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Below Replacement and Beyond: A Gendered Reading of Sri Lanka's 2024 Census Fertility, Marriage, and Labour Market Data

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ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka's 15th Census of Population and Housing (2024) indicates that fertility rates have declined significantly, with a Total Fertility Rate (TFR) recorded at 1.3 births per woman and a Total Marital Fertility Rate of 2.7. This paper interprets these findings through a gender perspective rather than as an impartial demographic statistic. Utilising secondary data from the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) alongside supplementary evidence from the International Labour Organization and the World Bank, this paper delineates four interconnected trends: (i) a significant decline in fertility rates since 1981, accompanied by a postponement of marriage, as evidenced by the Singulate Mean Age at Marriage increasing to 29.2 years for men and 25.6 years for women; (ii) a swift progression towards an ageing population, indicated by an ageing index of 87 and a nearing parity between old-age dependency and child dependency; (iii) a persistent disparity in labour force participation rates, with men at 67.4% and women at 28.9%, despite women's increasing dominance in tertiary education; and (iv) an escalation in the feminisation of vulnerability in old age, as demonstrated by the widowhood gap among the elderly, where 44.2% of women aged 65 and above are widowed compared to 10.5% of men. The paper contextualises these findings within the frameworks of gender-equity theories related to fertility transition, positing that Sri Lanka's low fertility is indicative of an incomplete transition. It suggests that the advancement of individual-level gender equality has surpassed the development of institutional-level gender equity in areas such as labour markets, care infrastructure, and marriage norms. It concludes with considerations for policies that are responsive to gender in relation to population and care.

Keywords *Fertility decline; Gender equity; Labour force participation; Population ageing; Sri Lanka; Census 2024*

1. Introduction

Fertility decline represents a significant characteristic of modern Asia; however, the rate and framework of this decline differ markedly among various nations. Sri Lanka has experienced a decline in fertility rates that occurred earlier than that of many of its South Asian counterparts. The final report of the 15th Census of Population and Housing, published by the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund, indicates a significant and structural decrease in

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fertility rates: a Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of 1.3 births per woman, coupled with a Total Marital Fertility Rate of 2.7 (DCS, 2026). The 2024 exercise marked a significant milestone as the inaugural Sri Lankan census to incorporate information and communication technology for the purpose of national-scale data collection. Its release has sparked extensive public discourse regarding the issues of population ageing and dependency.

Much of this discourse has approached the decline in fertility as an external demographic event, to be addressed mainly through reforms in pension systems or economic incentives aimed at encouraging higher birth rates. This paper contends that this framing is insufficient. The census data indicate a series of interconnected and gender-specific dynamics: the postponement of marriage, the lack of alignment between women's educational advancements and their participation in the labour market, and the disproportionate impact of an ageing population on women, who often serve as unpaid carers during their working years and as widowed dependents in later life. Examining the 2024 Census from a gender perspective is crucial not only for analytical purposes but also for informing the development of effective policy responses.

The objectives of this paper are threefold: (i) to document the findings related to fertility, nuptiality, and age structure from the 2024 Census in comparison to those from 2012; (ii) to contextualise these findings within the framework of existing evidence regarding gender disparities in Sri Lanka's labour market; and (iii) to elucidate the implications for population and social policy that is responsive to gender considerations. The subsequent sections of the paper are structured as follows. Section 2 provides a comprehensive review of both theoretical and empirical literature concerning gender and fertility transition, with a specific focus on the South Asian context. Section 3 delineates the data and analytical methodology employed. Section 4 delineates the empirical findings, structured around the themes of fertility and marriage, population ageing, gender disparities in the labour force, and the feminisation of vulnerability in old age. Section 5 examines these findings through the lens of gender equity, while Section 6 provides a conclusion that addresses the implications for policy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Fertility Transition and Gender-Equity Theory

Classical demographic transition theory elucidates the decline in fertility rates primarily as a consequence of decreasing mortality rates, increased urbanisation, and the escalating costs associated with raising children. Van de Kaa (1987) expanded upon this framework by introducing the notion of a "second demographic transition," wherein sub-replacement fertility is associated with individualisation, the separation of marriage from childbearing, and evolving values regarding family formation. McDonald (2000) introduced a distinctly gendered perspective, contending that extremely low fertility rates arise in contexts where advancements in gender equity within individual-oriented institutions, like education, outpace progress in gender equity within family-oriented institutions, including the labour market, marriage, and the domestic division of care responsibilities. In this context, women who experience a significant disparity between the independence granted to them as individuals and the limitations placed upon them as wives and mothers tend to respond, to some extent, by postponing marriage and childbearing or opting to forgo these roles entirely.

