

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

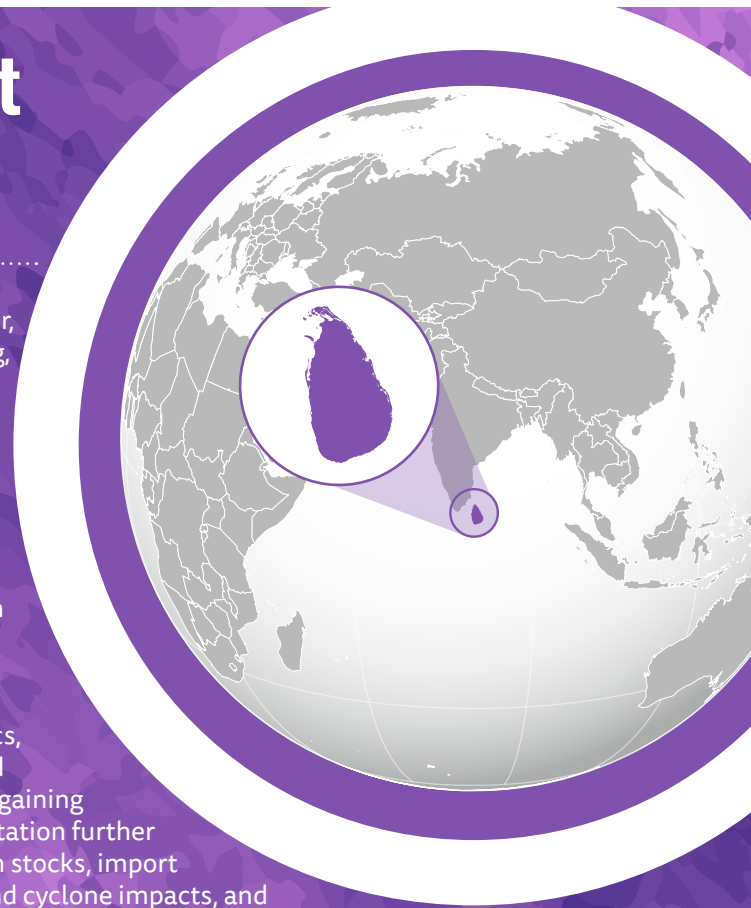
Women play important roles across Sri Lanka's fisheries sector, with contributions spanning nearshore harvesting, processing, trading, and small-scale entrepreneurship. Participation patterns vary widely across regions and communities, and are shaped by intersecting factors such as ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, and cultural norms. Women are central to the production and trade of dried fish and Maldive fish (boiled with spices, smoked, and sun-dried fish, usually tuna), products that are deeply rooted in local cultures and critical to livelihoods, local economies, and food and nutrition security, particularly for low-income households.

Despite these contributions, much of women's work remains informal, undervalued, and poorly reflected in official statistics, limiting access to credit, markets, infrastructure, training, and decision-making spaces. Gendered labour divisions, weak bargaining power, and gaps in fisheries governance and policy implementation further restrict equitable participation. Climate change, declining fish stocks, import competition, and recent shocks – including severe flooding and cyclone impacts, and the recent economic crisis and fuel shortages – have placed additional pressure on fisheries-dependent households, often disproportionately affecting women's livelihoods.

Sri Lanka has experienced deepening gender inequality over the past two decades. Although literacy rates are high and gender parity in basic education has largely been achieved, these gains have not translated into equal outcomes in employment or leadership. Gender-based violence remains pervasive, and some legal and institutional provisions remain inconsistent with constitutional guarantees of equality and Sri Lanka's obligations under international conventions.

At the same time, training programmes led by the Sri Lanka Women's Bureau, fisheries cooperatives, and savings groups, as well as targeted value-chain support, are strengthening economic opportunities in some regions. Policy frameworks – including the National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy (2018) – also increasingly recognise the importance of gender equality and inclusive governance, although implementation gaps remain.

This fact sheet provides an overview of the role of seafood value chains in Sri Lanka, with a focus on gender dimensions, highlighting opportunities to strengthen gender equity and women's empowerment in the sector and beyond. It is part of a series meant to offer development agency employees, government agencies, civil society organisations, funders, and researchers with a snapshot of gender and fisheries to inform the planning and delivery of relevant activities these actors might be involved in or are in the process of developing.



March, 2026

Fisheries production

National data

Sri Lanka's total fish production was estimated at 410,760 tonnes in 2024.¹ Marine fisheries accounted for 75% of this total, while inland fisheries – harvesting wild stocks from rivers, tanks, and reservoirs – and aquaculture made up the remainder.¹

Among marine catches, 'small fishes' were reported to account for 39.4% of total landings, followed by skipjack tuna (*Katsuwonus pelamis*, locally known as *balaya*) at 15.8% and yellowfin tuna (*Thunnus albacares*, locally known as *kelawalla*) at 10.8%.¹

For statistical reporting, marine fisheries are classified into coastal and offshore/deep-sea sectors. Coastal fisheries are typically small-scale and use non-motorised or small motorised vessels (often under 40hp engines) that operate relatively close to shore. These fisheries contributed approximately 54% of total marine landings in 2024.¹ Deep-sea fisheries involve a range of vessel sizes that typically fish over multiple days, both within Sri Lanka's Exclusive Economic Zone and, under special permits, in adjacent international waters.

In 2024, the administrative districts of Galle, Puttalam, Trincomalee, Jaffna, and Matara together accounted for about 55.4% of marine landings.¹

Subsistence fishing is not formally reported in national statistics, as most catches are sold commercially.^a However, it is common for fishers to retain a small portion of their catch for household use or share it with crew – practices seen in both marine and inland fisheries. Occasional fishing using hook-and-line or cast nets for household consumption also occurs, but remains undocumented in official data.^b

Sea Around Us data

The Sea Around Us estimated total annual marine capture production for Sri Lanka's fleets as follows:^c

- ▶ Marine subsistence^d (2019) – 107,171 tonnes
- ▶ Marine commercial^e (2019) – 169,170 tonnes by the industrial sector. Local artisanal fleets accounted for 115,583 tonnes captured within Sri Lanka's waters. Sri Lanka flagged vessels also caught 17,695 tonnes on the high seas.

Fish consumption

Between 2019 and 2024, national estimates placed per capita fish consumption at between 11.9kg and 16.6kg per year.^{1,3-5} The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN estimated annual apparent fish consumption^f at 22.7kg per capita in 2023, with about 65% coming from pelagic species.⁶

Fish is a key source of nutrition, providing around 50-60% of total animal protein intake.^{1,7,8} Documented declines in fish intake between 2022 and 2024¹ have been linked to higher fish prices driven by reduced supply, fewer fishing days due to extreme weather, and rising fuel costs.⁸

Dried fish – produced using traditional methods such as sun drying, salting, and smoking – is a key component of household diets, accounting for roughly one-third of total fish intake.⁸ It is used as a main protein source and as a flavour enhancer in vegetable and rice-based dishes. Dried fish is particularly important for low-income households in rural areas, where it serves as a vital and accessible source of animal protein.⁸

Economic contribution to GDP

Fisheries make modest contributions to Sri Lanka's economy. In 2024, the sector accounted for approximately 0.9% of national GDP^h – about 0.8% from marine capture fisheries and 0.1% from inland fisheries¹ – slightly less compared to contributions recorded over the preceding four years.⁹

The sector accounted for 2.4% of national export earnings in 2024,¹ with the highest revenues generated from food fish, followed by shrimp and aquarium fish.⁹

Employment contribution (all)

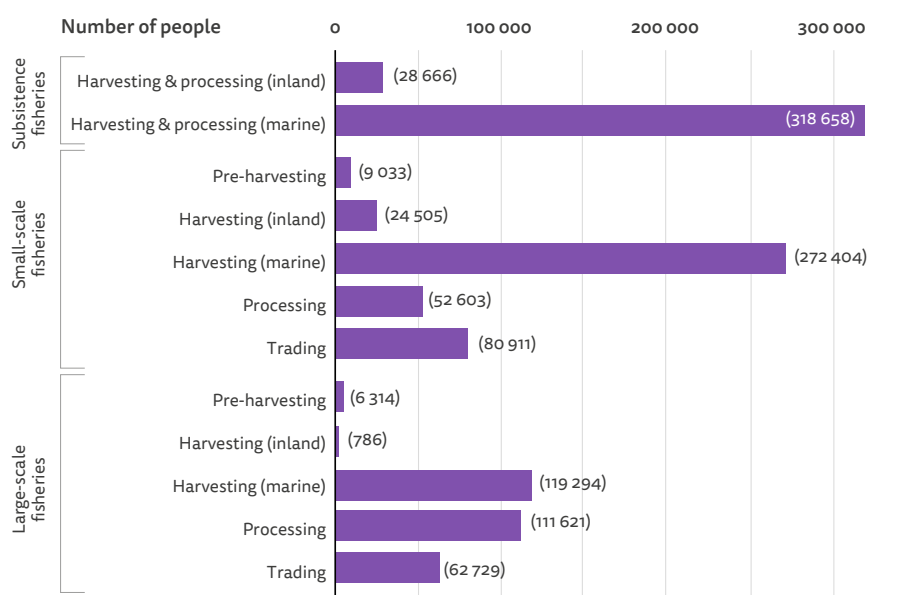
“Fisheries provide indirect employment to approximately 2.7 million people.”

