such as inscriptions, sannas, tudapats, akthapatra, praveni documents, gampatra, seattu, last wills and testaments were studied, and field studies were conducted. Also, Selected individuals were interviewed using the oral history method through in-depth interviews, and a substantial amount of qualitative data was collected using open-ended questions. As data analysis methods, the historical comparative method, the thematic analysis method, the case study method, and the empirical verification method were used to reach conclusions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The term housewife can be simply interpreted as a person who works in the house. That is, she is the one who turns the house into a paradise. The work she does by raising children and controlling the house, etc., cannot be underestimated. In the Indian social system, she was not given due respect through the Brahminical ideology. With the advent of Buddhism, those oppressions were suppressed, and the Buddha took steps to give the housewife the proper acceptance and respect in society. The Mathugama Samyakaya of the Samyakaya Nikaya is a collection of sutras specifically about women. The Singalovada Sutta in Buddhism has pointed out five duties that should be fulfilled by the husband and wife, indicating the west direction as the direction of the sadhas (puttadara disa pacha) among the sadhas. These are respecting the wife, not insulting her, not having sex with other women, delegating household chores, bringing food and drink, etc. (Manuratna 1998: 110). The above duties should be fulfilled by the husband towards his wife. In the Sattabhariya Sutta of the Anguttara Nikaya, four of the wives are described as great wives and three as flawed wives.

1. Matu Bhariya - A wife like a mother
2. Bhagini Bhariya - A wife like a sister
3. Dasi Bhariya - A wife like a maid
4. Sabi Bhariya - A wife like a friend
5. Chora Bhariya - A wife like a thief
6. Vadhaka Bhariya - A wife like a murderer
7. Sami Bhariya - A wife like a husband

The first four mentioned here are shown as gems, and Buddhism shows that they bring benefits to the man who gets them. The other three are presented as flawed characters, not to condemn them, but to direct them in a good direction. In the Vasala Sutta, a man who goes to another wife while still married and marries a young woman who is not suitable for his age is a sign of deterioration. Accordingly, the Buddha's sutras and sermons sought to establish the freedom of women as housewives, and due to the privileges they have acquired in society, they have made an efficient and productive contribution to household management as well as to the economic sustainability of the state.

Women's participation can be identified in many cases related to the economic activities of ancient Sri Lanka. In rice cultivation, they were involved in activities such as providing food to the paddy fields, guarding the paddy fields, harvesting, drying and threshing the paddy, and they were involved in vegetable and fruit cultivation, trading, animal husbandry, sugarcane industry, pottery, cotton industry, cloth weaving, cooking, and other professions such as weaving garlands and serving as maids. Therefore, it is clear that women had a very important position in the economic activities of ancient Sri Lanka, just like men, and that they were directly and indirectly involved in economic activities (Munasinha, 2024.08.2). It is also clear that the contribution made by women to the economic sector directly affected the development of economic activities.

The literary and archaeological sources found in Sri Lanka provide a wealth of information about women's participation in economic activities. This reveals how women representing the upper classes of society, as well as ordinary women, were involved in economic activities. According to the economic system that existed in ancient Sri Lanka, women contributed their labor equally or secondarily to the work of earning income. Men were engaged in work related to the hoe, hoes, and axes, while women were more skilled in handling tools such as the mohola, kulla, and idala (Munasinghe 1998:73).

In the past, women mainly assisted in farming, transported and stored grains, prepared various foods from those grains, and cooked food from the prepared foods. Women have participated in major tasks related to agriculture. Indrakeerthi Siriweera, who discusses agricultural labor in ancient Sri Lanka, points out that the husband, wife, and all unmarried children of working age in a household belonged to this labor unit (Siriweera 2005: 123). It is often seen that women contributed significantly to activities related to rice cultivation. Historical evidence is found in Sri Lanka that even mothers with small children took their children to the fields or the henna and assisted their husbands in various industries. As stated in the Nandimitra object of Saddhamalankara,

