

Motherhood, Career Aspirations, and Life Goals: Exploring Young Women's Attitudes as a Factor in the Declining Fertility Rate in Sri Lanka

Varuni Michelle, BA

Ruchira Bandara, BA

Iresha Lakshman, PhD

Department of Sociology, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The fertility rate in Sri Lanka has gradually declined over the last few decades. This study aims to explore how young Sri Lankan female undergraduates perceive motherhood in relation to their career aspirations and life goals. The study employed a mixed-method approach, following through a two-step process involving a survey and follow-up interviews, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The sample included 300 female students from three faculties - Arts, Management, and Science, both first-year and final-year - at the University of Colombo. The study adopted a pseudo-longitudinal design, comparing differences in perceptions and attitudes toward motherhood between students. Findings indicate that the importance placed on motherhood varies by academic discipline, with arts and management students generally prioritising it more than science students. The study also revealed a shift in attitudes from first-year to final-year students, as exposure to academic life and career aspirations influenced the timing and conditions of motherhood. Career goals, financial stability, and lifestyle considerations emerged as key factors shaping decisions about motherhood, while balancing career and family remains a source of concern for many students. The findings highlight the interplay between societal expectations, personal values, and professional

ambitions in shaping young women's reproductive choices in Sri Lanka. In conclusion, undergraduates' perceptions of motherhood are shaped by academic discipline and socio-economic factors, often leading to delayed motherhood due to anticipated role conflicts and financial considerations. Creating supportive policies, flexible work environments, and community-level interventions is essential to empower young women to balance career and family while making informed reproductive choices.

Keywords: Career Aspirations, Fertility Decline, Female Undergraduates, Motherhood, Sri Lanka

Introduction

The definition of 'mother' focuses on the gestational capacities of women, the ability to give birth and experience pregnancy, which by extension means to look after, care for, protect, nurse, and tend (Mitra, 2020). Motherhood is a deeply embedded concept in South Asian cultures, with its implications extending into the realms of gender roles, employment, and societal expectations. With the influence of both cultural norms and the increasing participation of women in the workforce, traditional views of motherhood are evolving in Sri Lanka (Gunathilake, 2023; Kodagoda & Duncan, 2010).

In Sri Lanka, the traditional male-breadwinner model has been challenged by the growing presence of women in various professional fields. Despite this shift, the expectations for women to balance work and childcare responsibilities persist, creating significant work-family conflicts (Kodagoda & Duncan, 2010). These conflicts highlight a broader issue where career advancement for women often faces limitations due to their maternal responsibilities, reflecting a global trend where working mothers encounter challenges in reconciling their professional and personal lives (Gunathilake, 2023).

According to the World Bank's (2022) data, fertility rates have gradually declined over the last few decades. As the 2016 report by the United Nations Population Fund on fertility and nuptiality states, Sri Lanka reached stage three of the demographic transition model (DTM) by the early 1960s, marking the phase of declining fertility (UNFPA, 2016).

This study aims to explore how young Sri Lankan female undergraduates perceive motherhood in relation to their career aspirations and life goals against this backdrop. It seeks to understand how traditional values and modern influences shape their attitudes toward balancing professional ambitions with family life. By examining these perspectives, the research aims to shed light on how such attitudes may contribute to the ongoing decline in fertility rates among educated young women in Sri Lanka.

Research Problem

How do young Sri Lankan female undergraduates' career aspirations and life goals influence their attitudes toward motherhood in the context of the country's declining fertility rates?

According to existing research on fertility, Sri Lanka has been experiencing a notable decline in fertility rates, which will eventually lead to a myriad of problems, specifically over the long term. This may result in a higher dependency ratio, eventually leading to economic strain, demographic imbalances caused by an ageing population, workforce shrinkage, and other related demographic challenges. This will further put an extra burden upon the government in providing welfare provisions despite its economic hardships as a lower middle-income country. This demographic shift raises questions about how evolving career goals, changing life priorities, and perceptions of motherhood are influencing young women's decisions around family formation. There is a lack of in-depth understanding of how these personal and societal changes affect young women's attitudes toward motherhood and their willingness or ability to have children. In particular, the perspectives of female college students, who represent the next generation of potential mothers, remain underexplored in this context.

Research Objectives

Main Objective

To examine how young Sri Lankan female undergraduates' career aspirations and life goals influence their attitudes toward motherhood across different academic disciplines.