This theoretical lens serves as a valuable foundation for understanding Sri Lanka, a nation recognised for its profile of "reproductive health without economic wealth." The country exhibits strong indicators in female education and health, attained at relatively modest income levels, yet this progress has not led to a significant transformation in women's status within the labour market.

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A related but distinct strand of demographic theory examines not the reasons for fertility rates falling below replacement levels, but rather the factors that may hinder recovery once these rates decline to very low levels. Lutz, Skirbekk, and Testa (2006) introduce the "low-fertility trap" hypothesis, which posits that demographic factors (a declining cohort of potential parents), sociological influences (the normalisation of smaller family-size norms), and economic conditions (increased relative income aspirations) interact in a reinforcing manner once fertility rates drop below approximately 1.5 births per woman. With a total fertility rate of 1.3 births per woman, Sri Lanka's 2024 figure falls within the range that historical literature identifies as susceptible to self-reinforcing decline. This underscores the importance of comprehending the gendered mechanisms outlined in this paper, rather than viewing the current rate as merely a temporary dip.

2.2 Marriage Delay and the "Flight from Marriage" in Asia

Sri Lanka's increasing Singulate Mean Age at Marriage and the expanding proportion of never-married individuals are situated within a wider regional context. Jones (2005) records a prevalent "flight from marriage" throughout East and Southeast Asia, where the previously dominant norm of marriage has been replaced by a gradual increase in the number of women, and increasingly men, who remain unmarried into their thirties and forties. Jones and Gubhaju (2009) demonstrate that this trend is only partially accounted for by compositional shifts toward higher education. Even within specific educational categories, the delay in marriage and the prevalence of non-marriage have continued to increase, especially among women in the more economically developed societies of the region. Historically, South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka, exhibited less pronounced variations of this pattern compared to East Asia, with marriage occurring at an earlier age and being more universally practiced. The findings from the 2024 Census indicate a significant increase in the proportion of never-married individuals in Sri Lanka, rising from 30.0 to 41.8 percent over a span of twelve years. Additionally, the female Singulate Mean Age at Marriage has increased by more than two years during this period. These trends suggest that Sri Lanka may be progressing along a similar path as observed in the research conducted by Jones regarding its East and Southeast Asian counterparts.

2.3 Population Ageing, Care, and the Feminisation of Old Age

A parallel body of literature has investigated the implications of Sri Lanka's swift demographic ageing on social protection and caregiving frameworks. The Asian Development Bank (2019) forecasts that Sri Lanka will experience an ageing process that is unparalleled by most nations with similar income levels, transforming the current youth-driven demographic dividend into an increasing old-age dependency burden within a single generation. Furthermore, it highlights ongoing deficiencies in pension coverage and long-term care provision as significant policy risks. The United Nations Population Fund (2019) articulates the gendered aspect of this transition through the notion of the "feminisation of ageing." This phenomenon arises from the fact that women tend to have longer lifespans than men, yet they are significantly less likely to possess independent pension or savings entitlements derived from formal employment. Consequently, population ageing in Sri Lanka results in a disproportionate number of economically vulnerable elderly women, many of whom persist in offering informal care despite the increasing demands of their own health needs. This literature provides insights into and elucidates the patterns of widowhood and living arrangements discussed in Section 4 of this paper.

