

ASSET

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion



Priyan Seneviratne

2019

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI)

WUSC has been mainstreaming gender-sensitivity in development projects since it started development programming in Sri Lanka in 1989. WUSCs latest approach to these issues, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI), is a broad-ranging cross-cutting theme introduced through the ASSET project. The WUSC programming ethos in ASSET posits that although people in Sri Lankan communities are not physically excluded based on their gender and disabilities, they risk being excluded from the processes of social, economic and political integration. In the case of the GESI strategy, it has been designed to address multiple vulnerabilities that prevent people from achieving their full potential in economic integration. ASSET adopted GESI tools during the implementation of its key project components: business stakeholder forums (BSFs); demand driven high-quality skills training; and social marketing. The tools used were to enhance accessibility to employment driven training and job placements for young women, ex-combatants, differently abled women and men who constantly face multiple barriers to economic empowerment. Hence, one of the salient features of the GESI approach is that it broadens the scope of equality and inclusion and looks beyond addressing gender disparities alone. In so doing, it recognized multiple vulnerabilities affecting economic empowerment of people in Sri Lanka and attempted to deal with them throughout the implementation of the project. In ASSET, this endeavour involved: addressing issues pertaining to low participation of women, ex-combatants and differently abled people in construction, automotive, H&T and ICT labour markets; gender discrimination at the workplace; societal and cultural barriers to economic empowerment of the marginalised groups; and financial constraints in obtaining skills in trades and technology sectors.

Gender equality is among the sustainable development goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. SDG 05 iterates that by 2030 all UN member countries will strive to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women and enhance their participation and leadership in political, economic and social spheres¹. The concept of social exclusion gained prominence in the international development discourse particularly because it has been able to extend the understanding of different forms of vulnerabilities that affect poverty, but may not be captured as effectively in the concept of income poverty². It has been defined as ‘the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live’³. The concept envisages the multidimensional nature of poverty and redefines it as a problem of access that affects people due to cultural, social, political and economically entrenched norms, attitudes, policies and practices⁴. People can be excluded from economic activities, such as livelihoods and employment, political participation, citizenship rights, or even from living with dignity and respect based on their gender, disabilities or other forms of vulnerabilities⁵. Exclusion from social

¹ United Nations. 2019. *Gender Equality* [Online]. [Accessed 22nd Dec]. Available from: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>

² Rawal, N., 2008. Social inclusion and exclusion: A review. *Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 2, pp.161-180

³ De Haan, A., 2000. Social exclusion: Enriching the understanding of deprivation. *Studies in Social and Political Thought*, 2(2), pp.22-40.

⁴ Hall, E. 2004. Social geographies of learning disability: narratives of exclusion and inclusion. *Area*. 36(3), pp.298-306.

⁵ Aasland, A. and Fløtten, T. 2001. Ethnicity and Social Exclusion in Estonia and Latvia. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 53(7), pp.1023-1049.

relations hinders people's access to opportunities that could improve their circumstances in life⁶. Development projects that advance social inclusion and address different forms of exclusion play an instrumental role in helping people with multiple vulnerabilities who could otherwise go undetected in other programs.

Sri Lanka has been able to achieve tremendous progress in terms of human development in the country compared to many developed and developing countries. However, when considering gender-based disparities that get measured by Gender Development and Gender Inequality Indexes (GII), they suggest that achievements in human development are yet to be equally enjoyed by both men and women in the country⁷. In 2017, Sri Lanka was ranked 80 in the GII whereas the Maldives; its neighbouring South Asian nation, was ranked 76 in the index. Prevalence of gender inequality in labour force participation and employment is one of the key issues that affects the country's economy. Women lag behind men considerably both in terms of participation in the labour market and unemployment. Lack of women's participation in the labour market has affected industries that largely rely on female labour. In 2017, the female labour force participation rate stood at 36.6% compared to 74.5% for male participation⁸. The same year, the female unemployment rate was 6.5% compared to 2.9% male unemployment, which indicates that female unemployment in the country is significantly higher than that of male unemployment. Social and cultural perceptions about women's roles in society, together with stigmas associated with women in certain industries have been the key barriers to increasing women's participation in the labour market and employment⁹. A high prevalence of gender-based disparities in wages and salaries also demotivates and prevents young women from seeking employment.