Sub-Objectives

- To examine the perceived importance of motherhood among female undergraduates across different academic streams.
- To explore how undergraduate students balance or anticipate balancing career aspirations and motherhood.
- To investigate the influence of career goals on students' attitudes toward motherhood and family planning.
- To assess the impact of socio-economic and lifestyle factors on students' decisions regarding the timing of motherhood.

Methods

The study employed a mixed-method approach to explore and compare attitudes toward motherhood among female undergraduates in Sri Lanka. The research was designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data through a two-step process involving a survey and follow-up interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives held

by participants within the respective cultural context. The study population included female students from three faculties: Arts, Management, and Science, at the University of Colombo.

The study adopted a pseudo-longitudinal design, comparing differences in perceptions and attitudes toward motherhood between students in their first year of study and those in their final year. Given the limited three-month timeframe allocated for the project, this approach enabled an effective comparison. A survey, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions were utilised as the main methods of data collection for the study.

Step 01: Survey

The survey questionnaire was administered through a Google Form in all three languages (Sinhala, English, and Tamil). These methods allowed the research team to efficiently collect primary data from a large number of respondents while also enabling the simultaneous collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative techniques were used to explore attitudinal tendencies in greater depth. Students from the first and fourth years at the university are included in the sample. Table 01 shows the number of students from the respective faculties.

Table 1: Number of students from the University of Colombo in the selected faculties

Faculty	No. of Students	
	1st Year	4th Year
Arts	50	50
Science	50	50
Management	50	50
Total	150	150

Source: Survey data, 2025

Sample selection for the study was guided by practical considerations, as it was necessary to restrict the sample to a manageable size. Due to the short project duration and periods of university closure, a total of 300 students were selected. This sample included 50 students each from the first-year and final-year batches across three faculties at the University of Colombo, resulting in 100 students from each faculty ($50 \text{ students} \times 2 \text{ batches} \times 3 \text{ faculties} = 300$).

Step 2: In-depth Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with Selected Respondents

Following the questionnaire survey, qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with a subset of students. Twelve students were selected for these interviews ($2 \text{ students} \times 2 \text{ cohorts} \times 3 \text{ faculties} = 12$). The questionnaire included an item inviting respondents to indicate their interest

in participating in an in-depth interview and to provide their contact information. Interview participants were then chosen from those who expressed interest within the selected faculties. The purpose of these interviews was to gain deeper insight into the factors and experiences shaping students' attitudes toward motherhood.

In addition, two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, each comprising 10 participants drawn from a mix of first- and final-year students across different faculties. These discussions allowed for a broader exploration of themes identified in the survey and interviews, enabling the examination of shared experiences and differences across faculties, disciplines, years of study, and cultural contexts.

Data from both phases were analysed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of female undergraduates' attitudes. Survey data collected via Google Forms were cleaned, coded, and analysed using SPSS, employing both univariate and bivariate statistical techniques as appropriate. Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were analysed thematically to identify key patterns and insights.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, it exclusively focused on female undergraduate students from the selected university, excluding male perspectives. As a result, the findings may not have fully captured the broader societal attitudes toward motherhood and fertility, particularly in relation to gender dynamics and expectations.

Second, the research was conducted under a strict three-month timeframe, which posed significant challenges for data collection and analysis. This limited period may have restricted the depth of exploration and the ability to capture nuanced variations in attitudes across different student groups. Faculties closed for the Christmas break during these three months.

Third, self-reported data collected via online questionnaires may have introduced response bias in spite of the Google form being anonymised. Participants might have provided socially desirable answers rather than their true perceptions, potentially influencing the accuracy of the results.

Despite these limitations, the study provided valuable insights into female undergraduates' perspectives on motherhood and declining fertility, contributing to ongoing discussions on demographic trends and gender roles.

Results

The following section presents the findings of the study, highlighting the demographic characteristics of the participants and their perceptions of motherhood in relation to education, career, and lifestyle. Both quantitative

and qualitative data are used to explore how undergraduate women in Sri Lanka negotiate the balance between career aspirations and family planning, including factors that influence their decisions regarding motherhood.

