

## THE IMPACT OF SRI LANKA'S REVISED SHOP AND OFFICE EMPLOYEES' ACT ON WOMEN'S CAREER ADVANCEMENT IN IT

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### ***Introduction***

The Shop and Office Employees Act,<sup>2</sup> introduced in 1954, regulates employment, working hours and the renumeration of persons covered under its provisions. Prior to the Amendments,<sup>3</sup> the Act imposed strict limitations on women's working hours in most sectors, negatively impacting the career progression through global participation, in industries such as Information Technology (IT) which necessitates early or late shifts.<sup>4</sup> Addressing these limitations, the 2024 amendments to the Act introduced work beyond traditional working hours,<sup>5</sup> before 6.00 a.m. and after 6.00 p.m. in selected

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<sup>2</sup> Shop and Office Employees (Regulation of Employment and Remuneration) Act No 19 of 1954.

<sup>3</sup> Shop and Office Employees (Regulation of Employment and Remuneration) (Amendment) Act No 28 of 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Note 2, s 10 - restricts women over 18 from working past 8 p.m., and in certain industries, this was extended to 10 p.m. Furthermore, they were barred from working before 6 a.m. or after 6 p.m.

<sup>5</sup> Before 6 a.m. and after 6 p.m.

industries,<sup>6</sup> including IT<sup>7</sup> and provide secure transportation and rest facilities for women working late.<sup>8</sup>

Although not addressed in this paper, the Act also include regulations related to maternity benefits,<sup>9</sup> and sanitary conveniences,<sup>10</sup> which contribute to the Act's broader role in shaping workplace conditions for women, highlighting the multifaceted impact of the Act on promoting career advancement of women.

Thereby, this research first delves into Claudia Goldin's theoretical perspectives,<sup>11</sup> emphasizing her examination of societal attitudes and the changing roles of women in the workforce. It then highlights the interviews conducted with women in the IT sector, evaluating the practical effects of the amendments. The findings from these interviews are subsequently discussed in relation to Goldin's framework, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the amendments. Lastly, the study offers recommendations to improve the amendments' impact, highlighting the importance of new amendments as well as cultural shifts to achieve ultimate gender equality in Sri Lanka's workforce.

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<sup>6</sup> Note 3,

Section 10 of the Shop and Office Employees (Regulation of Employment and Remuneration) Act (Chapter 129) (in this Act referred to as the “principal enactment”) is hereby amended as follows:

(1) in subparagraph (iii) of paragraph (b) of subsection (2) thereof, by the substitution for the words and figures “between 6.00 p.m. and 8.00 p.m.; and” of the words and figures “between 6.00 p.m. and 8.00 p.m.”;

(2) in subparagraph (iv) of paragraph (b) of subsection (2) thereof, by the substitution for the words and figures “between 6.00 p.m. and 10.00 p.m.” of the words and figures “between 6.00 p.m. and 10.00 p.m.; and”;

(3) by the insertion, immediately after subparagraph (iv) of paragraph (b) of subsection (2) of the following:

“(v) any female who has attained the age of eighteen years may be employed in any institution which is engaged in business, based on information technology and knowledge process outsourcing or business process outsourcing, or engaged in administration and accounts or related work in a back office for an institute situated abroad before 6.00 a.m. or after 6.00 p.m. on any day.”

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Note 2, s 66.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, s 18.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, s 13.

<sup>11</sup> Claudia Goldin, *Career and Family: Women's Century-Long Journey toward Equity* (Princeton University Press 2021).

### ***Claudia Goldin's Insights on Societal Attitudes and Women's Evolving Roles***

Claudia Goldin's work offers a transformative and highly relevant framework for analyzing the career advancement of women in the IT sector, particularly in navigating the balance between professional and personal responsibilities. Her research delves into the intersection of work, gender, and societal norms, highlighting the ways in which structural barriers and cultural expectations influence women's career opportunities. By utilizing Goldin's framework, this study connects historical patterns with the present-day challenges of Sri Lanka's IT sector.

