

Gender Inequality – Is It an Issue in Sri Lanka?

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What is gender equality? The United Nations describes gender equality as the equal enjoyment of socially-valued goods, opportunities, resources and rewards by women and men. Gender equality is regarded as a human right. It does not imply that women and men are the same; which is the most common misperception of gender equality.

Gender equality is important to a nation as it ensures sustainable development. In order to achieve gender equality, women at all levels need to be empowered. In Sri Lanka, some do not perceive gender inequality as an issue. And some even hold the view that gender equality is a concept that is being instilled into society by western countries. In this article, we will look at the following three aspects: women in employment, women in education, and women's political representation in Sri Lanka.

Women in Employment

Women play a leading role in some of the key sectors of the country's economy; namely, tea plantation and garment industries, and migrant workers. In all these sectors, however, women are employed at the lowest ranks. For example, in the sector of migrant workers, women are employed mostly as housemaids in foreign countries.

The Sri Lankan culture plays a significant role for women in choosing their occupations. Traditionally, most female children are encouraged from childhood to choose professions such as teaching that will ensure work-life balance. In addition, girls are encouraged to choose indoor jobs that do not involve traveling, such as banking and nursing. Most girls are not motivated to enter the business arena or go into professions which are traditionally considered “male occupations”, such as pilots.



Garment workers

At present, the female unemployment rate (11%) is higher than the male unemployment rate (7%), and the male labor force participation rate (65%) is more than double that for females (28%). And most leadership positions in organizations are held by males. Also, both in public and private sectors, women's representation in decision-

making positions is at a minimum level. However, the situation is gradually changing. Companies now declare that they will give equal opportunities in employment.

Women in Education

By law, education is compulsory for children up to the age of 14 years in Sri Lanka. Therefore, as regarding school enrollment, there is no gender discrimination. Sri Lanka is one of the few countries in the world that provides free education until a child completes university education. Until the introduction of the free education system in 1947, for cultural and economic reasons, female children were not sent to school; therefore, the group of people who benefitted the most from the introduction of the system is women. According to statistics, Sri Lankans have a very high literacy rate (91%) irrespective of gender, and more females (58% in 2010) become eligible to enter university than males.

Women's Political Representation

Despite the fact that the literacy rate of women is high and both genders have access to the political arena, female representation in parliament is still less than 10% in Sri Lanka. Looking back at the history of the country, you can see the female leaders who came into power belonged to political families, i.e., either their father or husband was a former prime minister who was assassinated. Other female politicians are popular personalities and celebrities.

Several reasons cited for the low representation include the lack of financial support, difficulty in gaining nomination from the main political parties, and the deteriorating state of ethical conduct in politics. The country has a long way to go before encouraging educated, professional females to enter politics.

Overall, when considering the respect for and treatment of women, Sri Lanka is ahead of comparable countries. This is mainly due to the cultural and Buddhist values predominant in the nation. Taking into consideration the three factors discussed above, it is fair to say that gender inequality does exist to some extent in Sri Lanka, especially in terms of political representation; however, gender inequality is not identified as a critical issue by policy makers and society as a whole.

By taking necessary steps to promote gender equality,—namely, eradicating power imbalances, empowering women to climb the corporate ladder, redefining the man's role in the family to share household responsibilities in line with the woman's role that has changed over time to become an economic contributor—Sri Lanka will be able to strive

to achieve its vision of becoming the 'Wonder of Asia'.