National data

In 2024, official records indicated 320,470 ‘active fishers’ (men and women) in Sri Lanka, with 225,480 engaged in marine fisheries¹ – 85% in coastal fisheries.³ Statistics further indicate that about 1.12 people are directly engaged in the fishing industry, with fisheries providing indirect employment to approximately 2.7 million people.³ In total, around 18% of Sri Lanka’s population relies on the fishing sector for their livelihoods.¹⁰

Illuminating Hidden Harvests estimates

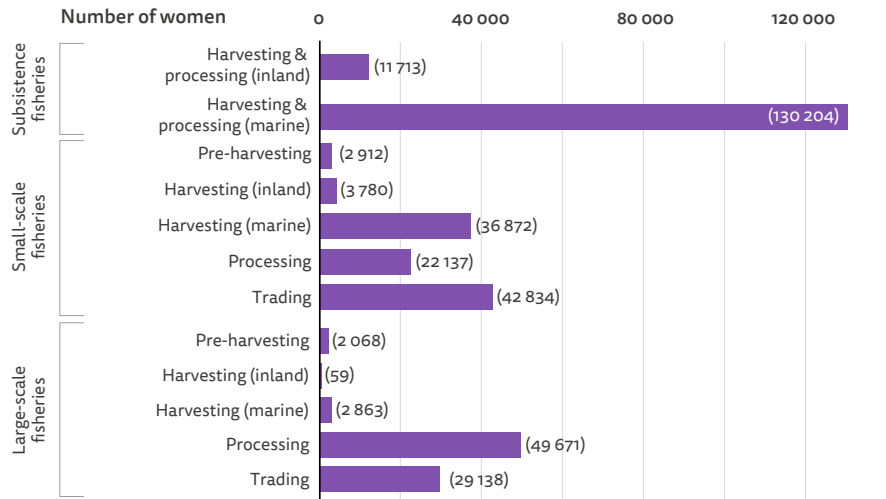
The Illuminating Hidden Harvests (IHH) Initiative^{i,11} estimated that in 2016, a total of 1,087,524 individuals^j were engaged in the fisheries sector, including pre-and post-harvest as well as subsistence^k fishing activities. Most individuals are involved across small-scale^l fisheries (SSF) supply chains (40%), followed by subsistence fisheries (32%) (see figure below). The IHH also estimated that a total of approximately 4,555,122 people depended, at least partly, on fisheries or subsistence fishing: 2,007,952 in SSF, 1,504,241 in subsistence fisheries, and 1,042,929 in large scale fisheries (LSF).^{m,n}



Employment contribution (women)

Illuminating Hidden Harvests estimates

The IHH Initiative¹¹ estimated that, in 2016, a total of 334,250 women were active in fisheries, with the subsistence sector providing the greatest source of livelihoods for women (see figure below). Women accounted for 41% of the total number of people engaged in subsistence fisheries. They represented 42% and 53% of individuals active in the processing and trading activities of SSF products, respectively. In LSF, women made up 45% of those engaged in processing and 46% of those engaged in trading activities.



“Despite substantial contributions, women face systemic inequalities – including low pay, insecure work, limited bargaining power, and exclusion from decision-making and official statistics.”

Women play important, but often overlooked, roles across Sri Lanka's fisheries sector. Their participation spans harvesting, processing, marketing, and ancillary work, but most of this work remains informal. Engagement patterns vary widely across regions and communities, shaped by intersecting factors such as ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, and cultural norms. Despite their substantial and historically rooted contributions, women face systemic inequalities – including lower wages, insecure employment, limited bargaining power, and exclusion from official decision-making processes.¹⁴ Their work is largely undervalued and rarely recognized as formal fishing within households, decision-making and support systems, or official statistics.¹⁵

Harvesting and nearshore gleaning

Women's direct engagement in harvesting varies significantly across regions, reflecting cultural, religious, and socio-economic patterns. Women are more likely to engage directly in harvesting in northern, north-western, and eastern coastal areas, particularly through nearshore gleaning and lagoon-based fishing activities.¹⁶ In contrast, in much of the western and southern regions, women are more commonly involved in fish processing and trade.¹⁶

In Tamil communities along the west and east coasts, women from low-income households glean for prawns, clams, mussels, and fish in lagoons, often using their hands, small nets, cloth, or sarees.¹⁶ In Ponnalai (Jaffna), women – mostly older, widowed, and from traditional fishing families – primarily engage in gleaning for shrimps and crabs in the lagoon.¹⁷ Despite contributing substantially to household livelihoods and local fisheries, many face marginalisation and socio-economic challenges, including low literacy levels, limited incomes, and restricted access to modern fishing techniques and government support.

“In coastal Trincomalee, Muslim women glean clams, mussels (*matti*), and seaweed in lagoons; some also row or dive for prawns and crabs seasonally—a traditional livelihood reflecting strong cultural ties to the sea.”

In coastal Trincomalee, Muslim women predominantly glean for clams, mussels (*matti*), and seaweed in lagoons.¹⁸ Some have developed rowing and diving skills to access deeper waters and collect prawns and crabs seasonally for local sale.¹⁸ This traditional livelihood, often passed down through generations, reflects a deep cultural connection to the occupation and the sea. Despite being stigmatized for their engagement in 'muddy work', these women make strategic use of informal and flexible work structures to maintain economic control over their earnings.¹⁸ Tamil women from the Indigenous Vedda community have comparatively greater freedom to engage in fishing activities, often working alongside men in beach seine operations. However, gendered wage disparities and social constraints persist even in these more integrated settings.¹⁸

In Sinhala Catholic west coast villages, where men dominate fishing, women sort and stack fish, and their work is commonly understood as supporting male fishers.¹⁶ This pattern is also reflected in southern Sinhala Buddhist communities, where men typically fish while women handle processing and prepare fish for market, with gendered roles often passed from parents to children. Sinhalese women are also largely excluded from fishing-related activities in the Trincomalee region due to stricter cultural norms and limited historical ties to fishing livelihoods.

“In lagoon systems such as the Anawilundawa Wetland, women’s nearshore harvesting is often part of diversified household livelihoods combining lagoon fisheries, aquaculture, wage labour, and factory work.”

In lagoon systems, such as the Anawilundawa Wetland (north-west coast), women’s nearshore harvesting activities are often embedded within diversified household economies combining lagoon fisheries, aquaculture, wage labour, and factory employment.¹⁵ Among predominantly Sinhala Catholic households in Muthupanthiya and Sinhala Buddhist households in resettled lagoon-edge settlements such as Nagul Eliya, women glean for small fish, prawns, crabs, and molluscs in shallow waters and mangrove edges. Some also accompany spouses in small crafts, such as *theppam*, assisting with sorting the catch.¹⁵ While lagoon fishing is more commonly undertaken by men, a small number of women fish independently, particularly in households where spousal support is limited or absent.¹⁵

Processing, sorting, and marketing

Women play a visible role in fish processing and trade across Sri Lanka, with the form and visibility of their participation varying by region, ethnicity, and market structure.¹⁶ In coastal Trincomalee, some Tamil women engage in fish sorting and marketing through caste- and kinship-based networks to access supply and maintain customer relations. Along the north-western coast, many women operate as mobile vendors rather than trading within formal market spaces.¹⁵

“In Negombo, women’s contributions are concentrated in post-harvest activities such as cleaning, trimming, and portioning of fish, alongside small-scale trading, while men largely control landing sites, bulk purchasing, auctions, and transport.”

Along the west coast, and in Negombo specifically, Sinhala Catholic women play an important role in small-scale fish trading, though their participation is shaped by gendered barriers related to market access, capital, and control over space.¹⁹ Women are more visible in smaller, peripheral markets serving fish for local consumption, while in central markets – dominated by higher-value seafood brought in from multi-day fishing boats – women often occupy more marginal roles and spaces.¹⁹ In Negombo, women’s contributions are concentrated in post-harvest activities such as cleaning, trimming, and portioning, alongside small-scale trading, while men largely control landing sites, bulk purchasing, auctions, and transport.¹⁹ Limited access to upfront capital and formal credit constrains women’s ability to compete for higher-value fish or participate in auction systems, reinforcing reliance on informal credit, long-standing relationships with small-scale fishers, and lower-value catch.¹⁹ As Negombo’s fisheries have become more mechanised and commercially oriented, these intersecting capital and spatial constraints have intensified, contributing to the gradual displacement of women from central trading roles into lower-margin and informal segments of the value chain.¹⁹

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In southern areas, cultural norms can restrict women’s access to landing sites; some rely on male relatives to procure raw fish or attend landing sites accompanied by a male family member.²⁰

Expanding value addition in Sri Lanka’s blue swimming crab value chain – particularly in northern Sri Lanka – has created new employment opportunities for women in coastal communities. In the blue swimming crab fisheries of northern Sri Lanka (Palk Bay) and the northwest (Gulf of Mannar), women are prominently engaged in processing and value-addition activities. The Market Development Facility reports that increased investment in seafood processing and canning facilities, linked to export-oriented supply

chains, supported the growth of crab processing in northern Sri Lanka and contributed to greater competition among buyers.²¹ These developments have generated formal employment for women, many of whom previously had limited access to wage labour. On average, women employed in these factories contribute around one-third of household income, and approximately 30% of employees are the primary earners in female-headed households.²¹

In general, however, employment opportunities in fish processing remain shaped by strong gender divisions of labour and unequal working conditions. In medium- to large-scale fish processing facilities employing both women and men, tasks are typically gendered: women debone and cut fish, while men lift baskets, gut fish, and tend fires during the boiling process. Women's wages in such establishments are often about half those of men. In fish canning factories – where women dominate the manual workforce – employment contracts are frequently temporary, often without social benefit contributions, and supervisory roles are typically held by men.²⁰

Dried fish and Maldive fish value chains

The production and trade of dried fish (mostly sun-dried, occasionally oven-dried, across a wide range of species)⁸ are a centuries-old tradition deeply rooted in local culture and critical to local livelihoods, nutrition security, coastal economies, and the wellbeing of marginalized groups.^{8,14} Maldive fish – known as *umbalakaḍa* (උමබලකඩ) in Sinhala and *masikkaruvadu* (മാപ്പിങ് കറുഖാലു) in Tamil – is a fish product, typically tuna, that is boiled with spices or plant flavourings, smoked, and sun-dried.⁹ Maldive fish originated in the Maldives and was historically processed there and imported to Sri Lanka. Domestic production in Sri Lanka began only in the 1970s, following an import substitution policy.⁹ It is an important condiment in local cuisine, processed and traded in smaller quantities than dried fish.