‘One day, his parents, who were going to the industrial site, did not detain him, but carried him on his back, made him sit under a bamboo bush to shade them, and began to work. He did not sit down, but instead, he was carried and, lying between the legs of the laborers, rolled around like a calf, kicking and kicking, and did not allow them to do their work. At that time, he was taken away and tied with a rope and tied to a bamboo bush. At that time, when the parents saw him leaving, they cried and cried and pulled him away with great force and speed. The rope also blew up the bamboo bush and left (Saddharmalankaraya 1954: 707). Thus, a clear idea can be formed of how the woman of ancient Sri Lanka, while nurturing her children, assisted her husband in the successful cultivation of paddy fields for the economic stability of her family.

The evidence that both men and women participated in the Vap Mangalya or the paddy sowing festival is mentioned in the Dubbitthimahatissa Sutta of the Saddhamalankāra.

‘In the recent past, there was a great Vap Mangalya. Several hundred people were engaged in the industry. White bulls, completely white, were slaughtered, bathed, adorned with ornaments, gold and silver flasks were placed on their horns, their feet were tied with gold chains, adorned with ornaments, and used in ploughshares, etc. All the people provided various food and drink items according to their abilities, and some ate, drank, and adorned themselves with ornaments. Some satiated. Some sowed. The women of the houses also dressed in the same way, adorned themselves with clothes and ornaments, and sowed with great celebration’ (Saddharmamalakāra 1954: 707).

Similarly, in the Seehalavathupparakara, a poor woman wearing a worn-out garment, carrying a basket full of kongu grains, is mentioned (Seehalavathupparakara 1959:112).

‘Tathakka duggatha itthi pontinantha nivasini kangunam labu purethva khetam gachchathi vapitum’

After sowing, it is seen that women were especially involved in removing the plants from the places where the crops were abundant and planting them in the vacant places. In the meantime, certainly, she was also involved in removing the weeds that were interfering with the crops. Women also participated to a great extent in protecting the fields from wild animals. As mentioned in the Poojavaliya, there is information about a woman who tried to scare away birds by running around in a rice field, shouting and shouting.

‘For the whole of the following month, she would run from one corner of the rice field to another, shouting and shouting, and without hesitation, the birds, the hawks, the gira, etc., which were eating the rice, would be killed’ (Pujavaliya 1951: 376).

The economic sustainability of the country was often determined by the development of agriculture, and the paddy field helped to maintain the balance of the household economy (Malani, 2023-03-16). Therefore, the farming family had to make considerable efforts to protect the paddy field they had cultivated from wild animals, and compared to the man, the woman also showed an active involvement in this. Information is

found in the Padmavati object of Saddhamalankhara that the woman was satisfyingly engaged in this work by singing songs, hymns, etc.

‘At that time, the Sitāṇa sowed a lot of alket, and when the harvest was ripe, they called their slave princess and sent her to guard the harvest. Those princesses went to the fields, beat the birds, the animals, the deer, etc., and the birds that were in the field, broke several ears of corn, lit a fire, and tied five hundred of them up, and went to the lake, and saw a small lotus flower, broke it, and came back, climbed the tree and sang songs. (Saddharmalankara 1954:167-168).

It seems that the women were responsible for preparing food for the fields and henna. Breakfast was called Ambula, and there is historical information about even the royal princesses being involved in such activities. As mentioned in the Mahavamsa, Prince Pandukabhaya met the Pali princess when she was carrying food to her father, Girikhandashiva, while he was working in the fields. This is a good demonstration of the participation of women in the success of Kuuru farming.

‘Prince Pandukabhaya, the son of the king Pandusdeva, was given the land by the king of the mountains, named Siva. That Kshatriya was harvesting a hundred acres of paddy. His daughter, a beautiful Kshatriya princess named Pali, rode a chariot and went with her father to harvest the paddy, accompanied by a group of people who brought rice to the factory where her father, a tile maker, was working. ‘When that king Subha died, fearing the king, he entrusted his only daughter to the tile maker. He gave her his blanket and royal jewels as a token. When Vasabhaya killed him, the carpenter Ulu took her in as his daughter and raised her in his house. The child, who was doing the same work, gave him rice. The wise O Thomo saw that the poor vines were not enough, and on the seventh day he gave rice to a monk. He again provided rice and gave rice to his father. When the delay was investigated, she told her father about it. This carpenter was pleased and repeatedly gave rice to the monk (Mahavamsa 1996:35:101-107).