Claudia Goldin's concept of "greedy work"<sup>12</sup> provides a valuable framework for understanding the challenges faced by women in Sri Lanka's IT sector under the amended working hour regulations. Goldin highlights those professions requiring long, unpredictable hours often elucidate gender disparities, as women are disproportionately tasked with balancing work and family responsibilities.<sup>13</sup> Overcoming these entrenched norms requires more than amendments, it calls for a broader cultural shift, which Goldin refers to as a "quiet revolution"<sup>14</sup> in societal attitudes.<sup>15</sup>

Goldin's analysis of generational shifts in women's career and family aspirations offers a historical perspective on the evolving roles of women in the workforce.<sup>16</sup> Similar to the Western economies she

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 23 – Here Goldin highlights the trade-offs and challenges couples face in balancing caregiving responsibilities with professional ambitions. It underscores how care roles impact career trajectories and earnings, reflecting broader societal issues around workplace flexibility and support for caregivers.

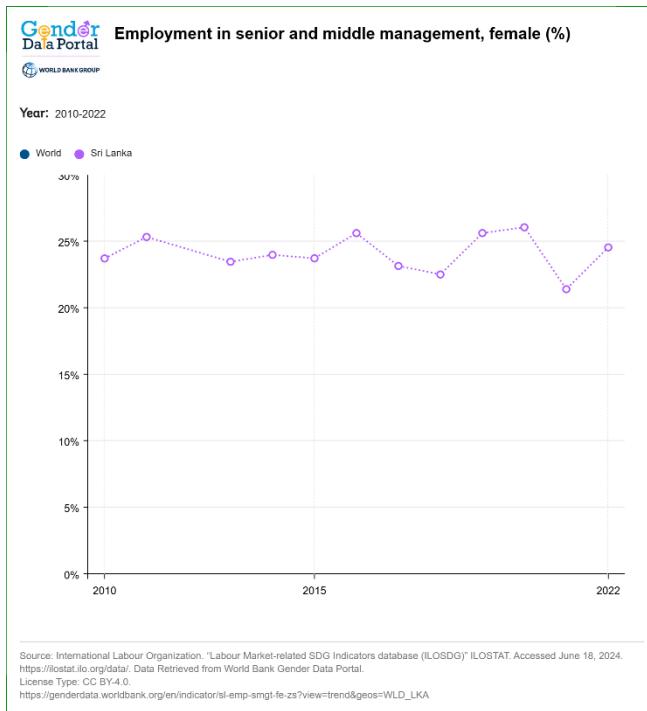
<sup>13</sup> Ibid 27.

<sup>14</sup> According to Claudia Goldin, the Quiet Revolution refers to a transformative period in American society during which women began to redefine their roles in education, marriage, family, and the workforce. This revolution is characterized by significant but gradual shifts in women's participation in careers, their pursuit of higher education, and their delayed timing of marriage and childbearing. It represents a quieter, more personal movement compared to the overt activism of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>15</sup> Note 11, 131-134.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

examines, the increasing participation of Sri Lankan women<sup>17</sup> in male-dominated industries like IT reflects a transformative phase.<sup>18</sup>



<sup>17</sup> Robbie Mitchell, 'Women in ICT: Sri Lankan Women Show ICT Careers Are Achievable' (APNIC Blog, 2 December 2016).

<<https://blog.apnic.net/2016/12/02/12155/>> accessed 1 December 2024

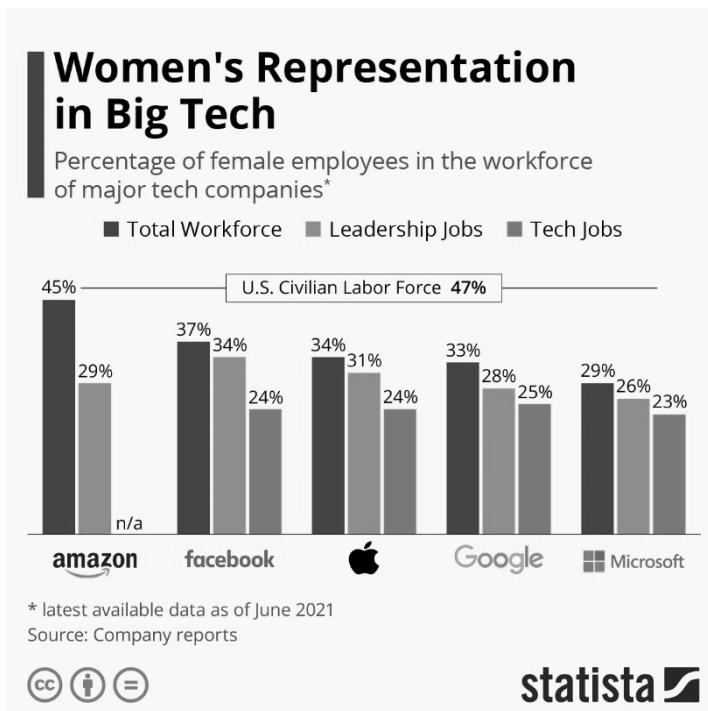
<sup>18</sup> World Bank, 'Gender Data Portal: Sri Lanka'

