

INVITED COMMENTARY: SRI LANKAN WOMEN CONTINUE TO OUTLIVE MEN – A POPULATION PARADIGM SHIFT

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For most of the 19th and 20th centuries, Sri Lankan men outlived Sri Lankan women by steadily widening margins. Nevertheless, in recent years, especially since 2001, it is conspicuous that Sri Lankan women have gradually begun to outlive men.

The sex ratio is defined as the number of males per 100 females in the population. A ratio above 100 denotes an excess of men, whilst a ratio below 100 denotes an excess of women. As revealed by the early censuses, beginning with the first national census of 1871, the sex ratios ranged between 105.7 (1871) and 107.3 (1921), indicating that for every 100 women there were between 106 and 107 men in the Sri Lankan population (Sarkar, 1957). Moreover, the sex ratio of the population steadily increased from 113.0 in 1946 to 115.5 in 1953, which marked the highest sex ratio ever recorded in Sri Lanka, representing a noticeably larger number of men than women in the population.

However, since 1953, the number of men in the population has gradually declined, reaching a sex ratio of 99.1 in 2001, which marked the turning point at which women began to outnumber men in the population. This discernible decline in the sex ratio is further evident from the latest Census of Population and Housing, 2024, which recorded a sex ratio of 93.3. This indicates that for every 100 women there are only 93 men, and that women now account for approximately 52 percent of the Sri Lankan population (vide, Table 1 and Figure 1).

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Table 1: The Men and Women Population, Sex Ratio, and Percentage

Census Years	Total Population ('000)	Sex ratio	Increase/Decrease	Percentage of Women
1871	2,820	105.7	-	48.6
1881	3,044	106.1	+ 0.4	48.5
1891	3,330	107.9	+ 1.8	48.3
1901	4,031	107.4	- 0.5	48.2
1911	4,702	107.2	- 0.2	48.3
1921	5,304	107.3	+0.1	48.2
1946	6,657	113.0	+5.7	46.9
1953	8,098	111.5	-1.5	47.3
1963	10,582	108.2	-3.3	48.0
1971	12,690	106.1	- 2.1	48.5
1981	14,847	104.0	-2.1	49.0
2001	16,930	99.1	-4.9	50.2
2012	20,359	93.8	-5.3	51.6
2024	21,782	93.3	-0.5	51.7

Source: 1871-1921 Corrected Census Results (Sarkar, 1957); from 1946 Department of of Census & Statistics Census Reports

This sex ratio can then be disaggregated by age as follows:

$${}_nSR = N_{nm} / N_{fx} \times 100$$

When analyzing the sex ratio across different age groups, it's clear that women continue to outlive men. As shown in Table 2, while sex ratio for the age groups between 0 to 19 years exceeds 100, for all age groups over 40 years, there is a gradual decline with increasing age. Notably, the age group of 70 years and above records the lowest sex ratio of 69.8 (Department of Census & Statistics, 2025).

Table 2: Sex ratio by Age Group – Census Years 2012 and 2024

Age (years)	Sex Ratio	
	2012	2024
Sri Lanka	93.8	93.3
0-4	101.7	101.2
5-9	101.9	102.7
10-14	102.2	103.1
15-19	99.5	102.3
20-24	93.9	96.6
25-29	91.9	93.4
30-34	94.6	93.3
35-39	94.9	94.3
40-44	94.8	96.3
45-49	92.6	96.1
50-54	91.1	94.3
55-59	88.9	89.7
60-64	86.4	86.3
65-69	81.2	82.0
70+	72.2	69.8

Source: DCS, 2025, Census of Population and Housing, 2024 Basic Population Information by Districts and DS Divisions