The Demographic Profile of the Participants

The study sample consisted of 300 Sri Lankan female college students, primarily aged between 21 and 23 years (44.4%), followed by 24-26 years (39.2%), and a smaller proportion aged 18-20 years (16.3%). The majority of the respondents were single (72.5%), while 27.5% reported being in a relationship. In terms of religious affiliation, the sample was predominantly Buddhist (85.0%), with smaller representations of Christians (6.5%), Muslims (4.9%), and Hindus (3.6%). These demographic characteristics reflect the typical composition of Sri Lankan undergraduates of the University of Colombo from the Arts, Management, and Science Faculties of the first and fourth years, where most are within the 21-23 age range, unmarried, and Buddhism remains the dominant religion.

Perceived Importance of Motherhood in Future Plans

Motherhood remains a significant yet complex aspect of many women's life trajectories, often intersecting with educational and career ambitions in ways that reflect broader societal expectations, personal values, and disciplinary cultures. Research has long highlighted the tension between traditional gender roles, which emphasise caregiving, and modern aspirations for professional achievement (Gerson, 1985; Stone, 2007). While some women view motherhood as a central life goal, others prioritise career advancement or seek to balance both domains (Blair-Loy, 2003; Hays, 1996). These diverging perspectives are further shaped by academic and professional socialisation, with fields of study influencing how individuals perceive their future roles (Ceci et al., 2014). These findings by previous research are further explored through the quantitative and qualitative data collected.

The importance placed on motherhood in their future plans varied significantly across academic disciplines. Management and Arts students were more likely to consider motherhood as a crucial part of their future, while Science students displayed more diverse perspectives. These variations are illustrated in Table 02, which presents the crosstabulation of the importance of motherhood in future plans by field of study.

Table 2: Importance of Motherhood in Future Plans by Field of Study

Field of study	How important is the idea of “becoming a mother” in your future plans?				Total
	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not very important	Not Important at all	
Management	44 (44%)	41 (41%)	9 (9%)	6 (6%)	100
Science	38 (38%)	33 (33%)	19 (19%)	10 (10%)	100
Arts	54 (54%)	36 (36%)	5 (5%)	5 (5%)	100
Total	136 (45.3%)	110 (36.7%)	33 (11%)	21 (7%)	300

Source: Survey data, 2025

Among management students, 44% (44 out of 100) rated motherhood as "very important", while nine students considered it "not very important" and six "not important at all". This suggests that management students generally regard motherhood as a significant future goal. Science students, in contrast, displayed a more diverse range of responses: 38% selected "very important", 33% chose "somewhat important", and larger proportions—19% and 10%, respectively—indicated that motherhood was less important or not important at all. These findings suggest that science students have mixed views regarding the significance of motherhood in their future plans. Arts students demonstrated the strongest inclination toward motherhood, with 54% selecting "very important". Only a small proportion considered it "not very important" (5%) or "not important at all" (5%), indicating that arts students tend to place a higher value on motherhood compared to students from the other disciplines.

Overall, the chi-square test ($p = .019$) confirmed a statistically significant association between the field of study and the perceived importance of motherhood.

Findings from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions depict a difference between first-year and final-year students regarding the perception of motherhood as an important aspect of life. First-year students often envisioned motherhood as a life stage that could not be avoided. It was evident that most of these perceptions were based on their religious and cultural expectations. For instance, one first-year arts student described motherhood as *“the highest position a girl/woman can achieve”*, while another student noted that *“after getting married, half the duties required for our religion will be over.”* These early-stage undergraduate views reflect a strong adherence to traditional norms and familial expectations of being a mother.

In contrast, many final-year students shared either conditional or delayed aspirations for motherhood. According to a fourth-year undergraduate of the science faculty:

“I prioritise finding a good job over becoming a mother. Only after that will I think about becoming a mother.”

(FGD Data, 2025)

This shift suggests that exposure to academic life, diverse peer groups, and the experience-based knowledge on career-building affects the initial conception seen in the first-year undergraduates.

Furthermore, the students have concerned financial readiness as a deciding factor for becoming a mother. According to qualitative data, both first-year and final-year students recognised the importance of financial stability before attaining motherhood and starting a family. However, final-year students explained it as a more decisive precondition. This was reflected in the statement provided by a fourth-year science undergraduate:

“I am not ready to give birth to kids to throw them away or offer them to a Buddhist monastery once we start to tackle financial issues.”

(FGD Data, 2025)

First-year participants, on the other hand, acknowledged financial readiness as something that could be worked toward rather than a barrier.