ASSET GESI Strategy

The GESI strategy was developed based on WUSC Sri Lanka's past learning experiences in projects, such as PRET, PRET Options, Plantations Community Project and Women Defining Peace. The strategy conforms with the GAC gender equality policy objectives which stipulate the elimination of all forms of gender-based discrimination in decision making in development, resource sharing and exercising of human rights. In order to ensure GAC compliance, strategy development entailed carrying out a thorough Gender-Based Analysis (GBA)+ using both primary data collected from 11 districts and secondary data from an extensive desk review¹⁰. A distinctive feature of the WUSC GESI strategy is that it aims to help both vulnerable women and differently abled people in skills development, whereas the latter segment of the society is largely left ignored in the government strategy, as set out in the Gender and Social Inclusion Framework (GESIF)¹¹.

⁶ Sen, A., 2000. *Social exclusion: Concept, application, and scrutiny*. Asian Development Bank.

⁷ MSDVT. 2017. *Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Framework*. Colombo: Ministry of Skills Development and Vocational Training.

⁸ Department of Census and Statistics. 2018. *Labour Force Survey : Annual Report 2017* Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics

⁹ Gunatilaka, R. 2013. *To work or not to work? Factors holding women back from market work in Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: International Labour Organization.

¹⁰ WUSC Sri Lanka. 2016. *ASSET Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Strategy*. Colombo: WUSC Sri Lanka.

¹¹ See note 7 above

When rolling out its GESI approach, WUSC recognized the importance of working with different stakeholders whom are partners. As such, throughout the project, it collaborated with VT institutions, business associations, private sector companies and government, in order to enhance scalability and sustainability of GESI initiatives in skills development and employment in trades and technology sectors. Figure 01 demonstrates how WUSC opted to collaborate with the Vavuniya Information and Communication Technology Association (VICTA) to enable women to take a lead role in discussing opportunities for women in the ICT industry.



*Empowering Women & Digitalisation
Panel Discussion organised by VICTA in Vavuniya*

A significant part of the ASSET GESI strategy entailed increasing the enrolment of women candidates in TVET programs facilitated by the project. At the beginning, it aimed to ensure at least 40% of enrolments to ASSET supported VT programs were female, with selection criteria preference given to women-headed households and differently abled people. WUSC also took measures to encourage both women and differently abled people to enrol by offering scholarships, as well as emotional and physical support throughout the duration of the training programs, followed by job placements. Continuous moral support was required for the trainees to do well in their training and job placements.

For example, Abirahmi is a young trainee who was recruited to an ASSET sponsored TVET program in H&T in 2017. Being a twenty-three-year-old and the youngest in her family has made Abirahmi always yearn to stay close to her mother and her two elder siblings. However, when she completed her training program, she was given a job placement in the Mount Lavinia Hotel, which is located 270km away from her hometown. Moving out of her home in Mannar and leaving behind her family has been so difficult for the young recruit, that initially she wanted to return home. However, WUSC, together with the help of Mount Lavinia Hotel human resources department provided Abirahmi with both physical and moral support throughout this period. First, she was given hostel accommodation at the hotel in order to make sure she felt secure without her family. Second, WUSC Mannar staff provided her with guidance and moral support whenever she felt low as a result of being in an unfamiliar place. WUSC was

able to provide her with this type of moral support for 4 months before she was able to become more independent and resilient in her new surroundings. Hence, one of the key features of the GESI strategy adopted by ASSET was that it laid much emphasis on emotional support for its female recruits and differently abled people, to help them overcome their fears and move forward in their chosen career path with greater confidence.

As much as the GESI strategy mainstreamed through ASSET has helped young women like Abirahmi to progress in their chosen career paths, it has also helped organisations to adopt more gender inclusive approaches. For example, ASSET supported iSoft college in Puttalam, to create a more female-friendly learning environment within their institution. This enabled young women who were interested in pursuing a career in ICT to join iSoft and learn the trade which was previously inaccessible for young Muslim women in the district. Subsequently, iSOFT was also given the entrepreneur of the year award in 2018 by the Sri Lanka Chamber of Commerce in recognition of its innovative efforts to promote ICT in Puttalam.