<<https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/sri-lanka>>

Accessed 1 December 2024

Women represented 24.6% of those employed in senior and middle management in 2022.

Goldin's observation that previous generations often had to choose between career and family<sup>19</sup> mirrors the challenges faced by Sri Lankan women balancing extended working hours.<sup>20</sup> Goldin further argues through the concept of a "quiet revolution," that the gradual evolution of societal attitudes toward women in non-traditional roles, can enable greater workforce inclusivity.<sup>21</sup> This can be viewed through increasing participation in the workforce.<sup>22</sup>



<sup>19</sup> Note 12.

<sup>20</sup> Note 11, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Tracie Stewart and others, 'Attitude toward Women's Societal Roles Moderates the Effect of Gender Cues on Target Individuation' (2000) 79 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 143 <<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.1.143>> accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Felix Richter, 'Women's Representation in Big Tech: Female Workers in the Tech Industry' (Statista, 1 July 2021) <<https://www.statista.com/chart/25282/female-workers-in-big-tech/>> accessed 3 December 2024.

### ***Research Questions and Objectives***

This research evaluates the impact of the 2024 amendments to Sri Lanka's Shop and Office Employees Act on women's career advancement in the IT sector. The first research question examines whether the extension of work hours has created new career opportunities for women, including leadership and higher-paying roles. The second question addresses providing workplace safety measures and organizational culture related to the extension of work hours. The final question assesses how these amendments contribute to gender equality in Sri Lanka's workforce.

### ***Research Design and Qualitative Approach***

This research adopts a qualitative approach, with interviews as the primary data collection method. This enables a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of women working in the IT sector.

### ***Interview Process***

The participants were selected using purposive sampling, specifically targeting women currently working in the IT sector, where the amendments to working hour regulations have had a notable impact. A total of 10 interview questions (Annexure 1) were posed to 4 participants, focusing on their job roles, empowerment through the amendments, and their potential for career advancement. These questions were designed to evaluate the three research questions as addressed above. The data collected from these interviews will be analyzed using Claudia Goldin's "Career and Family" framework, which explores the relationship between work, career progression, and family responsibilities.

### ***Practical Effects of the Amendments on Women's Career Opportunities in IT***

The 2024 amendments to the Act have shown mixed results, benefiting some with enhanced career opportunities, while others remain unaware of its existence and report no notable advantages in terms of salary increases for extra work or comprehensive security measures. Several respondents highlighted that the ability to work across time zones with the amendment has created new prospects for leadership roles. One participant highlighted that flexible schedules enabled them to take on late-night and overseas projects previously inaccessible, boosting career growth and earning team recognition.

An interesting insight revealed that the participant, already benefiting from a work-from-home option, was little influenced by the amendment, highlighting its impact primarily on on-site roles rather than hybrid or remote work models.

Respondents acknowledged that the amendments have levelled the playing field for both genders to a great extent, as willingness to commit to longer hours often results in increased opportunities for career growth. As one interviewee interestingly noted, career growth still largely depends on personal commitment to adapt to the flexible demands, alongside the favorable opportunities created by the Act. Thus, viewing the Act as a mere support system, prompts the question: what are the impediments and adversities that constrain individuals from achieving their highest personal commitment? This will be further explored in the discussion.

Respondents frequently cited safety measures, such as emergency contact systems, GPS-tracked transportation, and 24/7 security personnel to be reassuring and indicative of employers' genuine care for their well-being. Moreover, designated rest areas with facilities like emergency medical care have helped create a supportive environment for women working late shifts. However, certain organizational policies, such as requiring accompaniment by another female colleague during late-night work for security does not meet the satisfactory security measures. Thus, these inconsistent gaps underscore the need for uniform safety protocols across organizations.

