

Impact of Women's Educational Achievement and Employment on Their Families

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Sri Lanka has made remarkable progress in eradicating gender disparities in education in the past few decades. The enrolment rate of girls and boys in the primary education level is the same, with no gender gap. Girls and boys both equally enter into the arena of education. What is more interesting is that girls excel in higher education. During the recent years, girls have outnumbered boys in university admissions, a process which is highly competitive in Sri Lanka. Equipped with the high educational qualifications, many girls are joining the job market and get qualified for lucrative professions. Even in the public sector, it is conspicuous that women represent the majority of the various categories of public sector jobs. Women's educational achievements have also led many women to be engaged in prestigious professions such as administrators, medical doctors, engineers, university academics and managers in various other technical fields.

Traditionally, in Sri Lanka, women have been the majority in the caregiving sectors, such as teaching and nursing professions. But now there is a change as they represent the majority of clerical and other executive positions which were previously dominated by males. It is surprising to note that during the last few years the number of women who entered into Sri Lanka Administrative Service has increased at an exponential rate.

Of course this has had a positive impact in that women's educational achievements have enabled them to enjoy equal status in society and achieve financial and other types of autonomy in all walks of life. They are well recognized in society and have the ability of networking and moving forward. This has a positive impact on their families too, because when mothers are well educated and socially recognized, they are able to contribute to the families' wellbeing in various ways. For instance, they are able to direct their children to better education.

But what is now coming to the forefront is the recognition of the fact that, since women are supposed to perform their reproductive role, they need to have the support of their families to balance their career and family life. In the absence of other support structures, it is the family that has to share the responsibility of homemaking and domestic chores. Often, understanding husbands share their family responsibilities and support their wives to carry out their jobs smoothly. In this scenario, this is a win-win situation which results in better prospects for their families.

But even with all these positive aspects, one can see instances where prevalent gender stereotypes and attitudes have generated negative impact on this situation. Traditionally males were considered as breadwinners of the family and females were in the subordinate position. When the wife works and stays out of home in pursuit of her employment, the husband inevitably has to share domestic responsibilities, which can generate resentment if the husband is old-fashioned and has old patriarchal attitudes. The situation becomes even worse, if the wife's employment status is higher than that of her husband. Sometimes it may generate inferiority complex resulting in family conflicts. He still wants his wife to attend everything in the household and does not support her to balance their careers and the families. In such a context, women get overburdened and stressed out with their household responsibilities as well as career responsibilities. As Sri Lanka does not have well-equipped and affordable day care centers yet, young mothers face a lot of difficulties in carrying out their jobs. Especially women who hold high positions get miserable as they do not have conducive environment at home or in society to get support to perform both the roles: the

productive role for the economy and nation building; and the reproductive role as mothers and home makers in a fulfilling manner. This is an undesirable situation for the family and society at large.



Figure 1- A Sri Lankan employed mother escorting her daughter to pre-school



Figure 2- Children under the loving care of grand parents

Career women face some more challenges with the prevalent negative social norms in society. In order to fulfill the career responsibilities, any person has to sacrifice family time. In such instances help and support of husbands are necessary to cope with family affairs. In the absence of such support, children of these mothers are often left in the care of their grandparents or baby sitters. Help from grandparents are now taken for granted by most of young parents. Once the grandparents undertake childcare responsibilities on a full-time basis, they lack leisure time during their old age. Consequently, many old people in the present society lack time to engage in their personal matters, religious work or any other social work. This negative aspect which emerges due to women's full-time employment needs to be tackled sympathetically by families. The state should also contribute by providing affordable and safe day care facilities/crèches. Introduction of flexi timings or teleworking to enable mothers to work flexible schedules or work from home is another option. Society, families and the government have to work together to change the mindsets and provide the social infrastructure to enable the country to sustain the high levels of educational attainment and workforce participation of its women.