In addition to these endeavours, ASSET introduced a Diversity and Inclusion Human Resource Toolkit to Micro-Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which was prepared in collaboration with the Chartered Institute of Personnel Management of Sri Lanka (CIPM). The toolkit encompassed detailed procedures that could be followed on: HR policies and employment legislation; diversity and inclusion at work; women and youth at work; recruitment and retention; compensation and benefits; learning; training and development; grievance handling; and employee health and safety that are more gender sensitive and socially inclusive¹². The toolkit is expected to help employers to mainstream gender-sensitive and inclusive approaches into the workplace that will eventually help transform attitudes and perceptions that hinder the successful integration of women and differently abled people into the Sri Lankan workforce. Although the adoption of the toolkit in different industries may take time, it is a step in the right direction, which can be advanced through private sector and state involvement.



Prof Maithree Wickramasinghe at the launch of Diversity and Inclusion HR Toolkit



¹² WUSC. 2018. *Diversity and Inclusion Human Resource Toolkit- Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)*. Ottawa: World University Service of Canada.

GESI Mainstreaming Process

- Conduct a thorough Gender-Based Analysis (GBA)+ together with an analysis on social exclusion, to determine existing barriers and strengths to promote GESI in skills development in selected regions, communities, industrial sectors and among different actors. GBA+ explores the intersectionality of the issues pertaining to GESI and identifies caste, class, race and ethnicity-based dynamics affecting the regional and sectoral promotion of GESI.
- Develop a GESI strategy based on the findings, which will be shared with the staff and partner organisations.
- Incorporate a monitoring and evaluation strategy as part of the GESI strategy in order to identify risks, mitigation measures and any other necessary changes in the latter upon execution. This includes reviewing and revising the GESI implementation strategy based on regional and national contextual changes.
- Conduct staff orientation and introduce an organisational culture that is gender sensitive and inclusive. This includes regular sensitization programs to help staff to learn and change attitudes and perceptions that may help them to be more gender sensitive and inclusive at the workplace.
- Conduct staff training to help them to learn how to employ gender sensitive and inclusive approaches when implementing program activities.
- Identify key partners that could help the project to mainstream GESI. E.g. Nawajeewana, Vanni Rehabilitation Organisation for the Differently Abled (VAROD), Organisation for Rehabilitation of the Handicapped (ORHAN) and the Women Development Federation (WDF), were among key partners who specialise in GESI that WUSC partnered with, in order to mainstream GESI throughout ASSETs implementation.
- Provide guidance to partner organisations to incorporate gender sensitive and inclusive approaches into their operations.
- Include GESI as a key attribute in the MoUs signed with the partners to substantiate its importance when implementing WUSC project projects.



GESI Operationalisation Process in ASSET

- Train partner organization social mobilisers on GESI and how to talk to parents, potential female VT candidates as well as differently abled candidates to promote their enrolment in TVET programs.
- Introduce tools and methods to promote GESI in the communities. These included: street theatre, debates, villu pattu (bow songs) all of which discussed topics based on local dynamics affecting GESI. These types of cultural-sensitive tools were helpful to reach out to a wider communal audience through creating dialogue around the importance of skills development and inclusiveness.
- Introduce a GESI sensitive selection criteria when enrolling youth for WUSC supported skills development programs.
- Introduce Human Resource and Social Inclusion Tool Kits to the private sector, to help them become more gender sensitive in recruitment, selection, development and retention of prospective employees in their organisations.
- Create female friendly training environments in VT institutions.
- Provide continuous support (physical and emotional) for female and differently abled recruits throughout both their training and job placements, based on their specific needs.
- Obtain support from other NGO and social service organisations to address specific needs of the recruits.
- Conduct exposure visits to well-established private sector companies for both parents and potential recruits. This helps to change their perceptions about career development prospects in the private sector.
- Conduct further research into the successful integration of women and differently abled people into the Sri Lankan labour market and disseminate the findings both nationally and internationally.



