



THE AUSTRALIAN
APEC STUDY CENTRE
Asia-Pacific
Economic Cooperation



Sri Lanka Australia: Building Better Networks for Gendered Economic Development

2 December 2021

Promoting economic empowerment and increased women's labour force participation

Dr Leonora Risse

Senior Lecturer in Economics, RMIT University

Our shared goals

- The quest for gender equality and women's empowerment transcends country borders
- Sharing experiences from Australia while learning from Sri Lanka
- A fusion of economic, sociological, cultural, environmental and political factors – underpinned by human rights, labour rights, and moral principles
- Today's presentation
 - Statistical picture of Australia and Sri Lanka
 - What do we mean by women's economic empowerment?
 - Barriers and resistance
 - Building policies with promise

Statistical picture of women's economic empowerment

- Both Sri Lanka and Australia have much progress yet to make, especially in domains of women's economic participation and political empowerment

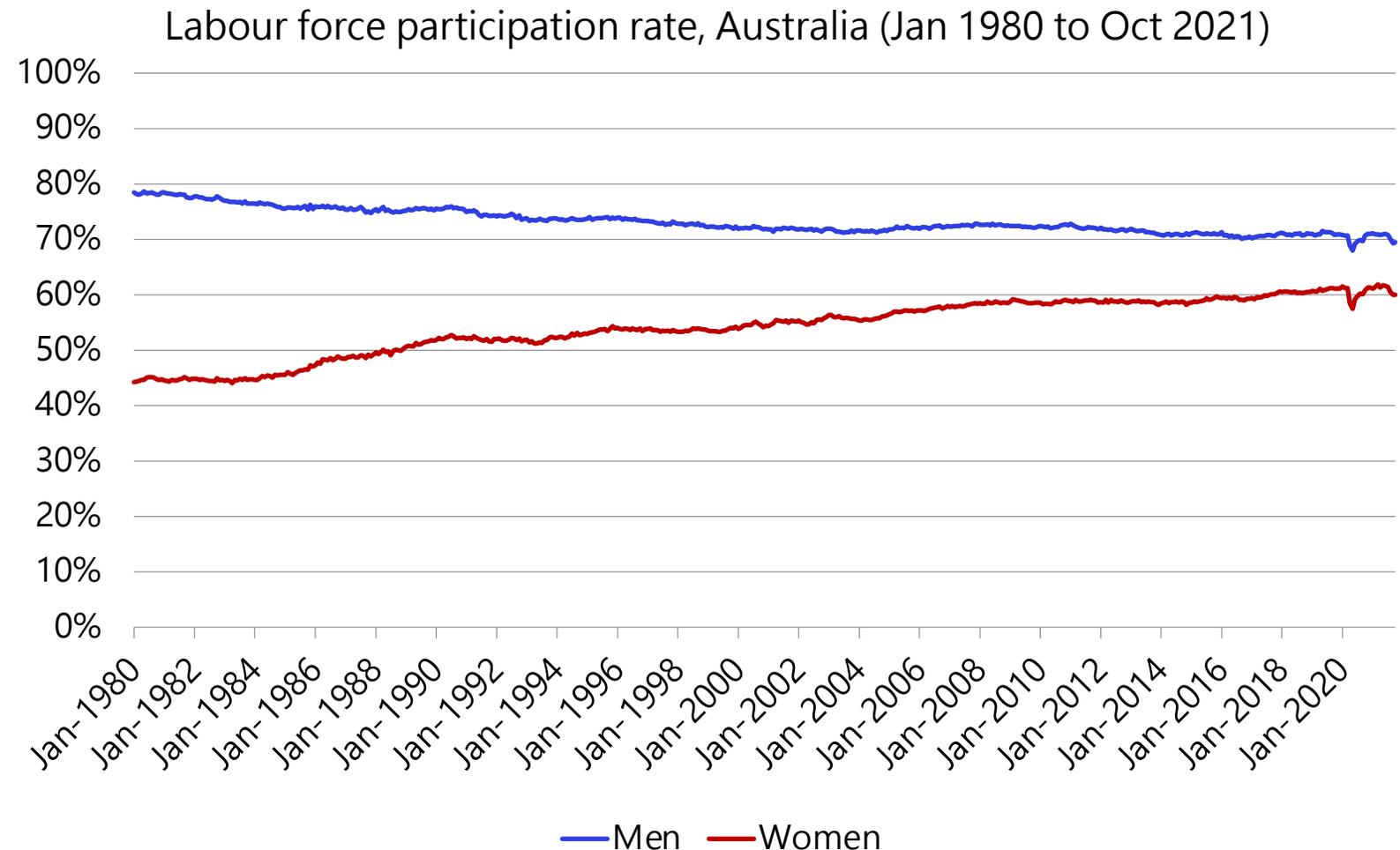


Source: World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap 2021

Statistical picture of women's economic empowerment

- Australian women's labour force participation rate has gradually climbed over time but still volatile and 10% points lower than men's

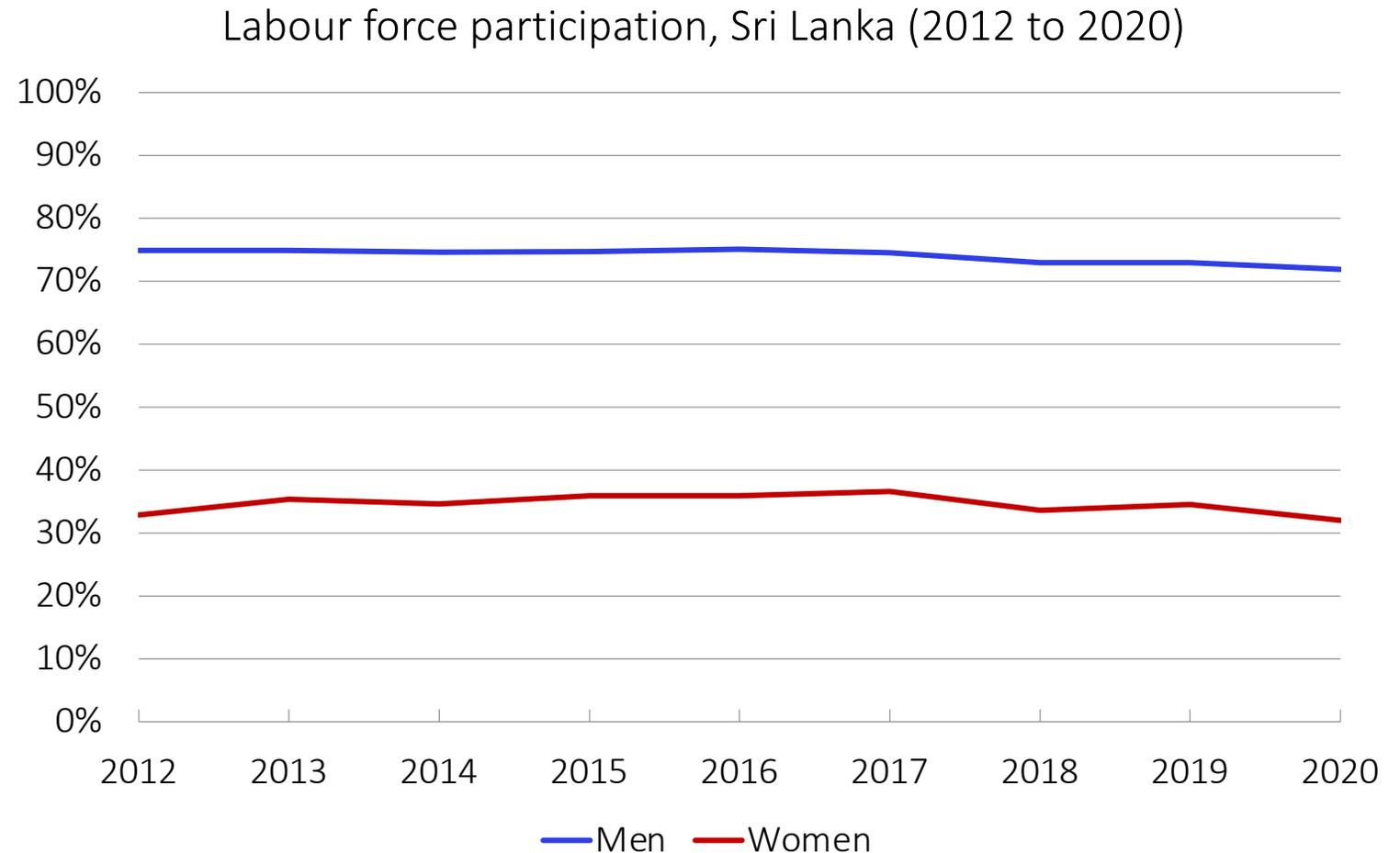
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force, Australia, 2021, Seasonally-adjusted



