

Economic Role of Women in Sri Lanka: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The economy is a social science and, as such, should take into account the practices of all components of the society, of men as well as women. Therefore, it can be identified that a significant relationship between women and the economy in history should be investigated broadly. Considering the economic history of ancient Sri Lanka, women's labour commitment depended on both the social necessities and the nature of the agro-economic system. It can be argued that women in ancient times have made a considerable contribution not only to household needs but also to agricultural activities. However, their economic role has not been taken into account in relation to the country's economy due to patriarchal ideology and the history of the country which was built under the dominance of males in South Asian societies. The major objective of this study is to examine how women contribute to the country's economy and investigate how women's labour role can be recognized in the society in Sri Lanka. According to the periodization of Sri Lankan history, the ancient and medieval periods are covered through the study due to time limitation. The study was based on primary and secondary data gathered from literature surveys directly related to the issues addressed in this study. The issues of women's economic situation have been discussed by feminist historians within the feminist theoretical approach, and they have developed a broader discussion regarding the economic involvement of women in the context of patriarchal society in South Asian countries. Accordingly, as a theoretical perspective in this paper feminist theoretical approach is used within the context of feminist historiography. The study revealed the factors regarding women's economic role with special attention to the various fields that women's involvement as workers in the selected period. According to the literary and archaeological sources, it can be emphasized that women have functioned in various fields, including activities related to the agricultural economy, internal trade affairs, animal husbandry, various other industries, and teaching. Women's labour role and direct involvement in the economic

sector increased with socio-economic changes that took place in the country from time to time. Furthermore, it can be recognized that women's role in economic standing directly affected women to increase their social development.

Keywords

Sri Lankan Woman, Economy, Patriarchy, Feminism

1. Introduction

From early times in human society, the respect and recognition of the woman were bonded with motherhood. As a result, she was considered the most important person who undertook all domestic responsibilities. Most societies recognized the fact that social and economic activities carried out by women were then natural responsibilities, and therefore, their contribution to the national output was never highlighted. People were uncertain whether the role played by her in safeguarding the family in day-to-day life had any value. Although it seems that the man, as well as the woman, made an active contribution to society, in most male-centered Asian societies, these factors were not highlighted. But with the growth of different social measurements and various viewpoints, different visions and novel social attitudes were also perceived about the woman. When scholarly attention was focused on women to look at them from a different viewpoint, the contribution of their social work, politics and economic activities were also widely considered and discussed. With this background, the study of women expanded widely into diverse fields. Accordingly, the main aim of this article is to examine the economic contribution of women in Sri Lanka, with special reference to labour role and property rights, by using available historical sources in Sri Lankan history.

2. Significance of the Study

The present study is focused on the ancient and medieval period and the beginning of the modern period of Sri Lankan history. The study of women's status in this period deserves special attention for several reasons. In general, the medieval period marks many remarkable trends and incidents which influenced the evolution of Sri Lankan history. Such trends can be identified in areas such as politics, the economy, and society. Various incidents in the medieval period have made a significant impact on the organization of the historical discourse of the country. Among them, conducting an extensive study of women's contribution to the economic sector based on historical sources would be timely and important.

Furthermore, the result of this research study may help to identify women's economic contributions in ancient times and how they actively participated in the economic development of the family and Sri Lankan society. Within this

context, the study is worth undertaking for many reasons. First, the research investigates the three main development issues, such as women, Sri Lankan society, and economic contribution to women in the patriarchal social context in Sri Lanka. Second, the present research opens a platform to investigate the historical sources important to women's studies in the selected period. It will benefit future research on ancient women in Sri Lanka. Thirdly, the study mainly focuses on the women's economic contribution in Sri Lanka to develop a broader discussion among Sri Lankan women researchers in a new direction. Fourth, the present study can provide the historical truth of women's economic participation in Sri Lankan history. In addition to this, the present study is of much significance to the discourse of women's studies in Sri Lanka.

3. Methodology

The study was mainly based on primary and secondary data collected from literature surveys and using available archaeological sources directly applicable to the issues addressed in this study. Considering the primary literary sources are available as textbooks, and according to the nature of these texts, researchers should gather information very carefully because of exaggerations. Archaeological materials such as inscriptions are available in volumes of *Epigraphia Zeylanica* and *Inscription of Ceylon*, and these sources are considered as most valuable materials due to the nature of the sources.