2.4 Gender and Labour Markets in South Asia

A considerable body of literature highlights the ongoing gender disparity in labour force participation in Sri Lanka. The World Bank (2020) describes this situation as a conundrum: despite achieving near gender parity in education and health, along with a decline in fertility rates that would typically be anticipated to increase women's participation in the workforce, female labour force participation in Sri

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Lanka has consistently remained approximately half that of men for several decades. Furthermore, marriage notably diminishes the likelihood of women's engagement in paid employment. The International Labour Organization (2024) similarly observes that the anticipated positive correlation between declining fertility rates, increasing educational attainment, and enhanced female labour force participation has not been realised throughout South Asia. This phenomenon is attributed to prevailing social norms regarding family status and household responsibilities, which independently limit women's labour supply, irrespective of their human capital. Utilising microdata from the Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey, Siyama and Samaraweera (2021) demonstrate that factors such as marriage, the presence and age of young children, and the occupational status of a husband serve as significant predictors of married women's participation in the labour force, exhibiting considerable variation across different ethnic sub-groups. Taken together, this body of literature indicates that the low fertility rates in Sri Lanka should not be interpreted as evidence of women's liberation for market employment. Instead, the coexistence of low fertility and low female labour force participation seems to stem from the same persistent gender division of caregiving responsibilities that McDonald's (2000) framework predicts.

3. Data and Methods

This study employs secondary data derived from publicly accessible official statistics, rather than engaging in primary data collection. The primary source is the final report and key findings press release from the Department of Census and Statistics regarding the 15th Census of Population and Housing, 2024, which recorded Sri Lanka's population at the census moment of 00:00 hours on 19 December 2024 (DCS, 2026). Census indicators pertaining to fertility, nuptiality, widowhood, age structure, dependency, labour force participation, and educational attainment are analysed in comparison to their published counterparts from the 2012 Census. This analysis aims to identify both the direction and magnitude of change that has occurred over the twelve-year intercensal period. These figures are further supported by evidence from the UNFPA/DCS report concerning fertility and nuptiality in Sri Lanka, as well as regional gender and labour market data from the International Labour Organization (2024) and the World Bank (2020).

The analysis is characterised by its descriptive and comparative nature, focusing on the documentation of co-movements between fertility, marriage, and labour market indicators. It interprets these relationships through the lens of the gender-equity theory of fertility transition (McDonald, 2000), yet it refrains from estimating a causal model that links these variables at the individual level. This represents a purposeful restriction of the scope. The DCS releases utilised in this analysis present population-level aggregates instead of unit-record microdata. A logical progression, as mentioned in Section 6, would involve the application of McDonald's framework to unit-level Census or Labour Force Survey microdata when it becomes accessible for research purposes. Since the paper is based solely on secondary, publicly available, de-identified aggregate statistics and does not involve the collection of data from human subjects, an ethics review was not necessary. The study did not receive any external funding; data sources are referenced throughout and are publicly accessible at the URLs provided in the References.

4. Results and Findings

Table 1 summarises the twelve headline indicators used in this analysis, comparing the 2012 and 2024 Censuses.

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Table 1. Key Demographic and Gender Indicators, Sri Lanka, 2012 vs. 2024

Indicator	2012 Census	2024 Census
Total Fertility Rate (TFR, births per woman)	2.4	1.3
Total Marital Fertility Rate (TMFR)		2.7
Population never married (%)	30.0	41.8
Singulate Mean Age at Marriage – Male (years)	27.2	29.2
Singulate Mean Age at Marriage – Female (years)	23.4	25.6
Widowhood among population 65+ – Female (%)	38.4	44.2
Widowhood among population 65+ – Male (%)	8.6	10.5
Child population, 0–14 years (%)	25.2	20.7
Elderly population, 60+ years (%)	12.0	18.0
Median age (years)	30	35
Sex ratio (males per 100 females)	93.8	93.3
Population with tertiary education as highest qualification (%)	18.2	26.2

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Census of Population and Housing 2024, key findings (DCS, 2026).

4.1 Fertility and Marital Transition

Sri Lanka's Total Fertility Rate has decreased from 3.3 births per woman in 1981 to 2.4 as recorded in the 2012 Census, and further to 1.3 in the 2024 Census (Figure 1). This decline positions the rate significantly below the replacement threshold of 2.1. The Total Marital Fertility Rate stands at 2.7, which is near the replacement level. This suggests that the disparity between overall and marital fertility is largely influenced by the increasing proportion of the population that has never entered into marriage, which is projected to reach 41.8 percent in 2024, an increase from 30.0 percent in 2012 (DCS, 2026).