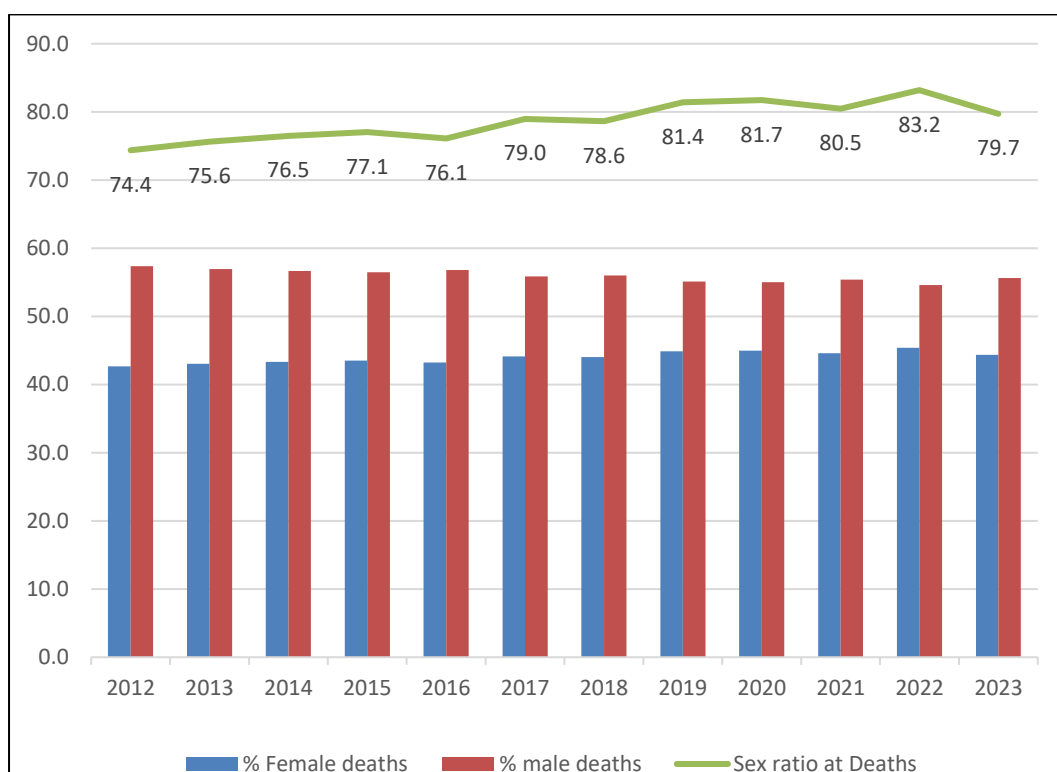
Contributory Factors on Women Continuing to Outlive Men

This remarkable increase in the number of women relative to men could be attributed to the higher life expectancy of women compared to men and the gradual reduction in general mortality rates, as well as male mortality and maternal mortality during the last two decades.

The data highlights a notable trend in the sex ratio at death over the last decade. For every hundred female deaths, there are consistently more male deaths, as illustrated in Figure 1. While the sex ratio at death has declined from 134.5 in 2012 to 123.1 in 2023, the proportion of male deaths remains higher than that of female deaths, indicating that females tend to have better survival rates than their male counterparts.

Furthermore, Figure 1 shows that the percentage of male deaths out of the total is greater than that of females. Therefore, these mortality differentials by sex contribute to the trend of women living longer than men.

Figure 1: Sex Differentials in Mortality, 2012-2023



Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Statistical Abstracts, 2020 & 2024

The reduction in female mortality, which followed a rapid decline after the 1970s and was sustained through the following decades as a result of the expansion of the health care system through preventive and curative services, has significantly increased the life expectancy of women since 1971 (see Table 3). Although women's life expectancy at birth in 1946 (41.6 years) was lower than that of men (43.3 years), female longevity has increased tremendously from 66.9 years in 1971 to 78.6 years in 2012.