Historical facts available in these sources were analyzed using the content analysis method, which is a research tool used to determine the presence of actual words, themes, or concepts. Using content analysis, researchers can analyze the presence, meanings and relationships of certain words, themes, or concepts. Hsieh and Shannon stated that content analysis is a study technique for the subjective understanding of the content of the manuscript data through the systematic organization procedure of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Therefore, in this paper, the facts were analyzed using content analysis according to the content analysis guidelines, such as outlined, classified and focused relevant documents about the topic; data gathered using sources; defined the basic units, creating a system of categories; allocated specific parts of the text to codes. Data were analyzed according to the categories and finally interpreted the situation.

4. Theoretical Perspective

The study is mainly based on the feminist theoretical approach within the context of feminist historiography. The study of women runs through different subject streams. It would seem that the vision of women changed with time in the field of history. This state can be further determined by the investigation of views about women in historical writings. It is useful to clearly understand the social discussions by exploring the research done in the ancient period as to how the woman's vision marched forward in the western tradition of thinking.

It seems that the study of women in history is analyzed as a new approach, and it also highlights as a new tradition. It can be explained as a primary characteristic created according to requirements of power and authority prevalent in the subject of history in any civilization. Accordingly, when establishing the society by way of history, the religious aspect has been given more value in historical writings, and as a result of the decision taken by the clergies who held the inferior position. Another consequence of this was that women who played an important part in the advancement of society had slipped from the ancient historical sources. Accordingly, in the western and oriental societies, very little authority was given to the female compared to the male in the ancient societies. Therefore, women's history can be explained as a social phenomenon isolated from the wide streams of historical and other standard sources. The authors who had written books from the male point of view very rarely mentioned the names of women unless the woman was a mother of a dignified ruler or she was a very faithful exemplary character.

But during the past decades, the contents and the concepts of history have made considerable gains. As a result, the approach to the subject of history was established in a novel and intelligent manner. The vision of the subject of history influenced the other social sciences, and also concepts presented from the other social sciences influenced the field of history. Accordingly, the concept of feminism can be shown as a concept presented by the newly developed social science streams and something discussed in history. This is a western concept seen as a practicing theory which requests the equality for the different form of depressed systems and also as a usage (Thiruchandran, 1995: pp. 31-35). Besides this, the concept of feminism highlights male and female equality in the family unit and in both the economic and political arenas of society. Although this concept is highlighted merely as a western concept, it is also used in analyzing oriental societies, and it is very clear that it is used in the academic world with different definitions not only concerning social conditions but also in the religious and cultural arenas. Therefore, it is important to investigate how the change of direction affected the study of women, and the subject of history and also new ideas established about feminism. This will, no doubt, direct the study about women towards a new approach. The origin of feminism commenced with the book entitled *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* written by Mary Wollstonecraft, based on the ideas of liberalism (Wollstonecraft, 1975). The theme of Wollstonecraft's book primarily emphasized equal rights for women. She attacked the societal idea that women were created simply to please the male. She has requested that women be given equal opportunities in social, political, educational, and labour matters. Accordingly, the feminist theory adopted in this paper is to analyze women's situation in Sri Lankan patriarchal social structure, although the feminist theory is not only for women studies theory but also a gender analytical theory. However, to analyze women's situation in a patriarchal social structure in any society, feminist theory can be considered as the most suitable theory.

5. Discussion

5.1. Labor Role of Women in Sri Lankan History

Women's contributions to labour in the ancient and mediaeval period in Sri Lanka took different forms. It became a notable practice in the sphere of agricultural activities. Many scholars have pointed out that not only men but also women have made an equal contribution to agricultural activities since ancient times (Munasinghe, 2004: p. 84; Kiribamune, 1990: pp. 15-40). In such a context, women's labour commitment was dependent on both the social necessities and the nature of the agro-economic system. It can be argued that women in ancient times have made a considerable contribution not only to household needs but also to agricultural activities (Munasinghe, 2004: p. 84). According to the literary and archaeological sources, it can be argued that women have functioned in various fields, including activities related to cultivation, internal trade affairs, animal husbandry, various other industries, and teaching.

Accordingly, the step by step moving forward as participants of social and economic development by the women who were spending the conventional household life-preserving their families can be shown due to the progress made by them throughout history. Marking the first occasion about the progress of the contribution of labour socialized by the Sri Lankan woman in the economic flow, about the social evaluation received by her on behalf of the same, and also the importance of reviewing about the ownership of the property by her was because it is she who fulfilled considerable part of the contribution of labour in the contemporary society. The role of the woman in agriculture in the pre-colonial period was very special. Her labour contribution in this instance was decided by the requirements of the then society and the pattern of its agricultural economy. In the male dominant ancient Sri Lankan society, the women of this country, whose main duty was to preserve their families, had performed a significant role in the paddy fields and Chena cultivation as well (Munasinghe, 2004: p. 84). The woman in this instance had devoted her labour to income-generating activities in the overall economy. She played a part in farming and related activities, assistance to internal trade, animal husbandry, different industries, employment in state service, including teaching. Also, they participated in various manufacturing industries according to primary and archaeological sources and evidence. Through these different professions, women utilized the income they received in the way they liked. Their contribution was valued according to the available evidence.