The Maldive fish industry, which is concentrated mostly in a few communities on the south coast, operates through an intricate network of value chains, with products traded predominantly in local markets. Women, as wives or relatives of fishers, are dominant in production, transforming lower-grade fish into higher-value products. Operations range from small, home-based enterprises handling 500-2,000kg of processed fish monthly, to larger establishments managing up to 20,000kg per month, typically with waged workers, drying ovens, and established supplier and buyer networks.⁹

Most dried fish processors tend to operate at very small scales, with limited equipment, working capital, and access to quality raw materials – generating narrow profit margins often used to service debt. Women working collectively are often able to pool resources and operate more efficiently.²⁰ Research shows that less commercialized, community-embedded dried fish value chains tend to offer women more equitable participation, underscoring the need for caution in commercial expansion strategies.¹⁴

In eastern communities such as Kalkudah and Kayankerni, women's participation in dried fish production has been closely linked to the availability of nearshore catch.²² Recent significant declines in fish stocks have resulted in little to no fish being available for processing, effectively pushing women out of the broader fisheries value chains and eroding an important source of supplementary household income. Additionally, despite strong interest in diversifying livelihoods, unpaid care responsibilities continue to constrain women's mobility and opportunities for income generation.

“Dried fish production and trade are longstanding traditions deeply rooted in local culture, supporting livelihoods, nutrition, coastal economies, and the wellbeing of marginalized groups.”

“Maldive fish production, concentrated mostly in a few south-coast communities, relies on local value chains where women transform lower-grade fish into higher-value products.”

“In eastern communities, declining fish stocks have resulted in little to no fish available for dried fish production, pushing women out of fisheries value chains and eroding an important source of supplementary household income.”

In west coast villages, Sinhala Catholic and Tamil women often run micro-scale, home-based dried fish processing operations, or work in small and medium-scale dried fish enterprises, typically owned by men.

Women from Sinhala Catholic villages also engage in small-scale fresh and dried fish trading in local and regional markets. Some women traders travel to east coast fishing communities to purchase dried fish directly, or source fish on the east coast through family networks and resell it on the west coast during seasonal supply gaps.¹⁶

“Small-scale fishers on Sri Lanka’s west and east coasts have long migrated seasonally to calmer waters during the southwest monsoon to sustain fishing, livelihoods, and food security.”

Seasonal migration and gendered livelihood dynamics

Small-scale fishers on Sri Lanka’s west and east coasts have a long history of seasonal internal migration (coastal and coast-to-coast), particularly during the southwest monsoon when rough seas limit fishing along the west coast. Migration allows fishers to continue fishing in calmer waters and sustain livelihoods and food security during the off-season.²³

Patterns of migration vary across communities and are shaped by household responsibilities, access to fishing assets, and social norms. Historically, entire fishing households migrated together, but in recent decades seasonal migration typically involves male fishers travelling to other coastal areas while women and children remain in home communities due to schooling and caregiving responsibilities.²³ In some cases, however, women still accompany migrating fishers, particularly from boat-owning households, with wives contributing to fishing operations by cooking, maintaining temporary shelters, and engaging in fish processing or related activities.²³ Evidence from west coast communities suggests that women’s participation in seasonal migration varies significantly between villages: in one study site nearly 40% of women from fishing households migrated seasonally, compared with around 10% in another, while women from the east coast villages examined in the study did not typically migrate.²⁴

Migration can provide important livelihood benefits for fishing households. It allows fishers to access more favourable fishing grounds during the off-season, while women who accompany migrant fishers may engage in dried fish processing and other post-harvest activities that contribute to household income and strengthen social networks within fishing communities.²³ These activities can provide women with financial independence, enhanced social mobility, and knowledge-sharing opportunities as they gain experience in pricing, market dynamics, and fish selection.²³

At the same time, migration can create social pressures and relational costs, such as family separation. Children are often left in the care of grandparents or other relatives when parents migrate.²³ Women who remain in home communities also frequently assume greater responsibility for managing households and caring for children and elderly family members.²⁴

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Governance and collective organisation

Historically, collective action in Sri Lanka’s fisheries has been organised through Fisher Cooperative Societies and, more recently, Rural Fisheries Development Societies.⁷ In marine fishing associations, membership and decision-making are predominantly male. Women’s membership is often tied to that of male relatives and women often attend meetings on behalf of male family members – particularly when men are away at sea for extended periods. Despite strong attendance in certain associations, women’s influence over decision-making remains limited. In some cooperatives, (fisher) men’s attendance is compulsory and women are excluded from membership. For example, the membership of the National Fisheries Federation in Negombo consists entirely of men, with no women members recorded.²⁵ In

“Across much of the coastal belt, women are active in dried fish and Maldive fish processing associations, and often occupy leadership and office-bearing positions.”

contrast, both women and men may participate in a range of processing-related associations, including dried fish processing groups and the Maldive fish processing association in the south.⁵ Across much of the coastal belt, women are active in these associations, and often occupy leadership and office-bearing positions, reflecting their central role in post-harvest activities. However, participation remains more limited in some areas – particularly along the east coast – where prevailing social norms constrain women’s engagement in such organisations. Several processors’ associations exist, including a relatively large dried fish processors association in Chilaw (west coast) and smaller village-level groups in locations such as Kottegoda and Kudawella (south coast) and Kinniya (east coast), although many face challenges sustaining regular activity and effective coordination over time.²⁶

Structural constraints

Across the sector, women face structural disadvantages: weak bargaining power – for example in obtaining raw fish, selling their products, securing marketing channels, or accessing support services; limited access to essential services like healthcare and sanitation; exclusion from harbour management committees and some fisheries cooperatives; marginalisation within governance structures and decision-making processes; and lack of recognition in fisheries management systems and national policies.^{20,23} The absence of post-harvest activities in Sri Lanka’s *2018 National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy*, the lack of sex disaggregated data in the marine sector, and the exclusion of women’s contributions from official statistics reflect their ongoing invisibility.^{27,28} For women-headed households, the impact is even more profound, with compounded vulnerabilities due to conflict and environmental challenges.^{24,29}

Women navigate these constraints by drawing on ancestral ties to fisheries, cultural traditions, kinship networks, and the informal economy.¹⁸

Labour conditions

Labour across the fisheries sector is characterized by informality, poor safety standards, and limited access to social protections.³⁰ Although national laws prohibit employing those under 18 on vessels, mandate compensation in case of death, and require insurance on multi-day boats, enforcement remains weak and significant gaps in worker protections persist.³⁰ Labour laws governing workplace disputes and worker protections are poorly suited to the fishing sector and often gender-biased.¹ Most women lack formal work contracts, leaving them unprotected.¹ The current organisation and governance of the fisheries sector, together with the nature of women’s participation, often leave women outside the scope of labour protections under the *International Labour Organisation’s Work in Fishing Convention (C188)*, which Sri Lanka has not yet ratified.³⁰ Structural reform in line with C188 would promote decent work standards in the fishing sector for the benefit of both men and women whose livelihoods depend on fishing.¹

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Inland fisheries

There is limited gender research in the inland fisheries sector. Interestingly, however, unlike in marine fisheries, national authorities collect sex-disaggregated data for inland fisheries, enabling more accurate documentation of women’s participation and offering a potential model for similar efforts in marine fisheries. According to available national statistics, around 6.3% of inland fishers were women in 2021,³⁰ contributing to a range of activities, including net mending, disentangling fish and giant prawns from nets, and fish processing. In several inland areas, women are also involved in operating fishing canoes, fishing, marketing, and dried fish processing. Female fishers have been reported operating successfully in reservoirs such as Minneriya, Kawudulla, Mahakanadarawa, Girithale Tank, and Chandrika Wewa.^x

In some cases, women participate in fisheries societies and may assume membership – for example, through inheritance of membership from a spouse or by independently engaging in fishing activities.^y Women have also been reported to serve as landing site managers and office bearers within inland fisheries associations.^z Nonetheless, despite these examples of participation and leadership, research indicates that women's participation in inland fisheries governance remains limited in some contexts, partly due to gender norms and the emphasis on active fishing as a key criterion for membership and recognition.³¹

Social considerations

“Sri Lanka’s Global Gender Gap Index ranking fell from 13th in 2006 to 130th in 2025 – the only country to regress from its baseline.”

