

How Poverty Affects the Education of Girls in Sri Lanka

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Sri Lanka has achieved remarkable progress in the region, and even globally as more females enter into the higher education stream. The country has achieved over 80% enrolment of women as law students and over 50% as medical students, and there are many more women who have access to free education in the public university system. Despite these achievements, however, there are stories of girls who are deprived of their rights to education, mainly due to poverty.

There are many stories which relate to the above problem in the local context. The story of Sanoja, the eldest daughter of a family in a remote village in a central northern province in Sri Lanka, depicts the hardships that young women have to go through due to social pressure and economical strain. Her mother, having had to leave the home to go to the Middle East as a domestic worker due to economic hardships, has left the care of the little children in the hands of her eldest daughter, Sanoja. Being just 12 years old, she was supposed to do all household chores in the absence of the mother, in addition to taking care of the younger siblings of the family. Although she managed these duties at the beginning with the help of her father, gradually she lost his support and had to attend to all tasks by herself. Under these circumstances, Sanoja had to stop her education and became a full-time worker in her own house. Despite doing all this work, Sanoja was subjected to harassment by her father due to various unpleasant incidents such as the taste of the food and not being able to prepare meals on time. Because of this situation, Sanoja became miserable and held no hope for her future. There are many girls with similar stories in Sri Lanka, mainly in rural areas and in under-educated and poverty-affected families.

Sri Lanka is a country where many women seek foreign employment as domestic servants due to economic burdens of their families. There are many situations where even young girls try to go outside of the country for employment opportunities, in search of more financial sustenance to support their families. They face a lot of hardships due to inexperience and immaturity while working abroad in unfamiliar and strange circumstances. The story of Rizana NAFEEK who was beheaded in Saudi Arabia in January this year after being convicted of murdering a child under her care is one such example which proves the tragic circumstances that these women face after migrating as domestic workers without having experience in such trades.

Rizana was born in 1988, but was forced to alter her date of birth to secure employment as a house maid. She had been forced to alter her passport to indicate the

year of birth as 1982. She had been sent abroad as a domestic servant to a family in Saudi Arabia. After starting working, she was assigned to bottle-feed an infant of four months. Rizana, having had no experience of taking care of such a tiny infant, had no understanding of the task she was handling nor any clue as to what she was about to face. While she was feeding, the baby started choking, which ultimately and tragically led to his death. After this incident, Rizana was handed over to the police along with accusations that she had strangled the baby. She was very harshly treated at the police station and was not able to explain what had happened due to language problems, and without even a lawyer at her trials or her family to support her, she had to face many inexplicably difficult and strenuous hardships. Ultimately, she was convicted of murdering the child and was subsequently beheaded. Although many accept that this is a gross Human Rights violation, even the efforts of Sri Lankan Government were of no avail, and have not elicited sympathy for her plight.

All these stories well represent the deprivation of women and girl children due to poverty. Particularly, girls in poor families are not only deprived of their rights to education due to poverty but are also subject to gender-based violence and sexual harassment in their efforts to fulfill their basic needs. These girl children and their mothers are compelled to seek employment in foreign countries as domestic workers mainly to earn an income for family survival, and in many cases, with the intention of building a house. Once mothers leave their families to make ends meet, they suffer from both ends. While being employed in foreign countries, many are subjected to various forms of sexual harassment and their children suffer here at home without the care and protection by their mothers. Girls, in particular, are denied their right to education and are subject to gender-based violence, including rape, incest and various forms of sexual harassment.

In view of this situation despite the remarkable achievements in education, there is another side to the story: poverty has caused a lot of women and girls to undergo extremely difficult situations. Although the numbers are decreasing, we still hear such stories daily. There may be a lot of Sanojas or Rizanas in the current world. Some families suffer without even receiving any information about their female members who have gone abroad as housemaids. Their employers or job agencies do not provide any information about these women. Sometimes, after a long lapse of silence, the families are informed that these women have been injured or dead. Hence, until the country reaches its targets in poverty reduction, it is not fair to boast only about the achievements in education.