Women in Agriculture

According to the evidence provided by archival and literary sources, the contribution of Sri Lankan women in terms of labour in different sectors of society is highlighted. Also, it is important to look at these sectors compared to the evaluation of labour by the male in contemporary society. As mentioned above, the contribution of labour by ancient Sri Lankan women was in various areas, an

important area being the agricultural sector. Most scholars have emphasized that in ancient Sri Lankan society, both male and female, have actively contributed to agriculture, as it was the main mode of living in the country. Some scholars who investigate the women's economic situation highlighted that agricultural work was the chief occupation in Sri Lankan society in which women have actively participated. Among these scholars Indrani Munasinghe (Munasinghe, 2004), Sirima Kiribamune (Kiribamune, 1992) and Indrani Iriyagolla (Iriyagolla, 1991) emphasized the situation as follows.

“...Paddy farming was the major agricultural pursuit. Where the work in the paddy fields was concerned, she always played a secondary role because she was also responsible for cooking...” (Munasinghe, 2004: p. 84)

“...Women in Sri Lanka have participated in productive labour from time immemorial, and the combination of dual roles is perhaps not an entirely new experience for most women, especially for those in the agricultural sector, which still the major area of economic activity in the country” (Kiribamune, 1992).

“...The female community in both literary works is treated as an integral part of the community where agriculture was the chief occupation...” (Iriyagolla, 1991: p. 93)

Therefore, we should pay attention to how the woman engaged herself in the economic sector. How important was women's labour in that social structure relative to the division of labour? It is also important to identify the changes which occurred in the agricultural sector during the pre-colonial period especially, with the development of irrigated agriculture after the 4th century and what is the difference between the required contribution of labour in a primarily agricultural society and the contribution of labour in extensive agriculture? (Munasinghe, 2004: pp. 83-84)

When inquiring into the labour contribution of women to agriculture, Munasinghe has pointed out that the idea that the women participated only in some specific activities cannot be determined. She has further pointed out that it depended on the social class and economic status of the people (Munasinghe, 2004: p. 84). Considering the primary text, *Saddharmāṅkārāya* mentioned that “women participated in the paddy sowing ceremony nicely dressed” (Sangaraja, 1954: p. 707). Another piece of evidence that appears in the *Sihalawattuppakaranya* shows that women not only participated in paddy cultivation but also in “chena” cultivation as well (Buddhadatta, 1959b: p. 112). Women engaged themselves in weeding the field, as well as safeguarding the young plants from different creatures. She also supplied food for those who worked in paddy fields and chenas. During the whole period when the paddy was growing, the women did tiring work to safeguard the crops and plants according to *Pūjāwāliya* (Ghanawimala, 1986: p. 557).

Further considering the contemporary literary text, *Saddharmāraṭṭhnaṅkārāya* and *Pansiya panas jāthakapota* also provided more details regarding women's participation in agriculture in the medieval period. Among these texts, *Saddhar-*

marathnāvaliya mentioned how Sri Lankan people engaged with agricultural activities throughout the year (Ghanawimala, 1985: p. 124). Considering the special occasions concerning paddy farming in the ancient society of Sri Lanka, such as the festival of the ceremonial inauguration of paddy cultivation or the *Vapmaṅgula* celebrated in month of *Vap* (October), males and females both took part in equally. There can be seen more evidence regarding this particular occasion in literary texts such as *Saddharmālakāraya* in Sri Lankan history. Following quotation of *Saddharmāraṭhnakāraya* that mentioned Munasinghe in her book proves the facts regarding *Vapmaṅgula* in ancient Sri Lankan society.