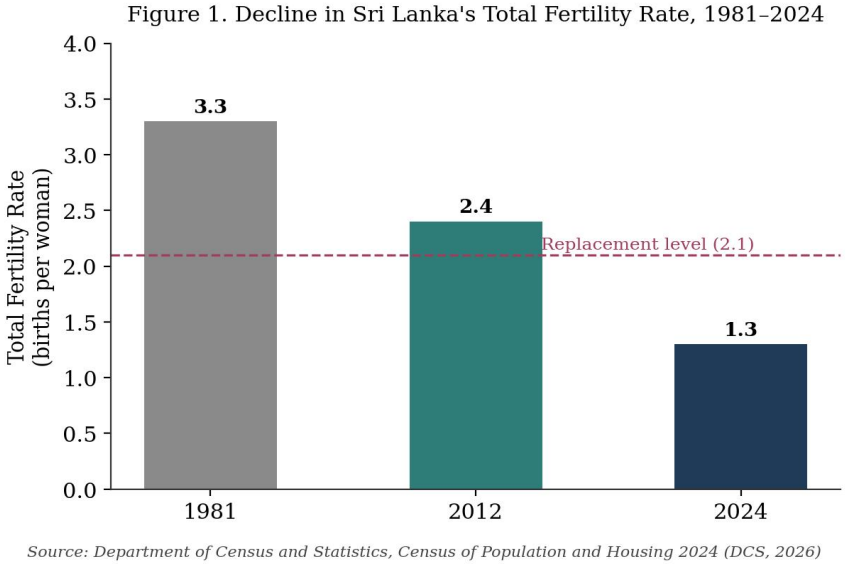


Figure 1. Decline in Sri Lanka's Total Fertility Rate, 1981–2024.

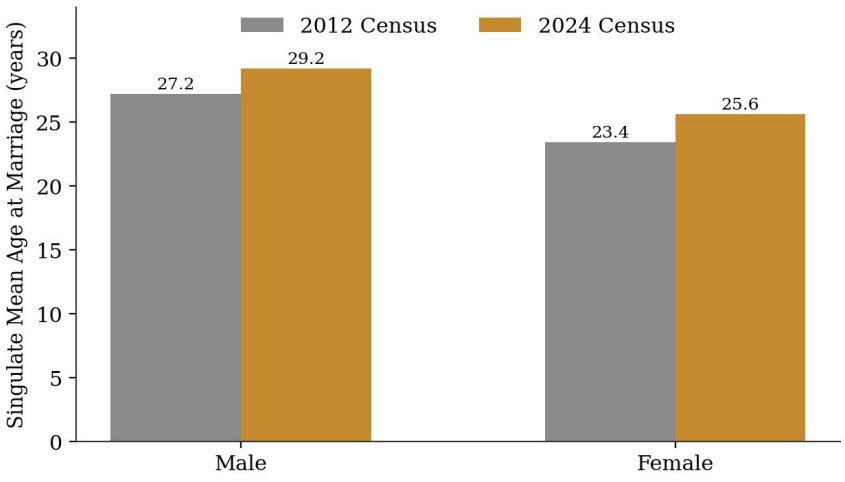
Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Census of Population and Housing 2024 (DCS, 2026).

In conjunction with declining fertility rates, there is a noticeable trend of delayed marriage among individuals of both genders. The Singulate Mean Age at Marriage increased from 27.2 to 29.2 years for men and from 23.4 to 25.6 years for women between 2012 and 2024 (Figure 2), indicating a greater absolute rise for women compared to men. When considered alongside the nearly doubled disparity between overall and marital fertility, this trend aligns with the notion of postponed and abandoned

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marriage, rather than a decrease in fertility among married couples, as the primary factor influencing the decline in fertility rates in Sri Lanka.