Despite notable progress in human development and women’s advancement – such as electing the world’s first female head of state Sirimavo Bandaranaike^{aa} in 1960 – and comparatively strong gender equality indicators within South Asia, Sri Lanka has experienced deepening gender inequality over the past two decades.³² Contributing factors include militarisation and authoritarian political changes brought about by the Rajapakse regimes.³³

The deterioration in gender equality outcomes is also visible in international indices. Sri Lanka’s ranking in the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI)^{ab} declined sharply from 13th out of 115 countries in 2006³⁴ to 130th out of 146 countries in 2025.³⁵ Over the past 19 years, Sri Lanka is the only economy to have regressed from its 2006 baseline, declining by 7.4 percentage points in gender parity scores.³⁵ Similarly, the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development shows rising gender inequality between 2019 and 2023, driven by increasing disparities in women’s access to leadership roles, formal employment, and decision-making spaces (see *SIGI* section below).³⁶

While poverty has declined and economic growth has improved since the end of civil war in 2009, progress has been uneven. Women constitute a large share of newly vulnerable groups, shaped by the lasting economic, social, and psychological consequences of conflict.³⁷

Education

“The widening gender gap has occurred despite high literacy rates, gender parity in primary education, more women in higher education, and improved economic growth.”

The widening gender gap has occurred in a context of very high literacy rates (>90% for women and men), parity in enrolment in primary education, a higher number of women at secondary and tertiary levels of education, and better economic growth over the same period. These gains have expanded opportunities for women’s economic and social participation, particularly in urban areas.

However, educational attainment has not translated into equal outcomes. Patriarchal norms and power relations³² continue to frame women’s roles as primarily domestic, marginalise their contributions, and limit their mobility, autonomy, and access to fundamental rights, including justice and labour rights.³⁸ In some contexts, these patterns have intensified in the post-civil war period.³⁹ Some educational materials have also been found to reinforce gender stereotypes, portraying girls as subordinate and passive and boys as dominant and assertive.⁴⁰⁻⁴²

Labour considerations

Despite comprising 52% of the population, women represented only 35% of the economically active workforce in 2021.⁴³ In 2024, labour force participation rate was estimated at 31.6% for women, compared to 69.7% for men.^{ac} Women also experience unemployment at roughly twice the rate of men,³⁷ and are disproportionately concentrated in lower-paid, lower-status occupations within the informal economy.³² Opportunities

for advancement remain limited, including within female-dominated professions.⁴⁴ Having children is further associated with reduced labour force participation and lower earnings.⁴⁵

“Unpaid care work remains a major structural barrier: about 3.5 million women provide unpaid care, compared with 1.5 million men.”

Unpaid care work is a major structural barrier. Approximately 3.5 million women of working age provide unpaid care for children and older family members, compared with 1.5 million men.⁴⁶ This labour, essential to household and social functioning and often dictated by gender norms, frequently comes at the expense of women’s careers and remains unaccounted for in the formal economy.⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸ Limited access to formal affordable, reliable childcare, alongside unsafe and unreliable transport, further constrain women’s participation in paid employment.⁴⁷

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Impacts of the 2022 economic crisis

In 2022, Sri Lanka became the first Indo-Pacific country in decades to default on its external debt, triggering an economic crisis that deepened existing gender inequalities. Many middle-income households fell into poverty, as food, fuel, and transport costs surged, and access to healthcare and essential services declined. Evidence indicates that women were disproportionately affected as they shouldered increased caregiving responsibilities and took on multiple additional income-generating activities to offset income losses.^{49,50} Women working in low-wage sectors – including factories, tea plantations, and street sweeping – experienced acute hardship, often skipping meals to feed their children and unable to afford basic necessities.⁵¹ Men were also affected by widespread job losses,⁵² and in some households assumed greater caregiving and domestic work. Overall, economic strain contributed to heightened stress, anxiety, and mental health challenges across households. Reports indicate a rise in domestic and intimate partner violence during this period, with women particularly exposed to compounded economic and social vulnerabilities.⁵³

Labour migration has long been an important livelihood strategy in Sri Lanka, particularly for women who migrate to Middle Eastern countries to work as domestic workers and support their families through remittances.⁵⁴ For many lower-income households, these remittances represent a critical source of income used to cover essential needs such as food, education, healthcare, and debt repayment in contexts where stable local employment opportunities remain limited.⁵⁴ The recent economic crisis appears to have further strengthened these pressures, with survey data from 2022 indicating that more than 75% of respondents were considering migrating abroad in response to worsening economic conditions.⁵⁵ In fishing communities and other coastal areas facing declining incomes and rising living costs, such migration may represent an increasingly important – though often difficult – household coping strategy.^{ad}

Women’s rights and political empowerment

Sri Lanka’s legal framework establishes formal guarantees of gender equality, yet significant gaps persist in protection and implementation. The Constitution guarantees equality before the law, with Article 12 explicitly prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex.^{ae} Affirmative action measures are permitted to promote equal rights, and the 1993 *Women’s Charter* adapted Sri Lanka’s commitments under the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to the national context.⁵⁶ The 2016 introduction of a 25% quota for women in local councils marked an important milestone in advancing women’s political representation.⁵⁶ However, the Constitution does not provide a comprehensive definition of discrimination nor does it explicitly recognise intersecting forms of

“Many women – especially those facing intersecting vulnerabilities – lack adequate legal protection, with persistent discriminatory laws, customary practices, structural barriers, and limited funding further undermining gender equality.”

disadvantage. As a result, many women – particularly those experiencing multiple and overlapping vulnerabilities, including due to ethnicity, legal or socio-economic status, and gender identity – remain without adequate legal protection.⁵⁷

These challenges are compounded by conflicting customary practices, entrenched structural, cultural, and institutional barriers, inadequate budgetary allocations for gender equality measures, and the persistence of discriminatory laws. For instance, the colonial-era *Vagrants Ordinance* relies on vague terminology, including the designation of “idle and disorderly persons,” to criminalize behaviours such as begging and loitering. The breadth of these provisions has enabled discretionary enforcement, with documented cases indicating disproportionate targeting of women in situations of economic vulnerability, arbitrary detention in state-run institutions, and increased risk of mistreatment.⁵⁸ Access to justice remains especially difficult for women in rural or minority communities, who may face language barriers, limited legal illiteracy, financial constraints, and social stigma.⁴⁴

Broader systems of inequality also affect men, who may be pressured to conform to restrictive gender norms that emphasise economic provision, emotional restraint, and social dominance.³⁷ They also underpin discrimination experienced by LGBTIQ^{af} persons continue to face discrimination and violence in the absence of explicit legal protections for sexual orientation and gender identity.³⁷

Inheritance, marriage, and family relations

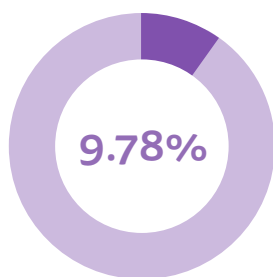
The *Land Development Ordinance* (1935) historically prioritised male heirs for state land inheritance⁵⁹ – a provision amended only in 2022 after decades of advocacy.^{60,61} While this amendment addressed formal gender disparities in succession, parallel reforms permitting mortgaging of state land have raised concerns about heightened risks of land loss and dispossession, particularly among smallholders and economically vulnerable women.⁶¹

Sri Lanka continues to apply parallel personal laws governing marriage and divorce on the basis of ethnicity and religion. The *1951 Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act* (MMDA) – a colonial-era legislative construct blending Batavian Islamic rulings, Tamil customs, English procedures, and elements of shariah law⁶² – has been widely criticised for provisions that raise equality concerns. These include the lack of a minimum legal age for marriage; permitting child marriage as young as 12; the lack of a legal requirement for the bride’s signature to demonstrate consent; unequal divorce procedures, allowing men to repudiate a marriage without cause, while women must prove fault with corroborating witnesses;⁶³ restrictions limiting Quazi judges and registrar appointments to Muslim men;⁶⁴ and the permissibility of polygamy with minimal safeguards, undermining women’s property and custody rights. Legal scholars and human rights bodies have identified tensions between aspects of the MMDA and Sri Lanka’s constitutional guarantees of equality, as well as its obligations under CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁶³

Discriminatory provisions also remain under *Kandyan* and *Thesawalamai* laws, particularly around property rights and divorce. The *Kandyan Marriage and Divorce Act* contains provisions that skew property division in divorce settlements in favour of Sinhala men.⁶⁵ The continued application of discriminatory provisions in *Thesawalamai* law is often justified as preserving Tamil customary traditions. However, many of these provisions were codified and institutionalized under Dutch and British colonial rule, when patriarchal legal concepts reshaped women’s pre-existing rights to

“Legal scholars and human rights bodies have identified tensions between aspects of the MMDA, constitutional equality guarantees, and Sri Lanka’s obligations under CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.”

own, inherit, and manage land.⁶⁴ These laws remain largely unchanged, contributing to unequal land rights for *Thesawalamai*-governed married women and widows in post-conflict northern Sri Lanka.⁶⁵ Despite longstanding reform efforts, progress remains slow due to cultural and religious sensitivities.



