

## PART-TIME WORK

# Balancing work, skills and opportunity



BY SUMUDU CHAMARA

Noting that Sri Lanka is in need of producing more skilled workers, the government recently said that it has paid attention to formally recognising and supporting part-time work, especially for those receiving skills training and are unable to work full-time.

**“T**here is (a need for) labour reforms, where part time work needs to be formally recognised. It is because the activity done while training cannot be done on a full-time basis. Then, to give them that recognition, there needs to be some legal changes,” Industry and Entrepreneurship Development Deputy Minister Chathuranga Abeysinghe was quoted as saying.

## Impact on economy, workforce

According to economic analysts, although this is a progressive initiative for the economy, in the long run, this could contribute to both positive and negative changes in the labour force.

University of Colombo Lecturer in Business Economics and Ceylon Foundation for Economic Policy-Analysis (CFEP Sri Lanka) Chairperson and Director Pasan Wijayawardhana explained that recognising and supporting part-time work could benefit the Sri Lankan economy in several ways: “Promoting and regulating this part-time option will help increase labour participation and bring some people who are not currently in the labour force into the labour force, thereby expanding labour force participation. Even retired people can join economic



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activities and contribute to the GDP when there is a part-time work option.”

He told *The Morning Money* that properly recognised part-time work will be helpful for the formalisation of the informal economy in Sri Lanka, which makes up around half of the country's workforce.

With regard to female labour participation, he noted that the lack of flexibility in working hours is one of the reasons that has discouraged women from entering the workforce, especially given their contribution to households. Noting that such concerns could be addressed via

proper part-time work options, he added that when there is a formally accepted and regulated option of part-time work, groups such as university students will also benefit. In the university students' case, he added, part-time work options would help address a key concern, i.e. limited ability to apply knowledge to gain skills and experience while pursuing education.

In response to the question as to what sort of challenges Sri Lanka may have to face in these efforts, he said that it has the potential to create two issues. One is that if part-time work arrangements feel more attractive in terms of financial benefits, leisure and flexibility, more full-time workers may lean towards embracing part-time work, in which case full-time employment may be affected. Secondly, employers may seek more part-time workers than full-time workers due to the financial benefits of having part-time workers, in which case there will be less demand for full-time workers.

## Practical concerns

In this regard, several part-time workers pointed out that mainstreaming part-time work could have both benefits and downsides. They, however, told *The Morning Money* that the benefits are likely to outweigh the downsides.

Anuradha, a 27-year-old part-time content writer for a local firm and a part-time student at a private education institute, opined: “Officially recognising and supporting part-time work will be good for part-time workers in many ways, especially in terms of job security and the various perks that come with formal employment. They will no longer be treated as easily disposable freelance workers and will instead be viewed as

part of a company's staff.”

However, he added that if part-time workers, especially those pursuing higher studies, could be hired for lower wages, employers may focus on hiring more of them instead of those entering the job market as full-time workers after completing education. This, he added, could be disadvantageous for those seeking full-time employment with little experience or skills.

Sharing similar views, Chanaka, a 30-year-old part-time worker, added that there need to be laws to ensure that part-time workers have the necessary legal protections: “I think the recognition aspect is important. Sri Lankans are hesitant to recognise part-time workers as part of the labour force, even if they have several part-time jobs allow them to make more money than a conventional full-time worker. This needs to change. The world is moving towards freelance and part-time work and more flexible work arrangements. It helps those with less experience to gain experience and those with personal commitments to still be employed. On the other hand, employers may prefer to hire several part-time workers with expertise in various aspects of a job, instead of one full-time worker with expertise in only one aspect of the job. However, there need to be laws to protect part-time workers, especially vocational training students, from exploitation. Employers should not see part-time workers as cheap labour.”

Moreover, several others were of the view that the government should further extend these efforts to recognise, support and provide flexible working conditions, which is beneficial for both employers and employees.