This information is given in more detail in the Vamsathappakasini (Vamsathappakasini 1994: 528). After harvesting, the women were responsible for weeding and threshing. The Mahavamsa records that women used to store the paddy brought to the house, and even old women used to dry it by putting it in the sun (Unapoorna Saati Mahavamsa 1959: 21 pari:27, stanza). Historical literary sources also provide interesting information about the inconvenience caused by rain in such activities. The Vamsathappakasini says, ‘When a woman puts a bundle of paddy in the sun, an untimely rain falls and soaks the paddy. She took the paddy and washed it’ (Mahavamsa 1996: pari 21:27 stanza) indicating that the paddy that was put in the sun to be dried by the bundle was soaked by the untimely rain that fell during the day (Vamsathappakasini 1994: 334). During heavy rains and in emergencies, the rice was dried in the smoke, and in this way, the rice was dried in the sun or on fire, boiled, peeled, removed the chaff and dust, separated the broken rice, and prepared rice, which was considered the main and important task of the housewife in every era of society. The Seehalavathupparakara mentions information about a certain woman named Chandra, who, to earn wealth by giving alms, ate only one meal and saved her rent, and while she was engaged in threshing, threshing, etc. at night, she slept on the mound of straw used for threshing rice to prevent sleep at night. Information about women engaged in paddy threshing is also mentioned in the Mihintala inscription of King Mahinda IV (Ahasatarchayas ‘Ahakbasaj dhakaga shala chaga 88\* When examined in this way, it can be recognized that although royal princesses rarely participated in agricultural activities, there are many examples of women in rural society, where agriculture was the main source of livelihood, performing those activities efficiently. It can be concluded that, in the equal status that women enjoyed in the past, they contributed to the survival of their husbands, children, and through them the state.

There is evidence that women were involved in trade, another important sector of the economy of ancient Sri Lanka. The Sandesha poems reveal that during the Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte kingdom period, women were engaged in trade as well as men. The Gira Sandesha poem praises the way traders sold goods fairly, remembering the consequences of unethical trade. (Gira Sandesha 1967: 58 poem) This also shows how women traded goods in market stalls and under the shade of large trees. The Thisara Sandesha reveals that traders during the Gampola period also traded by sitting on the market stalls and raising their voices and calling out the prices of their goods.



<i>‘Randana mana mahwe sal</i>	<i>pilumbuwala</i>
<i>Nomawena bolanda weledhanange</i>	<i>thuduwala</i>
<i>Athise nam karana kolahalaya</i>	<i>badumila</i>
<i>Redumata sithath in nosithanna</i>	<i>uduthela</i> ’ (Thisara Sandesha 1986: 56 poem)

‘රඳනා මනා මහවේ සල් පිළිබුව	ල
නොමැටෙන බොළඳ වෙළෙඳගන්නගෙ තුඩුව	ල
ඇතිසේ නම් කරන කොලහලය බඩුමි	ල
රැළුමට සිතත් ඉන් නොසිතන්න උඩුතෙ	ල’ (Thisara Sandesha 1986: 56 poem)

Sri Lankan sources also reveal a lot of information about the way women were involved in animal husbandry. When examining the property of Tissa in the Saddharmalankara, it is mentioned how a woman named Tissa, who lived in the Rohana colony, milked cows without fail in the morning and evening (Saddharmalankara 1954:584-586). Obtaining milk from cows was considered an honorable service, and therefore, not only women of ordinary society but also women representing the upper classes knew how to milk cows. King Saddhatissa's wife is mentioned as a skilled person in milking cows. (Rasavahini 1961: 32-34).

