

Young Female Leaders for the Future

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Role of females has evolved over the years. Not so long ago, the primary role of females was raising children and household chores. However, with globalization and change in lifestyles, females started gaining a higher level of education, entering the job market and were exposed to the outside world. This was the same in Sri Lanka.

Today, in Sri Lanka, females have a 91% literacy rate and more females than males go for university education. However, in the labor force, only 34% is female.

Only a few females have climbed to the top in their careers. Although more females than males work in the public sector, only 9 are female out of the 59 Ministry Secretaries (the highest rank in the public sector). Also in the private sector, there are only a few female Chief Executive Officers/Chairpersons. This is certainly a paradox as the World's first female Prime Minister was from Sri Lanka and the country also had a female executive President.



Sri Lanka Government Ministry Secretaries

There are a number of reasons for this situation. Even though females excel in studies, as they enter the labor force, they are faced with societal pressures to get married. For young couples, looking after children and attending to their needs has become a challenge. As a result, more and more educated professional females are leaving their careers. Sri Lanka is yet to embrace flexi-time system and full-fledged day care centers. Another reason may be that historically, leadership has carried the notion of masculinity and the belief that men make better leaders than women is still common today. Certain jobs are perceived as 'male jobs', mainly due to the work hours, type of skill required (e.g. managing a large male work force) and location. Therefore, some

industries 'prefer' males to females.

However, females are looking at different options where they can maintain a work-life balance and be successful career women. This is evident from the rising number of female business owners including those engaging in family business. They gain flexibility to play multiple roles.

There are some female leaders as role models in Sri Lanka in diverse industries such as financial services, apparel, telecommunication, IT, advertising, etc. They have common characteristics. Having a personal brand as a female leader in the country, they are strong-minded, conscientious and maintain ethical standards. The foundation to groom females to assume leadership roles needs to be laid at a young age. Traditionally, girls are guided towards careers such as teaching which would enable them to balance work and life. However, the girls raised in cities are more exposed to the corporate world and find their way into the business arena.

It is, therefore, important to raise both boys and girls with the same ideologies to take on leadership roles in whatever field they choose. Young girls need to be coached, mentored and equipped with skills that will enable them to face challenges in a leadership position and a complex business environment. Good governance, corporate social responsibilities and ethics will be vital game changers for tomorrow's world. More female leaders will certainly bring a brighter future to Sri Lanka.