Outcomes and Lessons Learnt

Negative perceptions around employment in the private sector in general and in H&T, in particular, are two key barriers to female participation in skills development. At the same time, perceptions around industries such as automotive and construction, which create the impression that they are unable to provide decent job opportunities for women, also hinder women from undertaking skills development relevant to these two industries. Employers also have reservations over the recruitment of women into certain jobs in automotive and construction industries, which prevent them from offering opportunities to women. Those who are recruited may also find it difficult to enjoy the same level of recognition, salaries and opportunities at the workplace compared to their male counterparts. It is recognized that ICT was the main sector that has been very progressive in terms of attracting women candidates for employment.

The ASSET project attempted to address these concerns by employing a number of tools. First, in order to address attitudinal issues affecting women's participation in the job market ASSET launched a nationwide social marketing campaign. The social marketing campaign included a very strong social mobilization component at the local and regional levels, which involved carrying out door-to-door visits to households with young women and men. Social mobilisers helped both young women and their parents to deconstruct their concerns, particularly over certain types of jobs and industries. The project constantly adopted other techniques, such as the promotion of female role models and, industrial exposure visits, both of which contributed immensely to changing attitudes of young women and their parents about non-traditional employment prospects for women in different industries. As a result, by 2018 the project recruited 4,527 young people into skills development training, out of which 37% were female. Figure 03 gives a detailed breakdown of new enrolment to different skills development programs between 2017 and 2019, while Figure 04 depicts annual trends of female vs male enrolment between 2015 and 2019. It demonstrates that between 2017 and 2019, the number of females enrolled onto ASSET supported training programs have surpassed that of male enrolment.