Education, Career, and Lifestyle as Prerequisites

Considerable numbers of participants across various fields, namely science, management, and arts, prioritise education over starting a family. For these individuals, obtaining academic qualifications and advancing their careers seemed fundamental before considering motherhood. In addition to education, career advancement is a significant driver. Respondents emphasised the importance of establishing a stable job, achieving professional growth, and securing long-term career opportunities prior to having children. Financial stability also plays a crucial role; participants, particularly those in the early stages of their careers, such as internships, noted that a stable income and the ability to manage the costs of childcare are critical prerequisites for starting a family. Moreover, personal freedom is highly valued, as many individuals prefer to maintain their autonomy and pursue personal interests, hobbies, and travel during their younger years. Lastly, lifestyle choices are a major consideration. Delaying motherhood is seen as a way to preserve a desired lifestyle that supports career focus, active social engagements, and ongoing self-development.

Balancing Career and Motherhood

The analysis of the relationship between field of study and confidence in balancing career and motherhood reveals significant findings. The responses to the question "Do you feel confident balancing career and motherhood in the future?" were categorised into "yes, definitely," "I am still thinking about it", and "no, not at all".

The breakdown of responses shows that out of 100 management students, 51% answered "yes, definitely", 47% were "still thinking about it", and only 2% responded "no, not at all." For the science students, 51% answered "yes, definitely", 40% were still considering it, and 9% responded "no, not at all." Arts students showed a similar pattern, with 51% saying "yes, definitely", 47% still thinking, and 2% expressing uncertainty. The Chi-Square test for independence produced a Pearson Chi-Square value of 11.837 with four degrees of freedom and a significance level of 0.019 ($p < .05$), indicating a statistically significant relationship between field of study and confidence in balancing career and motherhood. The likelihood ratio also supported this result, with a value of 11.070 and a significance level of 0.026. Most students, regardless of their field of study, exhibited either confidence or indecision about balancing career and motherhood. However, a notable difference appears in the science group, where a higher proportion of students (9%) indicated that they did not feel confident, compared to just two students from management and arts. Management and arts students showed a relatively similar distribution, with most either feeling confident or still considering their ability to balance both aspects. This suggests that students in management and arts fields tend to have a higher sense of confidence in balancing career and motherhood compared to their peers in the science field.

This had been further explained through the qualitative data while referring to their academic years. First-year students generally perceived a career and motherhood could be balanced, often underestimating its potential conflicts. According to one first-year undergraduate from the science faculty:

"Both studies and motherhood should be balanced. Because motherhood cannot be lost because of studies."

(In-depth Interview Data, 2025)

In contrast, by the final year, students had developed a more sceptical view about balancing a career and motherhood. As stated by a fourth-year science undergraduate:

“If you are going to have a nine-to-four job, then it's very hard to have a child as well.”

(In-depth Interview Data, 2025)

This perception was further elaborated by the fourth-year undergraduates during the discussions about the experiences at the workplace, as most of them were pursuing their internship. The students frequently mentioned hiring discrimination against pregnant women, lack of paternity leave, and the social expectation that mothers take on the majority of household work, which were rarely raised by the first-year participants.

In Sri Lanka, career aspirations and motherhood are often at odds. Many employers hesitate to recruit pregnant women, not seeing beyond their temporary leave to recognise their long-term potential. This reality forces many women to compromise their careers for motherhood because society has rigid gender roles. Even when both partners work, household responsibilities largely fall on women. Some choose to step away from their careers entirely, not because they lack ambition but because balancing both is overwhelming. Personally, I know I wouldn't be able to sacrifice my career and social engagement. For me, career and financial independence take precedence over embracing motherhood.

(In-depth Interview Data, 2025)

Influence of Career Goals on Views of Motherhood

In terms of the extent of influence, a relatively small number of students reported that their career goals had a strong influence on their views of motherhood, with only 84 students across all fields indicating a strong influence. Among these, management students had the lowest number, with only 24% of students indicating a strong influence, compared to 27% each from science and arts fields. The majority of students reported that their career goals had some influence on their views on motherhood, totalling 184 students. Management students accounted for the highest proportion in this category, with 63%, followed by Science with 61% and Arts with 60%. A small number of students reported that their career goals had little influence on their views on motherhood, with only 29 students in total. The distribution here was relatively similar across all fields: 11% of the management students, 9% of science students, and 9% of arts students. Finally, only 3% of students reported that their career goals had no influence on their views on motherhood, with management and science students having the fewest in this category (2 out of 100 and 3 out of 100, respectively). Arts students with a total of 4 reported no influence. The Chi-

Square test results showed a Pearson Chi-Square value of 1.233 with six degrees of freedom and an asymptotic significance of 0.975, indicating no significant association between the field of study and the influence of career goals on views about motherhood. This means that while students from different fields of study may have varied responses regarding the influence of their career goals on motherhood, these differences are not statistically significant. Most students, regardless of their field, reported that career goals had some degree of influence on their views of motherhood.