“They were celebrating a grand *Vapmaṅgula* festival. People in their hundreds set themselves to work. They bathed bulls of unblemished white colour in saffron water, adorned their necks with ornaments made of coconut fronds, covered horn points with gold or silver caps, tied gold-coloured tinkling bells on the bulls’ legs and decorated them in all manners and harnessed them to plough and yokes. Then, all people assembled started parking food and drinks made to suit each individual’s means. Some of them, adorning themselves with all kinds of embellishments, took to ploughing, some to sawing.” (Munasinghe, 2004: p. 86)

According to the evidence of women’s participation in agricultural activities, it can be seen that it depended on their social class and the community’s economic situation that they belonged as mentioned above in this paper. However, considering the above ceremonial occasion, all women participated without any barriers of class or cast. Therefore, women’s contribution to the agricultural sector can consider as their main employment in ancient society in Sri Lanka.

Sandēsa poems also provide evidence regarding female farmers in the medieval period in Sri Lankan history. *Sandēsa* poems reveal that how female farmers contributed to paddy cultivation, joining the protection of paddy fields and other works that women can involve properly in the paddy field. Further considering the women’s participation in the agricultural sector, there is evidence that they are actively involved in the cultivation of vegetables and fruits to develop their family economy. The words “female farmer” are mentioned in *Sandēsa* literature and further stated that she carried out all work such as harvesting, safeguarding the plants, winnowing, etc., not expecting a salary or payment but for the sole purpose of safeguarding her family (Dharmawardana, 1967: p. 11 poem). It was clear that women in all strata of society, from the highest to the lowest, i.e. from royal families up to the women in the lowest class in the society, contributed in different ways towards agricultural activities.

5.2. Women’s Participation in Industrial Sector

Internal trade was one of the areas where Sri Lankan women contributed immensely. It can be considered as one of the professions that Sri Lankan women were engaged in. The only problem that arises here was that in the *Raja Rata* civilization (Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa Kingdoms), there is only very little

evidence regarding the participation of women in trading activities. The information contained in the *Sandēsa* literature is very important as evidence that women of this country were engaged in trading activities during the Kotte period. The author of *Girā Sandēsa* mentioned that female traders engaged with trading activities without any cheating (Piyarathana, 1920: p. 58 poem).

In addition, women have contributed their labour for different industries for the uplift or advancement of society. The sugarcane industry was distinctive among them. The history of sugarcane industry runs as far back as the Anuradhapura period, according to written evidence found in the literary sources. The *Mahāwamsa* discovered that the king Mahachuli Mahatissa had disguised himself and had worked in a sugarcane factory for three months (Batuvanthudava & Sumangala, 1999: Chap. 34, Verses 5-6). A story mentioned in the *Sihalawaththupakarana*, women have contributed to this industry too. As mentioned in the book *Sihalawaththupakarana*, it was seen that women had contributed their labour even in industries like pottery, cotton industry, animal husbandry, cooking, etc. (Buddhadatta, 1959b: pp. 131-132).

Except for these industries, there were instances where women have contributed their labour in certain professions. There is evidence to show that they received appreciation for engaging in those professions. It was because women who knitted garlands were mentioned with payment for doing so. The inscription belonging to reign of Kalyānavathī mentioned female garland makers.

“...Female slaves who looked after the precincts of *stupa*, the garland making women, the perfumers and others...” (Paranavithana, 1944: No. 5, p. 260)

In addition, teaching, state service, working as wet nurses and attendants, slavery, prostitution and dancing were certain professions that women were engaged in.

When further investigating how women’s labour was valued in different fields, there is some evidence that they have got payment for some of the work but not all their services were paid. When we analyze the records to check the contribution of labour by Sri Lankan women, the *Mihintalē pillar inscription* of King Mahinda IV is very important. It mentions that the women in this country had received payment and an allowance for providing labour for their work (Wickramasinghe, 1912: pp. 84-90). According to the records, it can identify that, “*Jetamava*” (an old woman) was given a land for her work. The work done by “*jetamava*” cannot be specifically identified. D. M. De Z. Wickramasinghe, who provides an interpretation of the Mihintale Pillar inscription of King Mahinda, points out that her duty was to clean the temple (He has defined *Jetamava* as an old woman) (Wickramasinghe, 1912: p. 87). The Pali word *Jetamatha* had been converted as *jetamava*. Emphasizing women’s employment situation in ancient Sri Lanka, Hettiarachchi stated that,

“...Women during the period under discussion worked as employees in monasteries. The *Mihintalē* slab inscription of Mahinda IV (956-972 A.D.) is quite informative in this connection. It records not only the presence of women em-

ployees but also mentions the salaries drawn by them: a *jetmava* was paid one *paya* of land...” (Hettiarachchi, 1988: p. 109)

He has further pointed out that there was some officer-in-charge of the kitchen or dining room also paid one *paya* of land. Within this context he has emphasized that there was no obstacle against women to engage even in paid employment according to this examples (Hettiarachchi, 1988: p. 109).