Figure 4. Singulate Mean Age at Marriage by Sex, 2012 vs. 2024



Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Census of Population and Housing 2024 (DCS, 2026)

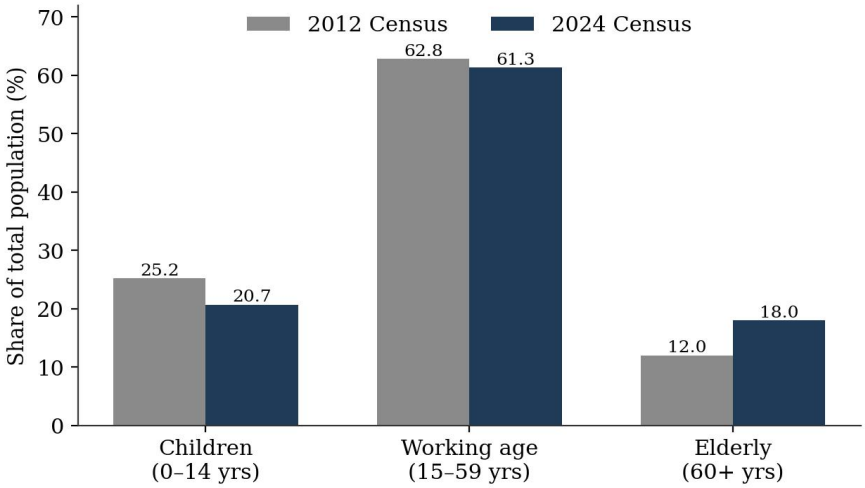
Figure 2. Singulate Mean Age at Marriage by Sex, 2012 vs. 2024.

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Census of Population and Housing 2024 (DCS, 2026).

4.2 Population Ageing and Dependency

The age structure has undergone a corresponding shift. The proportion of the child population, defined as individuals aged 0–14, decreased from 25.2 percent in 2012 to 20.7 percent in 2024. Conversely, the elderly population, comprising those aged 60 and above, increased from 12.0 percent to 18.0 percent during the same timeframe (Figure 3). The Ageing Index, which represents the number of elderly individuals per 100 children, attained a value of 87 in the year 2024. The child dependency ratio has decreased to 33.7, whereas the old-age dependency ratio has increased to 29.4, indicating a convergence between the two. Based on current trends, it is projected that within approximately a decade, Sri Lanka's working-age population may be supporting an equal number of elderly dependants and children (DCS, 2026). The median age increased from 30 to 35 years during the intercensal period.

Figure 2. Population Age Structure, 2012 vs. 2024



Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Census of Population and Housing 2024 (DCS, 2026)

Figure 3. Population Age Structure, 2012 vs. 2024.

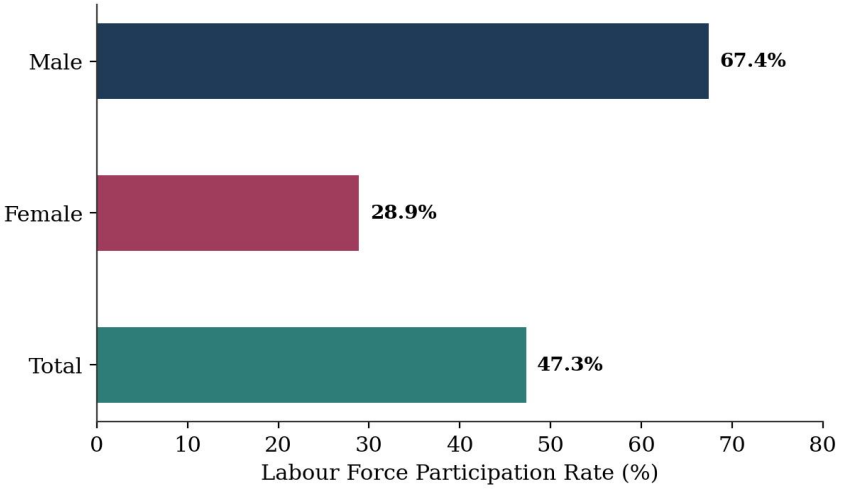
Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Census of Population and Housing 2024 (DCS, 2026).