Table 3: Life Expectancy at Birth-1946-2012

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Year	<u>Life Expectancy at Birth</u>	
	Men	Women
1946	43.3	41.6
1953	58.8	57.5
1963	61.9	61.4
1971	64h.2	66.9
1981	67.7	72.1
2001	68.1	76.6
2012	72.0	78.6

Source: Department of Census & Statistics, Statistical Abstracts, 2023

The increase in women's life expectancy at birth has also been caused by the remarkable decrease in maternal mortality during the last four decades. The maternal mortality rate declined by more than three-fourths (86 percent), from 15 per thousand live births in 1946 to 0.25 in 2025. This means that almost no women per 100 live births die as a direct result of pregnancy-related complications. In general, the biological advantage of female infants, who tend to have higher survival rates than male infants, is another contributory factor to women outliving men in Sri Lanka.

In addition, overseas migration for employment statistics since 2018 reveal a notable shift, with the proportion of male migrant workers increasing more than that of female workers. Whilst female migration was historically dominant in certain low-skilled categories, recent data indicate that men now comprise the majority of departures (SLBFE, 2024). A notable increase has been observed in the proportion of male migrant workers, which now stands at 60 percent (177,804 males), while 40 percent of the total workforce sent abroad were women (122,358). Of those going abroad, 184,140 migrated through self-arranged channels, while 116,022 went through employment agencies.

Policy Implications

The major components of population composition, namely age and sex composition, provide the basis for all development planning policies and activities in Sri Lanka. These significant demographic characteristics and the changes brought about by population dynamics such as fertility, mortality, and migration have a long-term impact on service provision and the labour market in Sri Lanka. As an emerging feature of women continuing to outlive men, it is necessary to adopt appropriate policy options and planning strategies to promote gender equity in Sri Lanka. Although a wide range of policies and development programmes for improving the status of women could be suggested, it is important to adopt appropriate policies while keeping gender equity in mind.

The research conducted by Sarvananthan et al. (2017) underscores the impressive status of gender equality compared to other countries in South Asia. Nevertheless, the female labour force participation rate, estimated at just 29.8 percent in 2024, remains notably low when compared with the male labour force participation rate of 67.4 percent (Department of Census and Statistics, 2025). These demographic trends, demonstrating that females outlive males, necessitate the exploration of various policy options. Some potential solutions could involve creating job opportunities for full-time or part-time work, particularly for married women, through initiatives such as “work from home” or job-sharing arrangements. Additionally, expanding digital market opportunities for women, as suggested by Siyama and Samaraweera (2021), could encourage entrepreneurship by providing access to micro-financing opportunities.

Moreover, there is a pressing need to address youth unemployment, particularly as educated female youth experience a higher unemployment rate than their male counterparts. Specifically, statistics indicate that 10.2 percent of female youth with G.C.E. (A/L) qualifications are unemployed, compared with 9.0 percent of males (DCS, 2025). Interestingly, unmarried women tend to participate in the labour force at higher rates than men, often due to varying domestic situations involving partners and children (ILOSTAT, 2020; Siyama & Samaraweera, 2021). In line with Sustainable Development Goal 5, achieving gender equality and empowering women requires equal access to education and employment

in both the public and private sectors. Furthermore, it is essential to create opportunities for women's participation in political decision-making and community affairs. Consequently, policy measures must be strengthened to reduce gender-based violence, ensure that quality maternal care services are easily accessible and free of charge, and provide counselling support for adolescent females during their transition into motherhood (UNFPA, 2007).

An understanding of, and the adoption of, appropriate strategies and plans are necessary to address the major challenges arising from the extent to which women currently outlive men. As evident from census and survey data, women significantly outnumber men at older ages (60+) and live longer than men in Sri Lanka. Many of these women are likely to be widows and may have no independent source of income. Hence, poverty among elderly widows and single women who live alone, together with the rising costs of nursing homes and other institutional care services for chronically ill elderly women who lack family support, represents a serious issue that requires careful consideration in current and future policy planning.

Summary and Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that Sri Lankan women have been steadily outliving men, particularly since 2001. Key demographic factors contributing to this trend include differences in mortality rates between the sexes, increasing female longevity, and the declining trend of women migrating abroad for employment. To promote gender equity, it is essential to implement various policy actions, programmes, and strategies aimed at enhancing the status and well-being of women in Sri Lanka.

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