5.3. Other Employment of Women

According to the pillar inscriptions of Mihindu IV, ancient women had contributed their labour through different professions or activities, and certainly, it was clear that their labour was valued. Accordingly, in the mediaeval period, women, like men have engaged themselves in different industries and other social services and had earned wealth. Archaeological sources reveal that the women who were engaged in different temples and the women who served as dancers received a payment. According to evidence, seven women considered as dancing girls of the god were dedicated to the God Kailasha. From the temple of God Shiva, these girls have received a monthly payment of 23 gold coins from the interest of a deposit.

“...having placed forehead marks on seven females (dedicating them) as dancing girls of the god, 23 *kācu* (coins) were deposited as an endowment...” (Paranavithana, 1944: p. 195)

It is also clear that they have received certain payment for dancing and singing in front of the god. It is a guess that according to the records, the concept of female attendant “*devadasi*” was established in Sri Lanka by this time. However, it is difficult to think that this concept was similar to the Indian concept, but the Sri Lankan female attendant had received professional honour for this position. By praising these female attendants or “*devadasies*” in *Sandēshakavya* of the Kotte period, it can be considered an “honourable profession” in Sri Lanka. The literary text provides evidence of these dancing girls and it revealed that dancing girls were economically a stable lot. In addition, when inquiring into the ownership of movable property of ancient Sri Lankan woman, it is clear that she had a wealth of her own, earned by her, and she used it in whatever way she liked. Accordingly, ancient Sri Lankan women had actively contributed to the economy’s advancement.

Yet another income-generating profession engaged by the women of this country was prostitution. It was considered the oldest profession engaged by women and considered an honorable profession in Indian society. But it seems that honorable women of this country were not encouraged to take part in this profession. This does not mean that this profession was not prevalent in this country, but according to pre-*Brahmi* records, prostitution was prevalent even from the pre-historic. Considering the *Sasseruva* inscription, it mentioned about the actor who was named *Cūla*, is introduced as grandson of a prostitute (Paranavithana, 1970: p. 79).

Prostitution can be considered as one of the professions which were recognized among women in South Asian society. Considering the history of this profession in Sri Lanka, Munasinghe emphasized that,

“It cannot definitely be concluded that prostitution was prevailing in ancient Sri Lanka as a mode of employment for women although in poems, especially in Sandeśa poems, there are plenty of references to Abisaru (prostitutes who themselves go to appointed places).” (Munasinghe, 2004: pp. 110-111)

However, there is much information regarding prostitute women in ancient Sri Lankan society, and that information can be gathered from various inscriptions and other sources. Most scholars who investigated women’s position in South Asian society highlighted this profession. Munasinghe stated that, in many ancient Indian societies, prostitution was not looked down upon (Munasinghe, 2004: p. 111). Considering the evidence of ancient Indian history, courtesans were appointed by the king and the price for their favours was fixed by a royal decree. According to the views of M. B. Ariyapala, a tremendous amount of money was charged from their admirers by every high-class courtesan. He further mentioned that prostitution is mentioned in the studies in *Vātsyāna’s Kāma Sūtra* (Ariyapala, 1956: pp. 306-307). Regarding Indian prostitution, Ariyapala stated that,

“The courtesan held a recognized place in Indian society in the past and provided amusement and intellectual companionship to anyone who could afford the luxury, for the *ganikās* used to charge exorbitant sums of money for a night. A *ganikā* according to *Vātsyāna*, was marked out by high intellectual attainments and striking preeminence in the arts that she won the coveted title of *ganikā*.” (Ariyapala, 1956: p. 306)

Considering S.B. Hettiarachi’s interpretation regarding prostitution, he mentioned that it is the most ancient profession of women everywhere.

“Prostitution is everywhere a very ancient profession, but because of the lack of evidence we do not know how common it was in ancient Sri Lanka.” (Hettiarachchi, 1988: pp. 109-110)

Among Sri Lankan literature, such as *Siyabaslakara* mentioned the prostitute as “*abisara liyan*” and the Pali and Sanskrit text stated as “*abisārika*”. *Dhampiyā Atuvā Gatapadaya* has mentioned terms such as *ganikā*, *gihiniya*, *giniya* and *gini* for prostitutes (Jayathilaka, 1933: pp. 131, 187).