This aligns with qualitative insights, where participants expressed concerns about traditional gender roles and the challenge of balancing career and motherhood. Even though fields like science and management may offer career-oriented environments, the overarching societal norms about gender and family responsibilities seem to affect students similarly across disciplines. However, the majority of participants in both in-depth interviews and FGDs expressed that career goals strongly influence their views on motherhood, with a few choosing career over motherhood.

I think a woman's career has a strong influence on her role as a mother. I believe it's possible to balance both studies and a career at the same time. If I have a family in the future, I will continue to manage both my family and career. If I don't have a family, I will focus on my studies and career.

(In-depth Interview Data, 2025)

Prioritisation of Career Over Family

The crosstabulation data presented in Table 03 indicate varying degrees of preference among students from different fields regarding prioritising their career over starting a family. A total of 300 students participated in the survey, with responses categorised into three options: "yes" (prioritising career), "no" (not prioritising career), and "not sure".

Table 3: Prioritizing Career Over Starting a Family by Field of Study

Field of study	Would you prioritise your career over starting a family?			Total
	Yes	No	Not sure	
Management	34 (34%)	27 (27%)	39 (39%)	100
Science	39 (39%)	33 (33%)	28 (28%)	100
Arts	35 (35%)	40 (40%)	25 (25%)	100
Total	108 (36%)	100 (33.3%)	92 (30.7%)	300

Source: Survey data, 2025

The highest proportion of students prioritising their career over starting a family is observed among science students (39%), followed by arts (35%) and management (34%). Conversely, arts students show a stronger tendency to prioritise family over career, with 40% selecting "no". Management students exhibit the highest level of uncertainty (39%),

followed by science (28%) and arts (25%). Across all fields of study, 30.7% of students are unsure about their stance on career versus family prioritisation, suggesting that uncertainty plays a significant role in decision-making. Overall, career prioritisation (36%) is slightly more common among the students than not prioritising career (33.3%), although the differences are minimal.

A chi-square test was conducted to examine the association between the field of study and career prioritisation decisions. The p-value (0.172) indicates that there is no statistically significant relationship between the field of study and the decision to prioritise career over family. This suggests that factors beyond academic discipline, such as personal values, societal expectations, or economic considerations, may have a greater influence on this decision.

While academic discipline can influence career paths, studies suggest that it does not have a strong direct relationship with women's prioritisation of career over family or marriage. Instead, personal values, societal expectations, and economic considerations are more influential in these decisions. For instance, research indicates that gender roles and societal expectations, rather than academic disciplines, play a more significant role in shaping career choices and the emphasis placed on career versus family (Nzasi, 2024).

Overall, the data suggest that career prioritisation is a complex issue, with a significant portion of students remaining uncertain. While the arts students show a stronger inclination toward prioritising family, management students exhibit the highest uncertainty. The lack of statistical significance implies that career and family prioritisation is not strongly influenced by one's academic background but likely shaped by broader social and personal factors.

Discussion

The implications of this study are diverse and discipline-related variations in young Sri Lankan female undergraduates' attitudes towards motherhood, career aspirations, and life goals in the context of fertility decline. While motherhood is a major life goal for most of the respondents, results indicate that the importance given to it is negotiated in accordance with the attainment of higher education, career success, economic independence, and personal autonomy. This simultaneous prioritisation is aligned with previous research suggesting that women's reproductive decisions are more and more shaped by competing demands between professional and family spheres (Blair-Loy, 2003; Gerson, 1985; Hays, 1996).

Statistical tests indicate that arts and management students are more likely to view motherhood as "very important" than science students, who are more diverse in their views. This pattern may be a product of disciplinary socialisation processes in which science professions have long periods of training and delayed entry into fixed employment; hence, family building is delayed. The same findings have been obtained in Western contexts, where STEM female professionals delay childbearing due to rigorous career demands (Ceci et al., 2014).