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4.3 The Gender Gap in Economic Participation

The 2024 Census indicates that Sri Lanka's low fertility rates have not been matched by a reduction in the gender gap within labour markets. The labour force participation rate (LFPR) was recorded at 47.3 percent overall, with men participating at a rate of 67.4 percent, while women had a significantly lower rate of 28.9 percent (Figure 4). Notably, women represented 70.6 percent of the economically inactive working-age population (DCS, 2026). This gap continues to exist even as women have made significant strides in educational achievement: the proportion of individuals indicating tertiary education as their highest qualification increased from 18.2 percent in 2012 to 26.2 percent in 2024, with a more notable rise observed among women compared to men (DCS, 2026). This divergence the increase in female education alongside a stagnant labour market gender gap reflects findings from the World Bank (2020) and the International Labour Organization (2024) and aligns with the evidence presented by Siyama and Samaraweera (2021) that factors such as marriage and the presence of young children, rather than educational attainment, serve as the primary constraints on married women's labour supply in Sri Lanka.

Figure 3. Labour Force Participation Rate by Sex, 2024



Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Census of Population and Housing 2024 (DCS, 2026)

Figure 4. Labour Force Participation Rate by Sex, 2024.

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Census of Population and Housing 2024 (DCS, 2026).

4.4 The Feminisation of Old-Age Vulnerability

A distinct gendered pattern becomes evident at the later stages of the life course. Between 2012 and 2024, the incidence of widowhood among individuals aged 65 and older increased for both genders, with a significantly sharper rise and a higher prevalence observed among women. In 2024, 44.2 percent of women in this age group were widowed, an increase from 38.4 percent in 2012. In contrast, the percentage of widowed men rose from 8.6 percent in 2012 to 10.5 percent in 2024 (DCS, 2026). In alignment with this, single-person households represent 10.5 percent of all households across the nation. Among the 370,229 households led by individuals aged 60 and older, a significant majority (71.3 percent) are women residing alone (DCS, 2026). Lower fertility rates and delayed marriage during reproductive years are consequently associated, a generation later, with a distinct pattern of unaccompanied old age among women.

5. Discussion

The results corroborate a gender-equity interpretation of Sri Lanka's fertility transition as suggested by McDonald (2000). Gender equity focused on individual achievements, as evidenced by the increasing

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and now predominant participation of women in tertiary education, has made significant progress. Gender equity, particularly in relation to family dynamics, as evidenced by female labour force participation, the responsibilities associated with unpaid care, and the ongoing reliance on marriage as the predominant means of establishing recognised family units, has not progressed adequately. Within this framework, the phenomena of delayed and forgone marriage, as well as low fertility rates, should not be viewed merely as consequences of modernisation. Rather, they can be understood as rational adaptations at the individual level to an institutional context that predominantly allocates caregiving responsibilities to women, while simultaneously maintaining significant economic and social pressures for their participation in these roles. This interpretation aligns with regional evidence indicating that the anticipated virtuous circle involving declining fertility rates, increasing educational attainment, and a growing female labour supply has deteriorated throughout South Asia (International Labour Organization, 2024).

The evidence of marriage reinforces this interpretation. Sri Lanka's increasing proportion of never-married individuals and the later Singulate Mean Age at Marriage reflect the phenomenon of "flight from marriage" identified by Jones (2005) and Jones and Gubhaju (2009) throughout East and Southeast Asia. This indicates that Sri Lanka is not an isolated instance but rather a relatively late participant in a broader regional trend where marriage is becoming less universal as women's individual opportunities continue to grow. At a total fertility rate of 1.3, Sri Lanka's fertility aligns with the range identified by Lutz, Skirbekk, and Testa (2006) as indicative of a self-reinforcing "low-fertility trap." This phenomenon suggests that as the cohorts of potential parents diminish and smaller-family norms become entrenched within society, fertility rates may not recover, even if certain gender constraints discussed herein are eventually alleviated. This elevates the significance of the policy discussion in Section 6 the pertinent comparison is not merely whether Sri Lanka's fertility will naturally rebound, but rather whether policy measures are implemented prior to the onset of self-reinforcing mechanisms that could complicate recovery.