Percentage of seats held by women in Parliament (as of December 2025).

“Harini Amarasuriya currently serves as Sri Lanka’s Prime Minister and Minister of Education, Higher Education and Vocational Education.”

“One in four (24.9%) women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner since the age of 15.”

“Underreporting of domestic violence and sexual harassment is driven by stigma, shame, low trust in authorities, and police responses that downplay or blame women who report abuse.”

Political representation

Despite constitutional commitments to equality, women remain significantly underrepresented in politics. The 2025 Global Gender Gap report ranks Sri Lanka 130th out of 146 countries for political empowerment, based on women’s representation in ministerial and executive positions over the last 50 years.³⁵ As indicated above, Sri Lanka is the only economy to have regressed on this indicator over the past two decades.³⁵ As of December 2025, women hold only 9.78% of seats in Parliament (22 out of 225).⁶⁶ There are currently two women in Sri Lanka’s Cabinet: Prime Minister and Minister of Education, Harini Amarasuriya; and the Minister of Women and Child Affairs, Saroja Savithri Paulraj. Other senior positions held by women include Dr. Kaushalya Ariyaratne, Deputy Minister for Mass Media, and Kushani Rohanadeera, who has served as Secretary General of Parliament since 2023 – an appointed administrative role within the parliamentary system.

Although women comprise more than half of registered voters, no women contested the 2023⁶⁷ and 2024⁵⁶ presidential elections. Barriers to participation include unregulated campaign financing, limited access to funding, and lack of training and preparation.⁶⁸ Women also face discrimination through lower news coverage, widespread online hate speech, and gender-based violence in the political arena.⁶⁸ While quota provisions are in place for provincial councils, there is no electoral quota to promote gender balanced representation at national level.⁶⁸

Socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors, all play a role in women’s underrepresentation in politics, but recent research points to institutional barriers – particularly centralized, opaque, and patriarchal party structures – as the primary driver in systematically limiting women’s entry and advancement.⁶⁹

Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive issue in Sri Lanka. According to the 2019 Women’s Well-being Survey, one in five women (20.4%) report having experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime, and one in four (24.9%) have experienced such violence since the age of 15.⁷⁰ GBV is more pronounced in rural and conflict-affected areas, where women also face intersecting socio-economic vulnerabilities.³⁷ Despite transitional justice efforts, many survivors of wartime sexual violence continue to await legal redress and reparations.

Sexual harassment is widespread, particularly in urban public spaces and workplaces. A 2019 UN Population Fund study found that 90% of Sri Lankan women and girls had experienced sexual harassment on public transportation at least once in their lifetime, yet only 4% reported it.⁴³ The same study found that 60% of women were unaware that sexual harassment carries criminal penalties.⁴³

Underreporting of domestic violence and sexual harassment is driven by cultural stigma and associated feelings of shame, lack of trust in authorities, and the tendency of police to downplay or blame women who come forward. Survivors also face barriers in accessing justice, including delays in legal proceedings, and under-resourced legal aid.

Marital rape is criminalized only under certain conditions (see above).⁷¹ In practice, this means that sexual violence within marriage is not fully recognized as a criminal offence, leaving many women without legal protection from rape within marriage.⁵⁸ Cultural norms in some communities frame violence as a private matter, further discouraging reporting and legal recourse.

Female genital mutilation (FGM), although not legally regulated or prohibited,^{72,ai} is practised among some Muslim communities,⁷¹ which make up 9.8% of the population. Small-scale studies and community accounts suggest that many women and girls among Moor, Malay, and Dawoodi Bohra communities may have undergone some form of cutting in infancy or early childhood by traditional practitioners or medical professionals.⁷³ While not all Muslim groups practise FGM, it is increasingly recognised as a public health and child protection concern, with advocates calling for legal reform and stronger safeguards for girls' bodily integrity.⁷³

While Sri Lanka has taken meaningful steps to address GBV – including through the ratification of international conventions, law reforms, and the integration of GBV management into government policies, such as the *Prevention of Domestic Violence Act*, no. 34 of 2005 – enforcement remains weak due to limited resources, low awareness, cultural resistance, and entrenched gender norms. These norms contribute to underpin male dominance and normalize intimate partner violence and GBV. During COVID-19 lockdowns, intimate partner violence reportedly worsened, with survivors facing heightened psychological and sexual health impacts while access to care decreased.⁷⁴ These patterns underscore the need for accessible, survivor-centred support services, including psychosocial care, legal protection, and effective enforcement.⁷⁴

Institutional commitments and future directions

Sri Lanka's Constitution enshrines gender equality, but discriminatory laws, weak enforcement, and entrenched cultural norms continue to limit its realisation in practice. Bridging these gaps will require sustained dialogue, broad stakeholder engagement, comprehensive legal reform, stronger institutional support, and addressing underlying social, cultural, and economic factors. The country's legal framework does emphasize stakeholder consultation, potentially offering a meaningful avenue for strengthening women's voice in decision-making.⁷⁵

Several recent policy developments are encouraging. A *National Women's Policy* is under development with the aim to address issues such as GBV, economic empowerment, and political participation. The policy is designed to ensure gender equality across sectors and provide a framework for action on women's issues. The government is also continuing to implement the *National Action Plan on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence*, with a focus on prevention, survivor support, and prosecution. In 2023, Cabinet approved the *National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*, covering eight thematic areas, with a Strategic Action Plan currently being formulated.⁶⁰

Institutional mechanisms also exist to translate policy into practice. The Ministry of Women and Child Affairs and Social Empowerment leads national efforts, including on economic empowerment and protection from violence. Under its mandate, the Sri Lanka Women's Bureau (established in 1978)⁷⁶ supports women's economic and social advancement through skill development and entrepreneurship, delivered through Women Development Officers stationed at district and divisional levels. These officers run awareness sessions, coordinate training programmes,⁷⁷ and

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provide oversight and advisory support to community-level women's societies, including revolving loan schemes and small-group credit programmes.

The National Committee on Women, established in 1994, is widely recognized as one of the most significant state-led mechanisms for advancing gender equality.⁷⁶ It plays an advisory role and coordinates gender-related policy initiatives. Other key institutions include the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, which monitors women's rights and investigates cases of discrimination; the Legal Aid Commission, which provides legal support to marginalised women; and the Ministry of Justice, which advocates for gender-responsive legal reform.

Key frameworks promoting gender equality and their ratification status^{aj}

- ✓ Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) signed in 1980 and ratified in 1981.⁷⁹ Sri Lanka submitted its ninth periodic report in 2022.⁷⁹
- ✓ CEDAW Optional Protocol^{ak} acceded in 2002.⁷⁹
- ✓ Beijing Platform for Action. Sri Lanka submitted a national review in 2015⁸⁰ and its Beijing+30 report in 2024.⁸¹

While Sri Lanka is reporting on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals regularly, data is missing for some indicators under SDG 5 on Gender Equality.⁸²

Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)

SIGI^{al} values range from 0 for no discrimination to 100^{am} for very high discrimination; with higher SIGI values denoting higher inequality.

| Year | Total aggregated index value | Discrimination in the family | Restricted physical integrity | Restricted access to productive & financial resources | Restricted civil liberties |
|--------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| 2019 ⁸³ | 43 (high) | 30 (med.) | 36 (med.) | 76 (v. high) | 20 (low) |
| 2023 ³⁶ | 53 (v. high) | 63 (v. high) | 42 (high) | 63 (v. high) | 44 (high) |

Gender Inequality Index (GII)

The GII^{an} value is given on a scale from 0 to 1, with 0 being 0% inequality, indicating women "fare equally" in comparison to men and 1 being 100% inequality, indicating women "fare poorly" in comparison to men. The assessment of women 'faring equally' or 'poorly' compared to men refers to their relative standing in health, political representation, education, and economic participation.

Value (2023)⁸⁴

0.367

Global Rank (2023)

93

(out of 172 countries)

Gender in fisheries governance

Sixty-three fisheries governance documents were identified and reviewed as of July 2025.^{ao,ap} Of these, five reference women or gender in some regard: four through explicit mention of women or gender (without feminine pronouns), one solely through the use of feminine pronouns (she/her), and none through both. The review covered a wide range of laws, regulations, statutes, development frameworks, and management strategies guiding Sri Lanka's fisheries sector.

The **Ten Year Development Policy Framework of the Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Sector (2007–2016)** emphasizes the need to promote co-management and empower fishing communities. A key objective includes increasing employment opportunities in the sector, with a specific action to “strengthen women’s groups in fishing communities and encourage them to promote savings.”

The **Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Act, No. 2 of 1996** requires that the Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Advisory Council include “two representatives of women engaged in fishing.”

The **Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (Amendment) Act, No. 35 of 2013** enables the Director-General to appoint representatives of fisher women’s groups to the Coordinating Committee of a given Fisheries Management Area.

