

# **Sri Lanka: Exclusion of women from National Labour Advisory Council comes under fire**

Monday 13 January 2025, by [Daily FT](#) (Date first published: 29 May 2023).

**The exclusion of women from the tripartite National Labour Advisory Council (NLAC) has come under fire by 150 activist individuals and 55 organisations.**

In a statement they said that the Minister of Labour has taken the extraordinary step to remove the only woman on the NLAC which consists of Employers' Organisations, Unions and the Government. It is the only national-level body convened between these three stakeholders to consult and cooperate on policies affecting workers in the country.

Even though the NLAC was established in 1994, there has not been a female member until 2021, which was when Swasthika Arulingam was appointed by the United Federation of Labour (UFL) as its permanent representative.

The UFL is a federation of many Unions including the Commercial and Industrial Workers; Union (CIWU) of which Swasthika Arulingam is the current President.

The statement said her appointment as a permanent member of the NLAC was hailed as historic as it was the first time a federation of Unions chose a woman to represent them at the NLAC. In this role, too, she strongly advocated against policies to remove labour protections for women. She has also pushed for the inclusion of more Unions and particularly women-led Unions into the NLAC. As an Attorney-at-Law, her legal expertise was an enormous asset in negotiations on labour regulations and policies. The presence of such a person is monumentally important at a time when Sri Lanka's working poor and particularly women are languishing in poverty.

In mid-May 2023, the Minister of Labour in a move to reconstitute the NLAC, imposed arbitrary criteria relating to Unions' membership in order to qualify for nominations and appointment. This move effectively disqualified UFL from receiving a nomination and thus removed the only woman representing workers in Sri Lanka.

"Given that the only legal criteria for the selection of Organisations and Unions is that they be the "most representative", we are shocked and utterly dismayed that the only woman and an eminently capable representative of workers has been prevented from serving on the NLAC. We believe her to be the best representative to serve the interests and concerns of all female workers in Sri Lanka, particularly at this time of enormous economic crisis and this exclusion is a serious undermining of women's labour rights," the statement said.

It said the NLAC should not be an exclusive body which has members selected at the will and fancy of the Minister of Labour. Neither should membership strength be the sole criteria for inclusion into the NLAC - this leaves out many sectors which have a weakened Union membership due to the extensive Union busting nor unfair labour practices of employers, particularly in the export sector which employs many women.

“It is essential to include more Unions irrespective of their membership strength and to give due recognition to women-led Unions to strengthen and protect the labour rights of working women in Sri Lanka,” the statement said adding that the signatories call for the immediate reinstatement of the UFL and its representative Swasthika Arulingam onto the NLAC; the immediate increase in the representation of women Union members on the NLAC and consulting the women’s labour force and women-led labour collectives on all labour law and policy reforms by increasing the number of Unions, especially women-led Unions, represented on the NLAC.

---

## **Daily FT**

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

---

## **P.S.**

Daily FT

[https://www.ft.lk/front-page/Exclusion-of-women-from-National-Labour-Advisory-Council-comes-under-fire/44-748864?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR38AksGbX28ipm2BFi7mLxkt29B44cKhJtkNArunQEIEMruR0tYSrvMhYQ\\_aem\\_taQmDFpBcZkpzRgc9mwCzg](https://www.ft.lk/front-page/Exclusion-of-women-from-National-Labour-Advisory-Council-comes-under-fire/44-748864?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR38AksGbX28ipm2BFi7mLxkt29B44cKhJtkNArunQEIEMruR0tYSrvMhYQ_aem_taQmDFpBcZkpzRgc9mwCzg)