The ramifications of this unfinished transition are accumulating throughout the life course. During the working age, the low participation rate of women in the labour force limits household incomes and, on a broader scale, reduces the tax and contribution base that is necessary to support an ageing population (DCS, 2026). In later life, the persistent gendered division of labour and the lower average labour market participation of women throughout their lives likely result in diminished independent pension or savings entitlements for women (Asian Development Bank, 2019). This situation exacerbates the vulnerability that is already evident in the high rates of female widowhood and the significant number of elderly women living alone. This pattern aligns with the concept identified by the United Nations Population Fund (2019) as the "feminisation of ageing": women who engage predominantly in informal employment throughout their working lives, often due to responsibilities related to marriage, childcare, or eldercare, find themselves in old age with diminished independent income security, particularly at a time when they are most likely to be living alone. The convergence of Sri Lanka's child and old-age dependency ratios, recorded at 33.7 and 29.4 respectively, indicates that the fiscal and caregiving pressures linked to these gendered disparities are poised to intensify in the forthcoming decade rather than diminish.

These findings must be interpreted while considering the limitations outlined in Section 3. The analysis relies on published aggregate statistics instead of unit-record microdata, which limits its ability to account for confounding factors such as sectoral (urban/rural/estate), ethnic, or regional variations. Previous studies based on microdata have demonstrated that these factors significantly influence female labour force participation in Sri Lanka (Siyama & Samaraweera, 2021). The comparisons made across

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census years are characterised as cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, thereby illustrating shifts at the population level instead of transitions occurring within individual life courses.

6. Conclusions and Policy Implications

Sri Lanka's 2024 Census indicates a fertility rate that falls significantly below the replacement level, coupled with trends of delayed marriage, an accelerated process of population ageing, a continuing gender disparity in labour force participation, and a distinctly gendered pattern of vulnerability in old age. When considered collectively, these findings indicate that Sri Lanka's demographic transition remains incomplete, particularly in a gender-specific context: the advancements women have made in education have not been paralleled by similar improvements in access to the labour market, care infrastructure, or the gendered dynamics of marriage and family formation.

Four overarching policy directions are outlined below. Initially, the expansion of affordable and accessible childcare and eldercare infrastructure would alleviate the unpaid care burden that seems to limit the labour supply of married women, addressing a significant constraint that has been consistently identified in the literature (World Bank, 2020; Siyama & Samaraweera, 2021). Secondly, the implementation of family-friendly labour market policies, such as flexible and part-time work arrangements, along with enhanced enforcement of workplace protections related to marriage and childbearing, has the potential to reduce the disparity between women's human capital and their economic participation. Third, it is essential to conduct a thorough review of social protection and pension systems concerning their treatment of women who have experienced interrupted or informal labour market histories. This is particularly important in light of the evidence indicating a disproportionate vulnerability faced by women in old age, as well as the long-term care and pension coverage gaps that have already been identified for Sri Lanka (Asian Development Bank, 2019). Fourth, given that Sri Lanka's current total fertility rate is positioned within the parameters recognised by the low-fertility-trap literature as susceptible to self-reinforcing decline (Lutz et al., 2006), the opportunity for policy intervention addressing the identified gendered constraints rather than focusing solely on fertility incentives may diminish over time rather than expand. In a broader context, it is essential for population and demographic-intelligence systems utilised in national planning to routinely incorporate gender-disaggregated indicators, such as those discussed in this paper. This approach is necessary to avoid the misconception of fertility decline and population ageing as phenomena that are neutral with respect to gender.

Future research ought to build upon this descriptive account by utilising unit-record Census or Labour Force Survey microdata to more directly evaluate McDonald's (2000) gender-equity hypothesis in the context of Sri Lanka. This could involve modelling the joint determinants of marriage timing, fertility, and labour force participation at the individual level, as well as investigating how these dynamics differ across the various ethnic, sectoral, and provincial divisions within Sri Lanka.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement

This study is based entirely on secondary, publicly available data published by the Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka. The relevant sources are cited in the References and are accessible at the URLs provided.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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