The **National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy (2018)** which addresses environmental and social issues to a greater extent than previous acts, includes a sub-section and several clauses on gender. These include promoting equality opportunities for women’s participation in sector activities, making gender mainstreaming integral to small-scale fisheries development strategies, creating conditions for both women and men to access resources and benefits, and encouraging both women and men to participate in finding solutions to problems. It also commits to improving the social safety net and social security protection for fishers and fish workers, including women, as well as assists women to set up micro-enterprises and provides training to women for supplementary income generation. However, the new policy fails to include post-harvest activities – where women’s contributions are most important – and lacks an action plan as well as institutional mechanisms to implement the gender-focused interventions that have been formulated.¹⁶

Roles in the fisheries sector are predominantly framed in masculine terms, including through the use of male pronouns in governance documents. The use of feminine pronouns indicates recognition that women may also hold various leadership, regulatory, and/or operational roles in the sector. The **Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Statute of Western Province (2017)** uses “he/she” in reference to a member of the Advisory Council.

Threats and drivers of change in fisheries

Several key threats to and drivers of change in Sri Lanka’s coastal ecosystems and examples of how these may be addressed are outlined below. While threats and drivers of change to fisheries may (or may not) have specific gender dimensions associated with them, gender integration is necessary in efforts to navigate them, improve adaptation, and foster resilience in the face of change.

Climate change – Sri Lanka is consistently ranked as one of the most climate-vulnerable countries due to a combination of exposure and low

“Warming sea surface temperatures have contributed to marine heatwaves and coral bleaching, increasing stress on reef ecosystems and cascading impacts on reef-associated biodiversity and fisheries productivity.”

“Ocean warming and shifting monsoon dynamics may alter the distribution and abundance of key fish species, including small pelagics important to dried fish value chains.”

“Climate and fisheries policies remain under-resourced and unevenly implemented, with gaps in monitoring, coordination, and gender-responsive planning, highlighting the need for stronger ecosystem-based management, improved climate data, resilient infrastructure, and inclusive adaptation.”

adaptive capacity.⁸⁵ It is highly exposed to marine and coastal climate risks due to its extensive coastline, densely populated low-lying areas, and strong reliance on fisheries and coastal ecosystems.⁸⁶ Sea surface temperatures in the tropical Indian Ocean have risen faster than the global average (approximately 0.15°C per decade), with projections of continued warming and more frequent and severe marine heatwaves.⁸⁶ These trends have already contributed to repeated coral bleaching events (notably in 1998, 2016, and 2020) and increasing stress on reef systems, with cascading impacts on reef-associated biodiversity and fisheries productivity.⁸⁷ Ocean acidification and declining dissolved oxygen levels further heighten risks to coral reefs and marine food webs, while warming conditions may also increase the likelihood of harmful algal blooms and associated food safety concerns.⁸⁷

Sea levels in the northern Indian Ocean have risen steadily and are projected to increase by roughly 0.2–0.6m by the end of the century, amplifying coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion, and flood risks.⁸⁷ These risks are particularly significant given that approximately 40% of Sri Lanka’s population and a large share of economic activity are concentrated along the country’s coastline.⁸⁶ Coastal habitats – including mangroves and seagrass meadows, which provide fish nursery functions and shoreline protection – face increasing pressure from both climate change and existing land-use stresses.⁸⁶

Shifts in oceanographic conditions and productivity – driven by warming, changes in upwelling, rainfall variability and altered monsoon dynamics⁸⁵ – are likely to affect the distribution and abundance of key fish species, including small pelagics critical to dried fish value chains, as well as larger offshore species.⁸⁶

For fisheries-dependent livelihoods, climate change compounds existing vulnerabilities. Coastal fishers already face declining catches, fuel and gear cost inflation, and competition from larger fleets and imported products. Extreme weather events such as cyclones and storm surges disrupt fishing activities, damage gear and boats, and limit access to markets.⁸⁸ These events have a disproportionate impact on smaller-scale and artisanal operators, particularly in remote or poorly serviced areas, and for traditional fishing communities,⁸⁹ including the Coastal-Vedda. Traditional practices such as sail canoe and raft (*theppam*) fishing, as well as other non-mechanized fishing crafts, are particularly vulnerable to climatic shifts. For example, sail canoes depend on predictable wind and seasonal conditions, yet increasingly erratic wind patterns have reduced their viability.⁹⁰

Aquaculture systems face climate risks due to salinity shifts, water scarcity, and disease dynamics linked to temperature variability.⁸⁵

Despite the growing risks, current climate policies and fisheries management plans remain under-resourced and unevenly implemented. Gaps persist in early warning systems, gender-responsive adaptation planning, coordination, and climate-informed fisheries science.^{85,86} Strengthening ecosystem-based approaches, improving climate data and monitoring, investing in resilient coastal infrastructure, diversifying livelihoods, and supporting inclusive, community-based adaptation that integrates the use of indigenous knowledge systems will be essential to building long-term resilience.^{86,88}

Women in Sri Lanka tend to be impacted disproportionately by natural disasters and climate change, including through threats to their health, livelihoods, and safety. In some cases post-disaster recovery efforts may reinforce existing inequalities, including gender-based violence.³⁷ Although

women play critical roles in adaptation and resource stewardship, socio-economic, cultural, and political barriers limit their participation in climate decision-making.⁹¹

National climate policies, such as the *National Policy on Climate Change* and *National Adaptation Plans*, call for gender-sensitive approaches and greater inclusion, but implementation remains uneven, with persistent gaps in representation, access to finance, and the collection of gender-disaggregated data.⁹¹

Recent crises and unrest – Over the past five years, Sri Lanka has faced multiple overlapping crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and a political-economic crisis triggered by unsustainable debt and weak fiscal policies, resulting in widespread public protests and fuel shortages. Coastal communities were particularly affected by the fuel crisis. Limited access to kerosene, liquefied petroleum gas, and lubricants sharply increased the costs of gear, boat production, and daily fishing operations. With many fishers requiring 40–80 litres of fuel per day, livelihoods came close to a standstill.⁹² Some fishers sold their gear and joined larger vessels as crew, others shifted to shore-based fishing or left the sector entirely. Almost all fishers and their families reduced food intake, switched to cheaper protein sources, sold assets, and became increasingly risk-averse, unwilling to launch boats without fuel security.⁹³

In Negombo, fuel shortages significantly altered how fish reached markets, with gendered consequences across the value chain.^{92,93} Reduced fuel availability constrained mechanised one-day boats – and to a lesser extent multi-day vessels – leading to a sharp decline in seafood supply. During this period, fish landed by non-mechanised traditional stake-net fisheries in the lagoon and outrigger canoe fishers at sea, typically lower in value and caught closer to shore, became one of the main sources of fish available for sale. Women traders, who maintained long-standing relationships with these traditional fishers, were better positioned to access this limited supply and remain active in market spaces.⁹³ As a result, women temporarily became more visible in market spaces, reflecting a short-lived shift in market dynamics.

The COVID-19 pandemic similarly disrupted fisheries, disproportionately affecting women. Lockdowns and movement restrictions limited access to fish supplies and markets, while compliance with health regulations increased operating costs. Women's economic vulnerability worsened, particularly as they balanced income generation with expanded caregiving responsibilities. In the dried fish sector, a larger share of women (86%) than men (62%) reduced or stopped work.²⁶ Although some women diversified income sources, pre-existing gender inequalities deepened.⁹⁴ During the second wave, a region-based lockdown strategy combined with livelihood permits enabled partial recovery. As fresh fish became less accessible, demand for preserved products – particularly dried and Maldivian fish – increased, creating opportunities for some women traders; mobile vending expanded among both men and women.⁹⁴

The 2021 X-Press Pearl ship disaster further compounded these challenges, halting fishing along parts of the west coast, including Kalutara, Wadduwa, Panadura, and Negombo, for about three months. Fishermen's wives absorbed significant economic pressures, seeking informal work in shrimp processing, sewing, food preparation, or street vending, and frequently pawning jewellery to meet basic needs.⁹⁵ The impacts of the 2021 X-Press Pearl ship disaster were further compounded by women's limited formal recognition within fisheries governance structures. Compensation and relief measures were largely channelled through fisheries societies and

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“Fuel shortages in Negombo reduced mechanised fishing and seafood supply. Women traders' ties with traditional stake-net and outrigger canoe fishers enabled access to limited nearshore catch, temporarily increasing their visibility in markets.”