Statistical picture of women's economic empowerment

- Sri Lankan women's labour force participation rate reached a high of 37% in 2017 and is currently trending downwards

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey Annual Report, 2020



Women's economic empowerment

1) Workforce and economic participation

- Education and skills
- Unpaid care – Informal work sector – Formal work sector
- Changing structure of economy – growth areas and skill needs

2) Economic advancement

- Representation in positions of influence, decision-making, control over resources

3) Dignity and respect

- Equitable pay and quality of work conditions
- Recognition of value of women's contribution including care work
- Autonomy over economic resources
- Safety, health, freedom from violence and abuse, human rights
- Across all stages of life course from birth to old age

Women's economic empowerment

- We already have strong and growing understanding of
 - ✓ what factors give rise to gender gaps in economy
 - ✓ benefits of gender equality for wider society
 - ✓ what policies we need for advancing gender equality
- The universal challenge is tackling the factors that **stand in the way** of putting this knowledge into action
 - Persistence and influence of **gender norms** and **societal expectations**
 - **Ideological resistance**
 - traditionalism and aversion to change
 - status quo in power structures
 - zero-sum game mindset

Putting forward the case for advancing women's economic empowerment

- '**Business case**' for gender equality
 - Economic payoffs of women's paid workforce participation for GDP and prosperity
 - Growing importance of human services and knowledge economy – skills and capabilities embodied in people
 - Diversity of perspectives, life experiences and ideas as drivers of innovation and entrepreneurialism
 - Demographic diversity broadens understanding of population needs
- But **limitations** of 'business case'
 - No guarantee of equal recognition of women's worth, proper valuation of care work, work rights, safety, respect
 - No compelling evidence that 'business case' alone is sufficient to generate change
 - Is it morally responsible to attach a monetary gain to a human right?

Barriers and resistance to women's economic empowerment

- Australia's historical experience teaches us that policy breakthroughs in women's economic advancement equality often occur out of **economic necessity**
 - Prospective economic risks (labour shortages, fertility, ageing population)
 - Concerns about international reputation (economic, political)
 - Electoral appeal and political pressures
- Progressive governments adopted holistic suite of policy changes as a matter of **moral principle, human rights, and wellbeing**
 - Paid Parental Leave Scheme enacted at national level from 2011
 - Victoria's Gender Equality Act 2020 arose out of inquiry into violence against women, requiring public sector to conduct a gender audit and create a Gender Equality Action Plan. Vic Gov also adopted Gender Responsive Budgeting
 - ACT Gov has brought a 'Wellbeing Framework' focus to its State Budget Policies (as has New Zealand)

Building policies with promise

- ✓ Data collection and building evidence base
- ✓ Embed accountability for achievement of targets
- ✓ Tackling resistance – shift social expectations and aspirations for both men and women
- ✓ ‘Gender Lensing’ – analyse how same policy affects men and women differently
- ✓ Empower public servants, analysts, students, future policymakers with knowledge and tools for analysis
- Future directions
 - How gender intersects with other dimensions of identity and lived experience – culture, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, region
 - Beyond binary classifications of gender