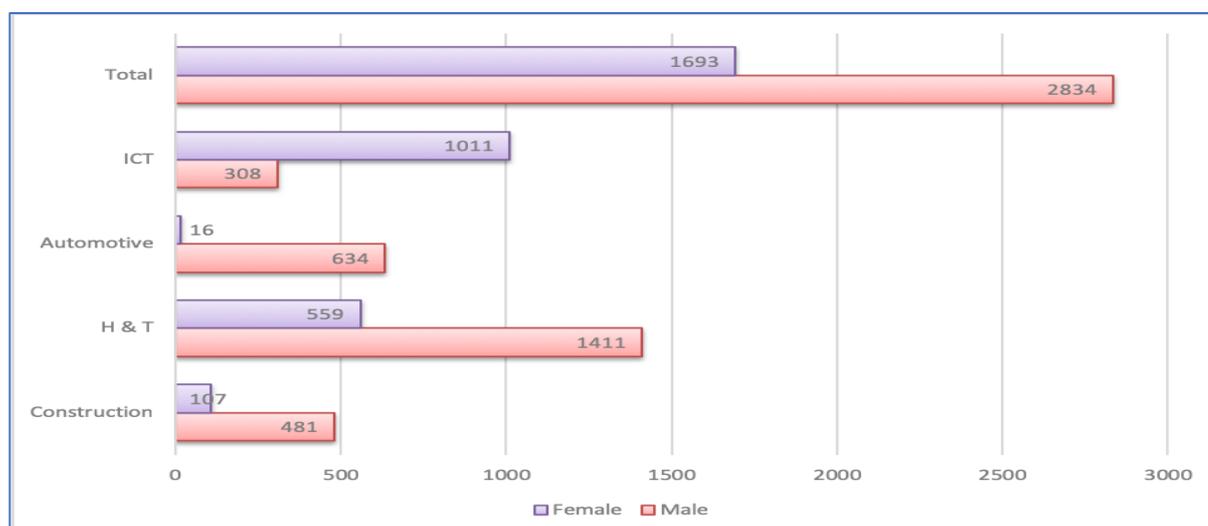


Figure 1 Sector wise Breakdown of Female and Male TVET Enrolment

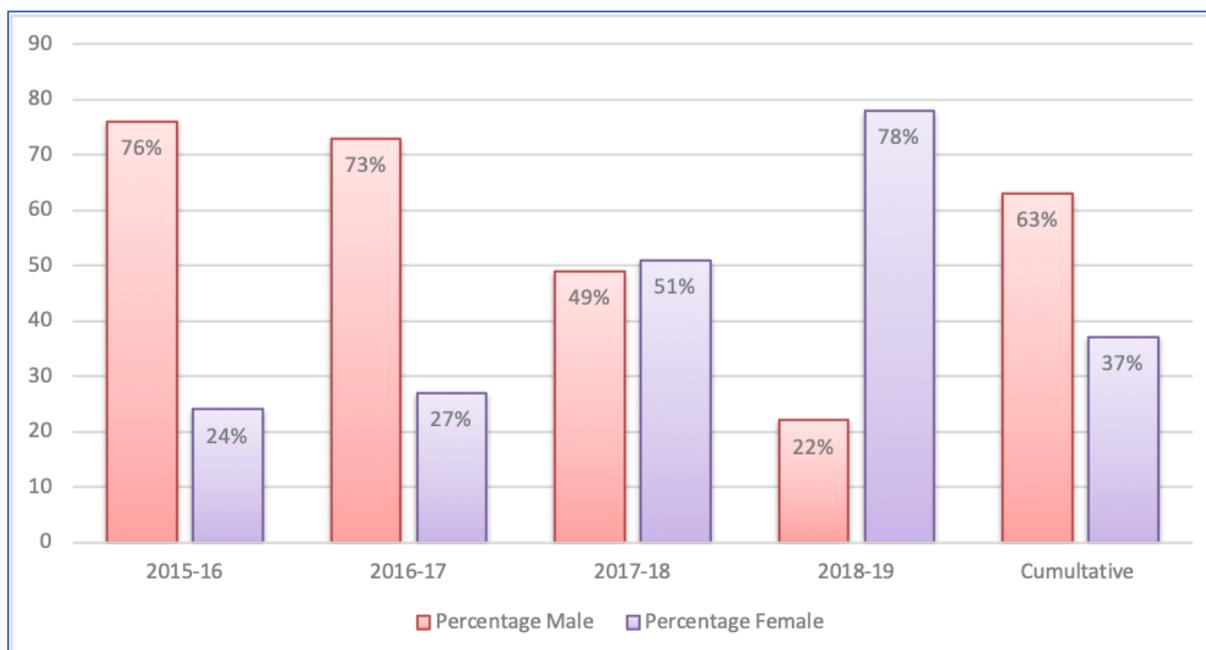


Figure 2 Female & Male Enrolment in TVET Programs 2015-2019

Since ASSET adopted a demand-driven approach to skills development, all of these recruits who successfully completed the training course, were also able to secure job placements following their training in the respective sectors. However, the surge in female recruitment into training programs was not evenly distributed between sectors, where ICT attracted the largest number of recruits, while the construction field attracted the fewest (See Figure 3).

Despite the significant progress made on female recruitment into skills development training, it was difficult to achieve the same for differently abled recruits. One of the reasons behind this difficulty was statistical discrimination¹³ resulting from prospective employer's reluctance to hire differently abled people over productivity concerns. However, during the project, H&T sector related jobs, such as spa massage therapists and ICT related jobs, such as graphic designing, in particular, were identified as potential avenues for differently abled people to be successfully integrated into the Sri Lankan labour market. A supportive employment model (where state officials and disability specialists work with the VT institutions and employers throughout the training and job placements), tends to go a long way with both the employers and the differently abled employees. It ensures the differently abled are more successfully integrated into the job market.

¹³ Fang, H. and Moro, A., 2011. Theories of statistical discrimination and affirmative action: A survey. In *Handbook of social economics* (Vol. 1, pp. 133-200). North-Holland.



Differently abled youth at the National Youth Summit 2018

The project was able to introduce women chapters to some of the key business associations, particularly in the H&T and ICT sectors, including the Federation of Information Technology in Sri Lanka (FITIS) and The Hotel Association of Sri Lanka (THASL). These women chapters enabled women's involvement in decision making in industries in which the project aimed at improving female labour participation. As a result of these efforts, the project was able to increase district, and regional level presence of women in board of directors, steering and executive committees of business associations that function as part of the BSF platform. Women's involvement in these business associations helped them to create space for gender sensitive decision making in the associations, which can over time, better accommodate positive dialogue between the private sector and other stakeholders to promote gender equality and diversity in the work place.