### ***Analyzing the Findings in Relations to Goldin's Theoretical Framework***

When concerning the findings in relation to Goldin's theoretical framework, the amendments have significantly enhanced opportunities for women in the IT sector by addressing structural barriers to career progression.<sup>23</sup> As per the respondents' statements the ability to work flexible hours and engage in overseas projects has resulted in visibility, rewarding them with a sense of recognition. However, proving Goldin's concept of "greedy work", the dilemma

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<sup>23</sup> Giovanna Galizzi, Karen McBride, and Benedetta Siboni, 'Patriarchy Persists: Experiences of Barriers to Women's Career Progression in Italian Accounting Academia' (2024) 99 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 102625  
<<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpa.2024.102625>> accessed 1 December 2024.

in balancing work life and family responsibilities continues to burden them as erratic work schedules often conflict with family obligations.<sup>24</sup>

Escalating the burden, the social prejudice and biases favoring the male dominance over female achievements further elucidates Goldin's idea of a "quiet revolution" which invites a gradual shift in cultural attitudes to dismantle entrenched norms,<sup>25</sup> which requires the collective effort of policymakers, employers, and communities to create an inclusive work environment.<sup>26</sup> The amendments also underscore the critical role of supportive organizational cultures in promoting gender inclusivity. Respondents reported that employers had implemented safety measures, including GPS-tracked transportation, emergency contact systems, and secure rest areas, which facilitated the possibility of working extended hours. These measures align with Goldin's concept of "assisting the revolution," where supportive workplace policies play an essential role in fostering inclusivity.<sup>27</sup> However, some respondents also noted a requirement for women to be accompanied by colleagues during late-night work which contradicts the purpose of the amendments to the act.

When analyzing the impact of the amendment, many respondents expressed a sense of empowerment and greater professional involvement, especially in taking on higher-stakes projects. However, some were already accustomed to flexible work environments,<sup>28</sup> thereby was uninfluenced. This variability indicates that the impact of the amendments may depend on individual roles<sup>29</sup> and organizational contexts.

This study provides valuable insights into the impact of the amendments within Sri Lanka's IT sector, but its scope is limited to qualitative interviews in one industry. Future research could explore women's experiences in other sectors such as healthcare and manufacturing to gain a broader understanding of the reforms'

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<sup>24</sup> Note 12.

<sup>25</sup> Note 14.

<sup>26</sup> Adjo J, Maybank A, and Prakash V, 'Building Inclusive Work Environments' (2021) 148(Supplement 2) *Pediatrics* <<https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-052047E>> accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Note 11, 215-217.

<sup>28</sup> Work from home and hybrid mode.

<sup>29</sup> Note 11, 167.

effects. Additionally, quantitative studies with larger sample sizes could offer statistical validation of the amendments' impact on career advancement and inclusivity.

### ***Recommendations***

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be suggested to improve the effectiveness of the amendments further promoting gender equality in Sri Lanka's IT sector.

First, the implementation of the amendments should be standardized across organizations. Practices that limit women's autonomy, such as requiring accompaniment for late-night work, should be eliminated as they go against the reforms' objectives. Rather the organization should possess clear, uniform guidelines outlining the application of the amendment.<sup>30</sup>

Drawing inspiration from Sweden, which offers equitable maternity and paternity leave, Sri Lanka should implement similar measures.<sup>31</sup> While maternity leave is already covered under existing labor laws,<sup>32</sup> there is no statutory provision for paternity leave in Sri Lanka, except for three days granted to public sector employees under Public Administration Circular 03/2006.<sup>33</sup> Providing shared parental leave would allow fathers to take on a more active role in caregiving, enabling women in IT to focus on their career growth without disproportionate domestic responsibilities.<sup>34</sup>

Additionally, focusing on early career development through education and offering scholarships enhanced with incentives such as mentorship programs with industry experts and networking opportunities<sup>35</sup> to provide hands-on experience and professional guidance would foster participation in IT careers. Initiatives from the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 199-219.

<sup>31</sup> Anna-Lena Almqvist, Anette Sandberg, and Lars Dahlgren, 'Parental Leave in Sweden: Motives, Experiences, and Gender Equality Amongst Parents' (2011) 9(2) *Fathering* 189.