Accordingly, much information can be found regarding prostitution in ancient society in Sri Lanka. However, when considering the selected period for the current research, more facts can be identified regarding prostitution through literary sources and some archaeological sources. Among the literary sources, *Kavsilumina* (Ariyapala, 1994: Verses 324) written in the thirteenth century, especially the *Sandēsa* poems written in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, give

adequate information. *Kavsilumina* and Tisara *Sandēsa* mentioned prostitutes using the term *abisaru*. From Sigiri graffiti also mentioned ideas regarding prostitution. The Sigiri poet states that Sigiri women behave as *abisaruvan* or prostitutes.

Some writers, especially poets who lived in the past wrote in detail about the members of the oldest profession. However, in their passionate explanations, they included several synonyms in their subjects of interest in the lexicons; *abisarus* are generally street workers (Munasinghe, 2004: p. 113). Considering the ancient records, it can be identified that the term *ganikā* was used to recognize all categories of prostitutes. According to Munasingher's explanation, "*panavamis* are the women available for the money. *Vesaṅgana* and *Vesambu* are demi-reps and common prostitutes. Gini is shorter form of *Ganika*, while *Salelis* are licentious women." (Munasinghe, 2004: p. 113)

Accordingly, the women in the medieval period participated in agriculture in the field, threshing floor and *chena*, which was the main economic activity without expecting any salary or payment. They were employed safeguarding their families and making their economy better. But they had also received a salary or a payment for doing various other professions. Therefore, Sri Lankan women in the medieval period contributed their labour in various ways to strengthen the economy, which was the primary requirement of social advancement. She received a salary or payment for some professions, thus receiving a quantitative evaluation to a certain extent. Therefore, it can be emphasized that although the sources were not strong enough to ascertain that women in the ancient period had played a considerable role in a male-centered society in the country, nevertheless, she had established an important status in the society.

5.4. Property Ownership of Women

Women had the ownership of property in early society. She was made an active contributor to the economic activities of the society because she amassed wealth by contributing her labour. When probing into the ownership of property of ancient Sri Lankan women, there are very reliable sources that show that women had owned property and that she handled this property independently. When inquiring into the social status, the women who held the respect as a daughter, wife and mother and also the nature of her ownership of property can be comparably analyzed from the information in literature, archaeological sources and records.

Ownership of property by women in ancient times can be discussed under several headings from the information available in the chronicle, inscriptions, and verses on the Sigiri wall. Before inquiring into the tenure of property of ancient women, it is important to refer to matters like the legitimacy of land tenure and other property matters in ancient Sri Lanka. It should be emphasized that it is difficult to compare the legitimacy of land in ancient times and the present day, especially regarding property. Comparing the concept of ownership of the present time with the ancient concept is not a fruitful endeavor (Siriweera, 2002).

The scholars who have researched land tenure and ownership of property have not submitted a specific definition regarding these technical words. H. W. Codrington, who was one of the pioneers of the subject, in his book entitled “Ancient Land Tenure and Revenue in Ceylon” mentions that the terms ‘tenure’ and ‘ownership’ did not have any legitimacy and further said that it was uncertain that the concept in Europe had prevailed either in Sri Lanka or in India (Codrington, 1938: p. 6). L. S. Perera in his article entitled “Property and Tenurial Rights in Ancient Ceylon” the technical words like owner, tenure, and deprivation of tenure have been used (Perera, 1959: pp. 1-36). But he has not given any definitions for those technical terms. In addition, scholars such as M. B. Ariyapala (Ariyapala, 1956: p. 140), Tikiri Abeysinghe (Abeysinghe, 1966: p. 101), W. I. Siriweera (Siriweera, 1972), who has researched the field, have submitted different definitions for the words ‘ownership’ and ‘tenure’. W. I. Siriweera points out that it is difficult to provide a specific definition for concepts such as land and tenure of property in ancient Sri Lankan society (Siriweera, 1972: p. 49). The concept of ownership in ancient Sri Lanka was a very complex one. Siriweera elaborating further on the tenure of land in ancient Sri Lanka says that ownership is held by the present holder when it passes on from one person to another in contemporary society. But the situation was different in the good old days, i.e. nothing happened to the person who lived in the land even though the ownership changed from one person to another (Siriweera, 2002: pp. 150-151). Accordingly, the scholars who inquired into land tenure in ancient Sri Lanka believed that tenure and ownership were very complex subjects in ancient times (Siriweera, 1972; Codrington, 1938).