When examining the Sandesha poems, the occasional mention of cowherd women is clear, indicating that women who performed the work of cows were in society. The Thisara Sandesha states,

‘Geri Kamin Yanena Gopalu Anganange thunu thalee ye  
nethu sithu sanasamin sambada nosalawa moratuwa eliya’ (Thisara Sandesha 1986: 89 poem)

‘ගෙරි කමිත් යනෙන ගොපු අඟනන්ගේ තුනු නැළි යේ  
නෙතු සිතු සනසමින් සබඳ නොසලව මොරටුව එළි යේ’ (Thisara Sandesha 1986: 89 poem)

When examining the economic activities of ancient Sri Lanka, it is clear that various industries held an important position (Lakmini, 2024-08-05). There is evidence that men engaged in many of these industries were constantly assisted by women. There is also evidence that women assisted men in the brick industry. When examining the pottery industry, it can be identified from the references in the *Seehalavathuppakarana* that a certain poor farmer living in Anuradhapura during the reign of Saddhatissa was involved in the brick-making industry with the help of his only daughter. It is stated in it as “Dhitava attana eka idha kammena jeevati” (*Seehalavathuppakarana* 1959:121).

There is evidence that the cotton industry existed in this country from the earliest times, and the Brahmi inscriptions refer to those engaged in the textile industry as ‘pehekara’. In the story of the landing of Prince Vijaya in Sri Lanka, which marks the beginning of the written history of Sri Lanka, information is given that Kuveni was harvesting cotton. ‘Seeing a group of horses, she showed herself to be a shepherd. One of them was stopped by the king, but when he had a dog, he followed her. Her daughter, Kuveni, who was the wife of the king, sat down at the root of a tree, like a cotton scythe’ (Mahavansa 1996: Pari 07:10-12 Gatha). As indicated in the Poojavali, it can be seen that the cotton industry was popular in Sri Lanka during the reign of King Parakramabahu II and that even women were engaged in this work (Pujavaliya 1951: 795).

‘Thinking of giving alms, many men and women from Sri Lanka gathered and started spinning cotton, spinning, spinning, weaving, weaving, weaving, cutting, weaving. ‘Some women were skilled in weaving the broad leaves of the palms of their hands, like spiders’ (Pujavaliya 1951:610.

A way in which women could grind sugarcane and produce honey can be found in their own homes. As mentioned in the Dhammika Raja Vatthuva of the Seehalavathuppakarana, there is a story of a king and a minister going to inspect the prosperity of the kingdom.

‘O you, seeing that these children are of slender bodies, tell me whether they prefer to eat pure sugarcane with honey, or with milk or ghee?’ She said. Hearing her words, the two women, with a peaceful heart, said, ‘O mothers, give them sugarcane with honey.’ Saying that it was good, they took a clean vessel and went to the sugarcane grove, felled a sugarcane tree and ground it with their hands to extract the honey.’

As mentioned in Rasavahini, at one point, a wedding ceremony was being held in a field belonging to a wealthy man, and following a false invitation from one of his enemies, about 500 monks from the Abhayagiri monastery arrived at the wealthy farmer’s house to offer alms. The farmer’s wife had offered a meal of ghee, honey, and sugar to the Sangha without any trouble (Rasavahini 1961: 166). This information indicates that the sugarcane was prepared safely and that the woman must have been the main person in the process.

There is information that some women were engaged in special jobs. There is evidence that women were engaged in the jobs of providing flowers and weaving garlands.

The Ruwanweli Seya tablet inscription of Queen Kalyanavathi states that ‘the midian Malakarins (Osandavatuwan etc.) were pleased with their grace and gold (Epigraphia Zeylanica Vol. IV 1994: 256). Information about the maids is also presented.

