

Achieving Gender equality; Exploiting the Leadership Potential of Female Undergraduates

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Being a Lecturer in languages at local universities for nearly five years, I have been associating with many youngsters in Sri Lanka who have entered into the higher education system. Even though, girls have outnumbered boys who enter universities at present in Sri Lanka, gender discrimination still exists. Having experience in lecturing at a defence university in Sri Lanka, I have witnessed this situation at class room level as well. Generally, the military personnel consider that “males are tougher and stronger” than females. This is a common assumption which has been inculcated even into the minds of the newly recruited younger generation. Usually the majority of the youth entering into the forces are males. The minority are females who are being dominated by the so called stronger sex. These female are often mistreated on various occasions.



Majority of the officers are males

Most of the time, boys are of the view that males have to face rigorous physical training, punishment and manual tasks compared to girls during their military training. This has made the boys develop an extremely jealous and pessimistic attitude towards the girls. As a result, when it comes to the classroom level at the defence university, girls naturally keep silent, depressed and confused while boys participate in all discussions, forums, presentations and interactive sessions.

This becomes a very pathetic situation when girls who are successful in studies, are made to be diffident in class and are forced not to show their true talents. As a result, even though girls have the competency to achieve their educational targets better than that of boys, they are not allowed to maximize their full potential and creativity.

I feel that male domination persists even among the academic staff at the university level. As majority at the decision making level is comprised of male officers in the Defence system, there is a tendency to exploit female staff members in many ways. Consequently, only males enjoy full leisure while females are always working hard.



Cadets during a lecture-Girls do not sit in the front

When it comes to ordinary universities, the girls seem to participate comparatively less in non-academic activities. As a result, girls' participation in extracurricular activities is much less than that of boys. And only boys take the leadership roles in various associations formed within the universities. This is common to other higher educational institutions (technical and vocational) too. This may be due to gender based attitudes and values which have been deeply rooted in our society.

According to the Sri Lankan family values, a girl should return home before dark. If not, there would be plenty of worries by parents. And this would cause a lot of issues and frustration in both parents and child's mind. As a result, during most of the activities which take place after lecture hours, girls' participation is rather at a low rate.

Apart from that, today's higher educational institutions in Sri Lanka, especially universities are in a turbulent environment due to the upheaval of student communities caused by social and political pressure prevailing in the society. Generally, it is considered that university students are the cream of the best educated youth in the society as they have gained university admission through a highly competitive examination. Once they enter into universities they face a lot of challenges while following their academic streams. These challenges arise due to social and economic backgrounds of individuals, their cultural and conventional upbringing and so on.

The political background of the country also influences the behavior of students who enter universities. These kinds of social problems sometimes make the students to feel that there is a huge social difference among them. Hence, they try to create an environment in which each and every student is treated equally within the university. The tool they use for this is 'Ragging'. Once a new batch enters in to the university seniors get organized to rag the freshers using various methods. They even go to inhumane ways of treating the newly admitted undergraduate, regardless of gender, in this case.

Similarly, all student unions that stand for the rights of the students are led by boys. Some of these unions are politically affiliated. Having been in leadership positions during their academic years in the university, these boys develop their leadership potential and easily get into leadership positions once they pass out of university. Female participation in this regard is comparatively low. Thus, it is evident that majority of the present political leaders are the people who held office in university student associations or at student unions. Existing gender inequalities have caused this condition. And there is a long way to go to remedy the situation.

Therefore, it is evident that in conventional Asian countries like Sri Lanka, girls are either discriminated by their peers or by society. The traditional upbringing, conservative norms and societal customs are holding down the educated female generation of the country. Even though they have the talent, the capacity and the eagerness to participate in various activities, fight for justice and are willing to contribute to the development of the country through their education, doubt remains whether they would be able to succeed without any obstacles.

Even though the 1st female prime-minister of the world and the 1st female president of Asia, are both from Sri Lanka, and a considerable number of females are now entering into decision making levels, women still have to experience gender based discrimination. They also have to experience the impolite remarks of the public and witness the callous grins of political personnel, when they first take steps in to the political arena.

Gender discrimination mostly exists in the employment sector as well. Society is still under the perception that women are the weaker sex who cannot handle tasks which require physical fitness and manual labor. Many people do not understand the fairness of work which considers the biological differences among males and females. No matter how educated a woman may be, she will be looked down on by society due to gender stereotypes.