In this background, when studying the women’s property ownership, an investigation should be made as to how she acquired property. According to the information in records and literary sources, ancient women have owned property through several means. The key system among them was donation at marriage, inheritance from parents or husband, engaging in various professions etc. One of the ancient Sri Lankan customs in marriage in Sri Lanka was to give property as a dowry by the parents to their daughter. Accordingly, she gets moveable property such as money, gold, jewelry and immovable property such as land, paddy fields, etc. A great deal of evidence is found in literary sources which confirm these points. This was practiced from Anuradhapura period in Sri Lankan history. According to the *Thūpawamsa*, (Wijesekara, 1992: p. 90), when King Kawantissa, the ruler of the Ruhunu area, married the princess Devi, she was made to stand on a collection of gems in the second century B.C. and also according to the *Saddharmāṅkaraṇa*, when Prince Saliya married Asokamala, King Dutugamunu made her stand in the same way (Sangaraja, 1954: p. 557). At the time of his daughter’s marriage, King Upatissa I has given the harvest according to the *Mahāwamsa*. In addition, when their sisters were married, King Moggallana I and King Moggallana III again gave the harvest according to the *Mahāwamsa* (Batuvanthudava & Sumangala, 1999: Chap. 39, Verses 55, Chap. 41, Verses 7).

It should be noted that a lot of critics have put forward different ideas regarding the word “*bhoga*” mentioned in the *Mahāwamsa* (Gunawardana, 1979: p. 61). The Sanskrit definition of the word “*bhoga*” means “tenure”, “income” and “consumption”. Wilhelm Geiger has translated “*bhoga*” as the Government income (Gunawardana, 1979: p. 61).

When referring to Sri Lankan chronicles, the word “*bhoga*” can be translated as income tax and property, as pointed out by Professor Gunawardana (Gunawardana, 1979: p. 61). As the word “*bhoga*” gives different meanings, Prof. Gunawardana has further pointed out (Gunawardana, 1979: p. 61) that L. S. Perera has attempted to show it as a common word. When further analyzing the word “*bhoga*” in the *Sahassawaththūppakarana*, the word “*bhogagama*” (Buddhadatta, 1959a: p. 158). Geiger has translated it into English as maintenance villages (Gunawardana, 1979: p. 61). In some instances, “*bhogagama*” has been defined as “wealth” or “income”. According to Geiger’s translation, “*bhogagama*” means proprietorship of land, but other definitions can mean property ownership. In some instances, the word “*bhogagama*” in the *Sahassawaththūppakaran* means “wealth” or “income.” According to Geiger’s translation the meaning of “*bhogagama*” can be given as ownership of land. Still, when we investigate the other definitions, the meaning can be ownership of property. When we further study this matter, we meet the word “*bhukthagama*” in the *Sahassawaththūppakaranaya*. As mentioned there, in one instance, the king has donated a village to a woman as “*bhukthagama*”. But “*bhukthagama*” is not the same as “*bhogagama*” (Buddhadatta, 1959a: p. 64). Professor Gunawardana emphasizes the fact that this donation or allowance mentioned in the *Sahassawaththūppakarana* cannot be considered as a donation of a village granted to a woman.

“...As regards the second objection, it is not clear whether *bhuttagāma* was identical in meaning with *bhogagāma*. In fact, it is probable that they were different in meaning since both these terms are found in the *Sahassa-vatthi-pakarana*.” (Gunawardana, 1979: p. 63)

Explaining “*bhogagama*” Professor Gunawardana emphasizes that through this, ownership or possession of land will be vested. Therefore, it is not clear that these examples show that women-owned land is property. When all these analyses are considered, it may be determined that “*bhoga*” means property of ownership or possession. Therefore, the property received by a woman as dowry at her wedding can be considered as her property. It is clear, according to the above examples, receipt of property by a woman has occurred in royal families. Nevertheless, according to the story in the *Sihalawaththūppakarana*, there is evidence that the common acceptance of society was that property should be given at the time of marriage.

The above information shows that women should be given property at the time of their marriage. The *deega* mirage is where parents give their daughters a dowry when they are given away in marriage. There are five pieces of evidence that in a “*binna*” marriage, parents give their lands to their daughters. The system of “*binna*” marriage comes to be known only in the Kandyan period, al-

though Prof. Paranavitana has presented evidence to show that the “*binna*” system of marriage can be seen even during the 8th and 9th centuries, quoting from the Sigiri verses. Therefore, it is difficult to confirm that the “*binna*” system of marriage was prevalent before the Kandyan period. Another method in which women received possession of the property was from parents and husbands. According to the inscriptions (Wickramasinghe, 1928: p. 163), women have directly inherited property from their parents. It is mentioned that this included moveable property and paddy fields and lands, part of forests and tanks. Accordingly, it can be mentioned very clearly that women inherited property from their parents. There is also ample evidence that the wealth received by women by different methods was used independently. When investigating how these women utilized their wealth, the independence they had and how they highlighted their ownership can be unearthed. When the information revealed from the records and literary sources is considered as a whole, there were several methods by which women claimed their ownership of property. Among them were offering habitable caves after construction, the building of temples and stupas and their maintenance by providing them with paddy fields, tanks and robes and requisites of bhikkhus.