<sup>32</sup> Note 2, s 18.

<sup>33</sup> Ministry of Public Administration and Home Affairs, Public Administration Circular 03/2006.

<sup>34</sup> Marie Evertsson, 'Parental Leave and Careers: Women's and Men's Wages after Parental Leave in Sweden' (2016) 29 *Advances in Life Course Research* 26.

<sup>35</sup> Lisa Flores, Isis Settles, Gloria G McGillen, and Tangier M Davis, 'Critical Contributions to Scholarship on Women and Work: Celebrating 50 Years of Progress and Looking Ahead to a New Decade' (2021) 126 *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 103490.

UK, which promote women's participation in STEM fields through targeted campaigns,<sup>36</sup> offer valuable models for Sri Lanka to adopt.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, the employers should adopt hybrid work models that combine remote and on-site work. This will allow women to meet professional demands without sacrificing family commitments. Offering services like childcare,<sup>38</sup> family counseling, and mentorship programs can ease the burden on women managing both roles.<sup>39</sup>

Cultural transformation within workplaces coupled with initiatives to address gender biases and leadership development programs tailored for women can help create supportive environments and prepare women for senior roles.<sup>40</sup> Most importantly, they should be made aware of their rights and opportunities, giving them more leverage to exercise their rights, which also aids in the standardization process. Regular monitoring, feedback mechanisms, and periodic reviews are needed to assess the long-term effectiveness of the amendments, allowing for continuous improvement.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

This study examined the impact of the 2024 amendments<sup>42</sup> to Sri Lanka's Shop and Office Employees Act<sup>43</sup> on women's career advancement in the IT sector. The findings show that the amendments have improved career opportunities by offering flexible working hours, enabling greater participation in leadership roles and high-stakes projects. However, challenges such as work-life balance, safety concerns, and societal biases remain. For sustainable progress in gender equality, further policy adjustments, including standardized

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<sup>36</sup> Emma Smith, 'Women into Science and Engineering? Gendered Participation in Higher Education STEM Subjects' (2011) 37(6) *British Educational Research Journal* 993.

<sup>37</sup> United Nations Sri Lanka, 'Science Needs Women, So Let Her STEM' (United Nations Sri Lanka, 15 February 2023) <<https://srilanka.un.org/en/218563-science-needs-women-so-let-her-stem>> accessed 3 January 2025.

<sup>38</sup> Note 11, 266.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid 270-278.

Catherine Schur, 'Conspicuous by Their Absence: How Childcare Can Help Women Make It to the Top' (2014) 27 *Georgetown Journal of Legal Ethics* 859.

<sup>40</sup> Adekunle Oyeyemi Adeniyi and others, 'Gender Equality in the Workplace: A Comparative Review of USA and African Practices' (2024) 6(3) *International Journal of Management & Entrepreneurship Research* 526.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Note 3 .

<sup>43</sup> Note 2.

safety measures, and initiatives to address societal biases, are essential. A cultural shift and continued organizational support are necessary to ensure long-term inclusivity and economic growth. Furthermore, achieving gender equality in the workforce requires a multisectoral approach that goes beyond legislative amendments, encompassing education, and community engagement to address systemic barriers and drive holistic change.

***Annexure 1***

1. Have you noticed changes in your career progression opportunities with the introduction of the amended working hours?
2. Do you feel that the extended working hours make higher-paying or leadership roles more accessible to women in IT?
3. How would you rate the security and support provided by your employer for late-night work shifts? Are there specific facilities that ensure your safety?
4. Do you believe that the transport and rest facilities provided by your company (if any) are adequate for your well-being during extended work hours?
5. What impact, if any, have these new working hour options had on your work-life balance?
6. How do you feel societal attitudes or organizational culture toward women working non-traditional hours have influenced your experience?
7. Can you describe how your career experience as a woman in IT compares now versus before the 2024 amendment?
8. Do you feel more encouraged or supported to pursue advanced roles, or do traditional gender expectations still pose challenges?
9. Do you believe that these amendments have realistically enhanced gender inclusivity in the IT industry?
10. How do you see your ability to balance family responsibilities and career progression, especially with the new working hour flexibility?