

THE CHANGING SCENARIO IN MORTALITY: A WIDENING GENDER GAP IN LIFE EXPECTANCY IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

Throughout the 20th century, a steady increase in life expectancy at birth for both genders was observed in Sri Lanka. However, at the turn of the 20th century, male life expectancy at birth was 36.4 years, while the corresponding figure for females was 2.2 years lower. In the subsequent period, up to the early 1960s, life expectancy for both genders increased progressively while the gap between males and females narrowed down; by 1962-1964 the difference was only 0.4 years. However, a marked increase in the gap between male and female life expectancy was visible during the consequent period, irrespective of the considerable progress in life expectancy for both sexes. By 1980-1982, the life expectancy for males and females reached 67.7 and 72.1 years respectively, revealing a gap of 4.5 years. The life table for 2000-2002 indicates that this gap had increased to 8.5 years. Maternal complications, the prime cause for low female life expectancy, has been reduced to a large extent by late marriage and declining fertility, buttressed by successful women-focused health programmes. Parallel health initiatives targeting males are visibly lacking. Further, life style determinants such as smoking and alcohol consumption as well as homicides and war casualties are taking a toll especially on young adult males. This demographic imbalance will aggravate the negative social consequences of a rapidly ageing society and should be addressed without delay.