Details regarding the construction of temples and viharas by women spending their own wealth can be surfaced from the particulars mentioned in literary sources and records. The exceptional occurrence was the participation of most noblewomen. Therefore, it can be guessed that the level of ancient normal women who had spent large amounts of wealth was a little below the normal level. As a result of their family background, the noblewomen had inherited large amounts of wealth. Therefore, it was clear that the status of the normal women might not have been so.

Accordingly, it can be pointed out that the status they held as a daughter, queen and mother in the society were also very important when their possession of the land was revealed. Therefore, it can be said not only noblewomen in the then society but also other women, too without any social stratification, could have acquired and utilized land. This information is evidence for women’s property rights which affected their economic standing in the contemporary society in Sri Lanka.

Considering the available evidence, Sri Lanka women engaged in the economic sphere as discussed previously in this paper, and these indications clearly show that the economic role and things they earn through several kinds of work done by them help to maintain their social values and respect. For example, women who are strong economically through their work and with their property donate their prosperity to temples and for social activities. Additionally, women who earn money through some occupations like prostitution lived in luxury, and they lived independently. Furthermore, the influence of economic strength on women’s social development can be identified through women’s comfortable life in the past. Additionally, they assisted in developing their family, and they were

involved in religious activities and donated their prosperity to religious institutes. Women who belonged to royal families enjoy more property rights than other women, and their social values, importance and their social evaluation were higher than other women in contemporary society. Regarding this aspect, Indrani Iriyagolla stated that,

“...Sinhala women participated with men in many public matters, enjoyed an independent status as woman, as mother had an identity in private and public life and freedom to choose one’s of life. After the establishment of Buddhism, they made another progressive move, to renounce life and seek ordination. ...Women to a large degree were beneficiaries of this humanism...” (Iriyagolla, 1991: p. 78)

According to this statement, it is clear that Sri Lankan women had liberation to participate in social activities, and Buddhist culture influenced the situation. Although patriarchal attitudes are practiced in society, Sri Lankan women enjoyed social liberation to some extent. The economic condition also helped them to develop their social status.

6. Conclusion

Considering feminist historiography, it is important to recognize that the term “feminism” carries multiple meanings and feminist history writings have often occurred as a response to questions of power and privilege, capturing the challenging environment between history and history writing. Accordingly, considering the women’s role in ancient Sri Lankan society, there are no sufficient historical facts to explore as other sections such as political and religious history in the country due to the practice of the patriarchal ideology. However, the feminist historians and other scholars focused on ancient social history, discovered women’s social, political, economic and cultural situations using available sources in the country.

In Sri Lankan society, women in various sectors actively participated as workers in the ancient period than other South Asian women such as Indian women. In the economic sphere, women’s labour commitment was dependent on both the social necessities and the nature of the agro-economic system. It can be justly argued that women in ancient times have made a considerable contribution not only to household needs but also to agricultural activities and other economic activities. According to the literary and archaeological sources, it can be argued that women have functioned in various fields, including activities related to cultivation, internal trade affairs, animal husbandry, various other industries, and teaching.

It was very clear that in the Sri Lankan family-centered economic process, the woman did an unlimited service. Therefore, it is stressed that Sri Lankan women were considered as a much-respected group. Sri Lankan women from Anuradhapura period socially recognized as daughters, wives and mothers and acted as

social servants with great intelligence. It can be pointed out that she had wealth that could be utilized independently and thus, with the same fact, sharpened social recognition further.

Accordingly, the labour, economically socialized women, the value she acquired in turn, and the possession of her property should be further studied to ascertain how these factors changed with time. It is important to carry out a thorough study, the forms of changes on the economic status of women following the political, social and economic changes in Sri Lankan history, which run from ancient times. Furthermore, the discussion of the economic role of Sri Lankan women should motivate to analyze by drawing attention to her social development. It was not enough to determine her status; although she was engaged in different professions, there is no doubt that she received some recognition through it, and therefore, these facts are important. Therefore, I assume that one who researches this field of study may receive direct access from this article.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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