“The 2021 X-Press Pearl disaster halted fishing for months, forcing many fishers' wives into informal work and debt, while compensation systems largely excluded women engaged in post-harvest fisheries activities.”

registration systems that narrowly define fisheries work around active fishing and extraction, excluding all post-harvest activities (drying, sorting, and trading). As a result, income losses experienced by women and others engaged in fish sales and post-harvest work due to the disaster were not formally recognised, and many were ineligible for compensation. Even in areas such as Poruthota, where a women's fisheries society operated under a main fisheries society, decision-making authority and eligibility for relief remained concentrated among those recognised as active fishers.^{as}

In November 2025, Cyclone Ditwah triggered widespread flooding across Sri Lanka, directly affecting an estimated 2.3 million people, including approximately 1.2 million women, in households already facing high debt, unstable incomes, and limited capacity to absorb shocks.⁹⁵ The cyclone caused severe damage to Sri Lanka's fisheries and aquaculture sector, with losses estimated at LKR 20.4–21.4 billion.^{at,95,96} Damage to boats, gear, aquaculture inputs, and access infrastructure constrained fishers' ability to resume activities, while flooding of inland water bodies disrupted production systems across fisheries and aquaculture.⁹⁷ The consequences extend beyond immediate asset losses. Longer-term disruptions to fishing capacity and impacts on agriculture, incomes, and food security⁹⁷ are expected to deepen rural poverty, particularly in already fragile communities, once indirect losses are considered.⁹⁸

Changes in fish catch composition – A 2021–2023 study on the western coast of Negombo highlighted how mechanisation, the shift towards offshore fisheries, the introduction of higher value seafood into markets, and the globalisation of value chains are reshaping small-scale fisheries in gendered ways.¹⁹ As fishing effort moves offshore and catch composition changes, traditional small-scale fishers are increasingly marginalised within globalised value chains. Women, in particular, remain excluded from formal market structures and institutions. For example, historically, fish retailing in north-western marketplaces was dominated by women; once fish was landed on the beach by men, women were responsible for transporting and selling it, often through well-established informal credit networks.⁹⁹ However, as mechanised boats increased and the species composition and market value of catches shifted, capital requirements rose. Women vendors have found it increasingly difficult to pool sufficient capital to purchase fresh fish or extend credit to suppliers, eroding their bargaining power and market access.¹⁹ As a result, with the exception of a small number of women traders who have consolidated their position in regional markets, many women vendors now occupy more marginal spaces within Negombo's fish markets.¹⁹ At the same time, rapid urbanisation has reshaped distribution systems. The growth of localised retail shops across the country has reduced the reliance on long-distance travel and traditional head-loading practices that once characterised women's trade. While some women continue to purchase fish in one region for resale in another – for example, sourcing from the north, northwest, or east coast to sell in the west – these practices are increasingly constrained by capital limitations, competition, and evolving supply chains.^{au}

Fish imports and market pressures – Women fish processors face growing challenges from imported Maldivian fish, which is estimated to supply 80% of the local market and undercuts locally produced products. Small- and medium-scale women-led enterprises also struggle to compete with larger, often male-dominated, better resourced processors, who are able to access high-quality raw fish, invest in equipment, and meet stricter hygiene standards.^{20,100}

“As fishing effort moves offshore and catch composition changes, traditional small-scale fishers are increasingly marginalised within globalised value chains. Women, in particular, remain excluded from formal market structures and institutions.”

“Women fish processors face growing challenges from imported Maldivian fish – now supplying about 80% of the market – which undercuts locally produced products.”

A 2019 study of small-scale fishers in the Southern Province found their most pressing concerns included weak governance, competition from foreign fleets, and neglect by authorities.²⁰ They also cited declining fish stocks, climate change impacts, and, for those on multi-day boats, the growing burden of meeting high hygiene standards for export markets.²⁰

Gender in ODA allocation for fisheries

Between 2012 and 2022, Sri Lanka received a total of USD 14,77 million in fisheries Official Development Assistance (ODA),^{av,aw} of which 4% (USD 0.66 million) was allocated to gender equality and women's empowerment in fisheries (i.e., tagged with gender markers 1 or 2). Fisheries aid to Sri Lanka represents 19% of fisheries aid to the Southern and Central Asia subregion, whilst gender-equality focused fisheries aid to Sri Lanka represents 2% of gender focused fisheries aid to the region.

Of the aid that was screened for gender markers, gender focused financing for fisheries in Sri Lanka came from the United Kingdom (38%), Canada (24%), Norway (21%), and Japan (17%).

| United Kingdom | Canada | Norway | Japan |
|----------------|--------|--------|-------|
| 38% | 24% | 21% | 17% |

Examples of programmes or initiatives aiming to advance gender equality in fisheries

A range of initiatives, often in collaboration with the Sri Lanka Women's Bureau, Cooperative Department, the Ministry of Fisheries, Aquatic and Ocean Resources (Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources), and civil society organisations, support women entrepreneurs, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. These ongoing programmes typically offer vocational training, capacity building, access to microfinance, and support for women to start and grow small businesses. In 2018, for instance, the Sri Lanka Women's Bureau launched a skills development initiative in fish processing, preservation, and entrepreneurship, increasing women's involvement in post-harvest activities and small-scale business ventures, and supporting their economic independence within the fisheries sector. Several of these efforts have also benefitted from support from the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs through collaboration with fisheries cooperatives.^{ax}

Fisheries cooperative societies, established under Sri Lanka's Cooperative Department, aim to strengthen the financial resilience of fishing households by facilitating collective organisation, savings schemes and access to credit, including both short-term emergency loans and longer-term financing.¹⁰¹ Beyond financial services, these societies often function as local institutional platforms through which fishing communities coordinate aspects of fisheries governance, resource access, and social support among members. Women's roles within these structures vary by society type. In marine fishing cooperatives, membership and decision-making are predominantly male, with women's participation often tied to male relatives or limited to attendance at meetings. In contrast, within dried fish and Maldivian fish processing cooperative societies, women participate actively in cooperative structures, frequently contributing to savings schemes, and serving as office-bearers or committee members.¹⁰² Such involvement can strengthen women's access to financial resources, leadership opportunities, and social networks, thereby contributing to household resilience and local collective action. However, participation and influence are not uniform: in

some areas, women remain underrepresented in decision-making bodies or in formal fisheries organisations, reflecting broader gender norms that shape access to resources, institutions, and fisheries governance.²⁵

The **National Fisheries Solidarity movement** operates fisher cooperatives along two-thirds of the coastal belt and has embedded women's participation in its constitution. Women's fisheries organisations affiliated with this movement provide credit facilities to support livelihoods.¹⁰³

Beyond formal cooperatives, several financial mechanisms serve women in fishing communities. Although microfinance is not a dominant part of the financial sector, it offers an important option for fishers and low-income households lacking collateral. Some providers, such as the **Women's Development Federation**, specifically target women.²⁰ "**Seettu**," the most widely used informal savings group in fishing communities, operates as a self-managing pool where members contribute a fixed sum regularly; women make up the majority of participants.

Local civil society groups also play a meaningful role. One example is **Soba Kantha Padanama**, a society with 500 women members in the Southern province, which provided drying infrastructure and ovens for women, organised members into user groups, and delivered additional training in fish paste production.^{ay}

Several externally funded programmes have contributed to women empowerment in the fisheries sector, addressing gaps in enforcement, processing infrastructure, and market development. The **Blue Enforcement Project** (2020–2023) was an initiative aimed at supporting maritime law enforcement in the fisheries sector of the Maldives and Sri Lanka with an explicit gender equality focus. It was funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries under the Blue Justice initiative and implemented through the World Customs Organization Container Control Programme and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Global Maritime Crime Programme. The project facilitated the development of an interregional network of women officers through a workshop in Bangkok, which focused on gender equality and women's leadership for customs and law enforcement officers from the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.¹⁰⁴ In 2023, the project received the UNODC Gender Award for its comprehensive training programmes, strategic sea operations, and for fostering cross-agency coordination and regional cooperation through a gender-inclusive lens.¹⁰⁵

In 2017, an EU-funded project, in partnership with FAO, piloted the construction of **FAO Thiaroye Processing Technique (FTT)** fish smoking ovens with inland communities in Unnichchai, Batticaloa. The aim was to "make the fish value chain in Sri Lanka more productive and profitable for the poorest families",¹⁰⁶ by enabling the reduction of fuel costs and an increase in smoking efficiency.^{106,107} Fifteen additional FTT kilns were installed across the country in 2018.¹⁰⁷ It is worth noting, however, that access to improved processing technologies like FTT remains out of reach for most small-scale processors in Asia without external funding – a structural limitation that has not yet been addressed.¹⁰⁷

The Government of Australia has been a longstanding partner in Sri Lanka's post-conflict recovery and development, including through support to livelihoods and economic opportunities in conflict-affected regions. Earlier assistance under the Australian Community Rehabilitation Programmes focused on recovery and livelihood rebuilding following the civil conflict. More recently, Australia's development cooperation – through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade – has evolved

"Microfinance and informal savings groups provide financial access for fishers and low-income households, with women widely participating – particularly through "seettu," the most common community-based savings system."

"The Blue Enforcement Project supported maritime fisheries law enforcement while promoting women's leadership, building regional networks, and strengthening gender-inclusive training and cooperation."

“Market development efforts transformed the blue swimming crab sector into a more competitive value-adding sellers' market, improving prices for fishers and expanding employment opportunities for women in processing.”

toward an economic partnership approach aimed at fostering inclusive, private sector-led growth^{108,109} through initiatives such as the **Market Development Facility (MDF)**.¹¹⁰ Together with actions by government, private sector actors, and other development partners, efforts by MDF have contributed to transforming the blue swimming crab sector from an uncompetitive, buyer-controlled market with limited value addition into a more competitive, value-adding sellers' market.¹¹⁰ As processing capacity expanded and additional export-oriented companies entered the sector, crab fishers gained improved access to markets and higher prices. Women have benefited from this shift through increased employment opportunities in crab processing facilities and, as members of fishing households, through the improved market returns generated by the sector's evolution.¹¹⁰

The National Aquatic resources Research and development Authority (NARA), in collaboration with the Ministry of Fisheries, Aquatic and Ocean Resources, has also delivered several training programmes in southern fishing villages on the production of value-added products including chili paste, pickle, and Maldive fish *sambol*.^{az}

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Women sorting and gutting fresh fish on the beach (left) and selling freshly caught fish at a market (right) in Negombo (Western Province). Photos by Nadiya Azmy.