Self-efficacy for balancing career and motherhood also varied by discipline, with lower levels of self-efficacy in science students compared to arts and management students. This is consistent with previous research on work–family conflict, which emphasises that career fields with heavy workloads and stringent schedules will reduce perceived feasibility of combining career and motherhood (Hochschild, 1989; Stone, 2007). But the qualitative data show that across all fields, social expectations, more precisely, those founded on traditional gender roles, continue to play a significant role in reproductive choices. Interestingly, while career ambition was observed to influence attitudes toward motherhood, the influence of field of study was not statistically significant. This suggests that more diffuse structural and cultural forces, such as gendered relations in the labour market, economic insecurity, and entrenched family culture, may be more influential than educational discipline itself on women's reproductive intentions. McDonald (2000) also concludes, arguing that gender equality both in the public and private spheres is crucial to fertility maintenance in advanced stages of the demographic transition.

A noteworthy finding is that a large proportion of students remain uncertain about whether to prioritise career or family in their future lives. Such indecision bears witness to a transitional cultural context in Sri Lanka in which modern aspirations for self-fulfillment and economic independence coexist with traditional expectations of early marriage and motherhood (Gunathilake, 2023; Kodagoda & Duncan, 2010). Such ambivalence can manifest in deferred fertility, which can explain the country's ongoing below-replacement fertility rate (World Bank, 2022).

Demographically, the attitudinal transformation that has been witnessed among educated young females could have significant implications for Sri Lanka's fertility trajectory. Sequencing education, occupational security, and independence as priorities in that order before childbearing is aligned with patterns seen in other countries that have attained advanced stages of the demographic transition (Dyson, 2010). If such attitudes are sustained in the absence of effective policy initiatives like workplace flexibility, affordable childcare, and more gender-balanced domestic arrangements, the country can expect to experience declining

fertility, with likely socioeconomic impacts including a further aging society, shrinking workforce, and higher dependency ratios.

Nonetheless, the present research adds to the limited literature on fertility intentions of university students in Sri Lanka, with special focus on the interrelationship among education, career, and gender in shaping conceptualisations of motherhood. The implications of these findings are for policy responses crafted to align women's reproductive ambitions with career and personal aspirations toward a more integrated demographic future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a visible difference between the academic stream and the perception of career aspirations in viewing motherhood. It is also evident that the perceptions have a gradual change compared to the first year in the final year. As the sample consists of undergraduates, several factors could affect this, including the education, peer groups, and socialisation in a new environment. There is also a tendency to delay motherhood by the undergraduates as they encounter and predict a role conflict. They also believe that financial stability is a priority that should be considered before starting a family.

It is, however, noteworthy to point out that a decision to become a mother is not solely personal from a sociological viewpoint, as it is always embedded with social factors. According to the data, it is evident that this decision-making has been in question because of the socio-economic situation in the country, viewed from a structural-blame perspective. As the financial struggles continue rising up, young women tend to delay commencing a family, as it should be intertwined with separate duties and responsibilities and extra financial burdens.

Therefore, in order to sustain the country's fertility rate, it is better to plan for policy reformation. The discourse generated by the participants reflects the policy formulations and revisits in employment. Encouraging every discipline to empower women to be active members of the workforce is crucial, as women in the workforce in every sector significantly impact the country's development. This could be enhanced by introducing flexible work policies to promote work-family balance, including paternity leave, which could support women to perform their dual roles. Providing financial support, scholarships, and mentorship programs for women in higher education and career development is crucial. The gender focal points at the universities must regularly update a database on the employability of married graduates and its trends. This could help them to design future curriculum and scholarship programs favorable for the women to enhance their agency. Improving access to affordable and high-quality childcare services and offering subsidies for childcare costs for the working parents is crucial.

Finally, addressing sociocultural norms through community dialogues and showcasing successful role models can encourage supportive attitudes towards women's reproductive choices. Additionally, enhancing maternal healthcare services and providing mental health support for women experiencing stress related to family planning and motherhood is essential. Implementing these recommendations will create a more supportive environment for young women in Sri Lanka to pursue their educational and career goals while making informed decisions about motherhood, ultimately addressing the declining fertility rates and promoting women's empowerment in society.

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