As mentioned in the Nakula Sottiya of the Saddhammalankara, the daughter of a Nakula Upasaka of a family in Magama performed maid service (Saddhammalankara 1954: 578). As mentioned in the Tissa Sottiya, there is a mention of a woman who performed maid service as a maid in the houses of those who gave her money (Saddhammalankara 1954: 584). Also, as mentioned in the Mihinthala inscription of King Mahinda IV, 24 maids called “Minidi” were engaged in the work of the temple, and the main one among them was ‘Midi Vajeruma’. There was a woman in charge of the rice field called ‘Bathge Ladiya’, a woman called ‘Jetmava’, and ‘Vatimidi’ or paddy-cutting maids among them. The maids known as ‘Salajetu’ and ‘Pisana Salain’ were engaged in cooking. These positions indicate that these women, who were employed at the Mahapali almshouse in Anuradhapura, were engaged in various occupations. These maids received rice and saffron from the government as per the king’s order (Epigraphia Zeylanica Vol. I 1994:109).

The source also reveals information about those who served as slaves. The Miyugunu Vehera Cave Inscription mentions a slave girl named Kanadasika as ‘Upasika Dinakadasaika Lene Sagasa’ (Inscription of Ceylon Vol. I 1970:33), and the Mahavamsa states that Prince Pandukabhaya was taken to a village called Doramadala by a slave girl when he was a baby (Mahavamsa 1996: Pari 10: 1-6 Gatha). There is evidence that during certain periods during the Polonnaruwa and Dambadeniya periods of Sri Lanka, the lands owned by the monasteries were cultivated by slaves. When Queen Kalyanawathi and General Ayasmantha offered fields to the Pannala and Weligama Kulawadana temples, they also gave them dasas (Mahavamsaya 1996: Pari 38: 35-41 stanzas).

The above facts reveal that the ancient Sri Lankan woman, who practiced any manual labor, contributed to the economic sustainability of the family. Therefore, it can be seen that she did not burden her family's economic burden on her family, but she helped her husband build the family economy in every possible way. In a social system based on limited, simple needs, she was able to easily control the family budget. She not only generated wealth but also used the wealth earned by her husband with care. She was very good at thrift and saving. The doctor understood that the daughter was a miser because she advised the maids to save the oil that had fallen on the floor during a treatment for a certain daughter who was suffering from a headache. Then she said that thrift is extremely important for a woman in the management of the household economy (Pujavaliya 1965: 58). The Sri Lankan woman, who primarily provided labor to build the family corporation, naturally contributed to the economic growth of the country. It seems that the employment of the woman was productively provided to society by taking care of the children, engaging in household chores and household industries, and assisting the husband in agricultural activities. Therefore, both the male and female parties were equal partners in the economic development of the country. Accordingly, the woman in the past was an important group that contributed to the economic sustainability of the state.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the above facts, it is possible to identify how women in ancient Sri Lanka contributed to sustainable economic development in various ways. Women's participation was seen in the main aspects of the economy, such as agriculture, trade, various industries, and animal husbandry. Here, in paddy cultivation, women were involved in activities such as providing food to the paddy fields, guarding the paddy fields, harvesting, drying and threshing paddy, and there is several information that they were involved in vegetable and fruit cultivation, trading, animal husbandry, sugarcane industry, pottery, cotton industry, cloth weaving, cooking, as well as other professions such as garland weaving, escorting maids, and slave labor. Thus, although there has been a visible male dominance in economic activities since ancient times, it is clear that women were active in economic activities as well as in other sectors, not inferior to men. Furthermore, since many sources representing the great tradition, such as the Mahavamsa and the Dipavamsa, were written based on the Anuradhapura region and the elite, little information is revealed about the economic activities of ordinary women in areas far from Anuradhapura. Since the subjects of sources such as the Saddhamalankara, the Saddharmaratnavaliya, the Seehalavathuppakarana, and the Sandesha Kavya were written about the general society, it seems that a wealth of information about the economic activities of women is revealed by including a lot of information about the general public. Accordingly, it can be concluded that ancient Sri Lankan women were directly and indirectly involved in economic activities and that the contribution of Sri Lankan women towards sustainable economic development was at an optimal level.

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