Women working together sorting fish for the drying process. Photo by Dilanthi Koralagama

Typical drying facilities for a small-scale dry and Maldivian fish woman processor, Kudawella (Western Province). Photo by Cecile Brugere



Women preparing and drying fish at a coastal processing site in Negombo (Western Province). Photo by Nadiya Azmy

Endnotes

- a Co-author contribution.
- b Co-author contribution.
- c Marine fisheries statistics are derived from catch reconstruction under the Sea Around Us - <http://www.seaaroundus.org/data/#/eez>. The approach utilized builds on national statistics and accounts for discards as well as sectoral catch data that often is not included in official datasets (e.g., artisanal or recreational catches). The Sea Around Us data is also utilized here as a consistent frame of reference for and to facilitate comparison across the set of countries for which fact sheets were developed as part of this project. Sea Around Us data are distinguished according to the following categories: large-scale (i.e., industrial) and small-scale (i.e., artisanal, subsistence and recreational) fisheries catches. Recreational catches were not considered here.
- d "Marine subsistence" is used by the Sea Around Us to refer to the amount of annual marine capture production landed by the subsistence sector. This consists of fisheries conducted by women and/or non-commercial fishers for consumption by one's family, and where applicable, the fraction of the commercial catch that is given to crew or the community (mainly from small-scale fisheries). (2)
- e "Marine commercial" is used by the Sea Around Us to refer to the amount of annual marine capture production landed by commercial fisheries. These are fisheries whose landed catch is sold commercially (as opposed to being consumed and/or given away to the crew) and encompass both the industrial (large-scale) and artisanal (small-scale) sectors. (2)
- f The term "apparent" refers to the average food available for consumption, which for several reasons (for example, waste at the household level), is not equal to average food intake or average food consumption. The amount is calculated as production + imports - exports - non-food uses, +/- stocks variations and divided by number of people partaking of it.
- g Co-author contribution.
- h At current market prices. At constant prices (2015) the sector accounted for approximately 1.0% with marine fisheries contributing 0.8%. (1)
- i The Illuminating Hidden Harvests Initiative estimates are utilized here as a consistent frame of reference for and to facilitate comparison across the set of countries for which fact sheets were developed as part of this project (visit <https://oceanrisk.earth/> to access all the fact sheets).
- j These estimates are not based on primary data collection activities in the country. IHH estimates of employment in fisheries were derived using the IHH modelling framework. For more details we refer the reader to Appendix A.4.2 of (11) and the IHH database - <https://www.fao.org/voluntary-guidelines-small-scale-fisheries/resources/ihh-database/en>.
- k Subsistence fisheries activities, also referred to as "working for own consumption", are defined by the IHH as activities that individuals of any sex and age carried out at least once over the last 12 months in order to produce and process fish for their own final use, with no transaction occurring in the marketplace. By definition, they are considered here as small-scale fisheries. (Table 2 in 12)
- l Small Scale Fisheries (SSF) are distinguished from Large Scale Fisheries (LSF) according to a characterisation matrix that distinguishes between fisheries according to gear use, vessel characteristics, fishing operations, types of storage and preservation of catch, employment/labour, and use of catch. The characterisation matrix allows for a standardised approach to classify and characterize fisheries at the global and regional level, allowing for high levels of variation between fisheries. SSF generally includes low-technology, low-capital, labour-intensive fishing practices. Often, the term artisanal is used to refer to small-scale fisheries. In the context of the IHH work, the term small-scale fisheries refers to the whole value chain of pre-harvest, harvesting and post-harvest activities, including subsistence fisheries and excluding recreational fisheries. (13)
- m According to IHH estimates, 6,108,376 people belong to a household where at least one person engages in fisheries or in subsistence fishing.
- n Note that the presence of LSF as part of inland fisheries in the IHH estimates has been flagged by co-authors as surprising, especially given the overall size of the inland sector.
- o Maldivian fish processing involves purchasing the fish, gutting it, boiling it in salt, saffron and garcinia/indian tamarind mixed water, and letting it cool before taking the bones out, smoking, drying and packaging it. In general, 5kg of fish goes into making 1kg of Maldivian fish (co-author contribution).
- p "During the 1970s, [...] Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mrs Bandaranaike implemented a national development policy of 'import substitution,' curtailing imports and fostering local production [...]. As part of this broader policy and in response to foreign currency pressures, the Sri Lankan government informed the Maldivian government that it would gradually reduce imports of Maldivian fish from 1972, with the aim of eliminating them over a seven-year period while fostering domestic dry fish production [...]." excerpt from <https://athishakoor.com/the-role-of-the-state-in-the-development-of-the-fishery-industry-todate-and-beyond/>
- q Co-author contribution.
- r This paragraph is based on co-author contributions.
- s Co-author contribution.
- t National legislation refers to "employer" and "workman" and denotes the superiority and control of the employer over the employee. (30)
- u Co-author contribution.
- v With regards to the rights of workers, including those of women formally and informally employed in fisheries, Sri Lanka has ratified most of the fundamental Conventions enabling their freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining (C87, C98, C141, C111); the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour (C29, C105); the effective abolition of child labour (C138, C182); the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation (C111, C100, C95). However, it is lagging in its ratification of conventions promoting a safe and healthy working environment (C155, C187, C161), notably C188 for workers in the fishing sector, social security (C102), and prevention of violence and harassment (C190).
- w Co-author contribution.
- x Co-author contribution.
- y Co-author contribution.
- z Co-author contribution.
- aa Sirimavo Bandaranaike was elected as the world's first female Prime Minister on 21 July 1960.
- ab An index which measures parity across economic participation and opportunity, education, health and survival, and political empowerment. "Since launching in 2006, it is the longest-standing index tracking the progress of numerous countries' efforts towards closing these gaps over time." <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2025/>.
- ac ILO (n.d.) ILO Modelled Estimates and Projections database (ILOEST) - ILOSTAT. Accessed January 07, 2025. <https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/> accessed through the WorldBank Gender Data Portal - Sri Lanka - <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/sri-lanka>. Notes from original source: Given the exceptional situation, including the scarcity of relevant data, the ILO modeled estimates and projections from 2020 onwards are subject to substantial uncertainty.
- ad Co-author contribution.
- ae Article 12(1) states: "All persons are equal before the law and are entitled to the equal protection of the law." Article 12(2) specifically adds: "No citizen shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, place of birth or any such grounds."
- af Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Questioning/Queer
- ag Muslim family law in Sri Lanka is adjudicated by a system of Quazis, traditional courts that deal with matters pertaining to Islamic law. (62)
- ah The Cabinet of Ministers has approved granting Kandyan widows the same inheritance rights as those under general law, but the amendment has yet to be enacted.
- ai However, the performance of FGC would potentially be prosecutable under various provisions of general criminal law, depending on the circumstances and the degree of harm inflicted. (72)

- aj Visit <https://oceanrisk.earth/fact-sheets/#supplementary-material-for-country-fact-sheets> to read summaries of key conventions/policies, as well as additional information about key indicators used in this factsheet.
- ak The Optional Protocol to CEDAW (OP-CEDAW) is an international treaty that creates additional complaint and inquiry mechanisms for CEDAW, allowing individuals to report violations and enabling the CEDAW Committee to investigate grave and systematic violations of women's rights by state parties. (78)
- al Visit <https://oceanrisk.earth/fact-sheets/#supplementary-material-for-country-fact-sheets> to read summaries of key conventions/policies, as well as additional information about key indicators used in this factsheet.
- am Countries are classified into five groups according to their SIGI score: (1) very low level of discrimination ($0 < \text{SIGI} < 20$); (2) low level of discrimination ($20 < \text{SIGI} < 30$); (3) medium level of discrimination ($30 < \text{SIGI} < 40$); (4) high level of discrimination ($40 < \text{SIGI} < 50$); and (5) very high level of discrimination ($50 < \text{SIGI} < 100$). Source: OECD (2023) Social Institutions and Gender Index. OECD International Development Statistics (database). Also corresponds to scores for 2019 listed in https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2020/09/the-social-institutions-and-gender-index-sigi-2019_c570aa08/022d5e7b-en.pdf.
- an Visit <https://oceanrisk.earth/fact-sheets/#supplementary-material-for-country-fact-sheets> to read summaries of key conventions/policies, as well as additional information about key indicators used in this factsheet.
- ao Visit <https://oceanrisk.earth/fact-sheets/#supplementary-material-for-country-fact-sheets> to read summaries of key conventions/policies, as well as additional information about key indicators used in this factsheet.
- ap Sourced from the databases FAO LEX, ECO LEX, and SSF LEX. Fisheries governance documents include fisheries policies, laws, acts, plans, strategies, and regulations. A database of all reviewed governance documents can be found here: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15098509>.
- aq Co-author contribution.
- ar Co-author contribution.
- as Co-author contribution.
- at As of Mar 2026 \$1 USD = 310.9 LKR.
- au Co-author contribution.
- av Visit <https://oceanrisk.earth/fact-sheets/#supplementary-material-for-country-fact-sheets> to read how ODA allocations were derived
- aw Different from OECD standard methods, this is measured in disbursements from DAC countries (including EU Institutions) to recipient countries. This captures the amount of money given, as opposed to the amount of money committed. Original data was downloaded on 17th June 2024.
- ax Co-author contribution.
- ay Focus group discussions with women processors, Puranawella and with Soba Kantha Panadama NGO. (20)
- az Co-author contribution.

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