

Plight of the Woman Architect: Implications of Gender on Sri Lankan Architectural Profession

Mr. Nishan WIJETUNGE (Sri Lanka)

In Asian contexts such as Sri Lanka, women traditionally did not seek employment after coming of age but cared for children and the family, while men were the sole bread winners of the household. The fact that the island nation has had a number of women rulers in its two and a half millennia of documented history, and also the fact that a majority of its populace being practicing Buddhists – a doctrine that discourages gender discrimination – did very little to help their cause over the centuries. Some, in fact, argue that because of the close proximity to Hindu India, Lankan culture was essentially infiltrated by hierarchical strands evident in its neighbor's dominant culture. However, largely with the advent of Western colonialism and ensuing westernization of Asian societies, certain women elevated themselves and stepped into fields that were hitherto seen as solely 'men's domains'.

Minnette de Silva, a Sri Lankan woman who qualified in the early 1950s as an architect in Architectural Association (AA) School in London, U.K., in fact has been honored as the first ever Asian woman to obtain the membership of Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). A few years down the line, Sirimavo Bandaranayke from Sri Lanka became the first woman Prime Minister in the world. These forerunners undoubtedly became a breath of fresh air for aspiring women in the island of this revolutionary era.

Nowadays, Sri Lankan women are increasingly breaking shackles imposed by age-old traditions, and venturing into fields that have hitherto not seen many women professionals. Statistics show us that over the last few decades – especially after the neoliberal economic reforms were introduced in 1977 – Sri Lanka's tertiary education sector saw women contributing to 80% and 50% respectively, in the vital fields of law and medicine. The world over, architecture is considered to be one of the costliest and most time-consuming fields to qualify in. On par with the current trend of more than 50% of architectural/design students being women in the West – a fact that constitutes the underlying reasons of growing unemployment, rising tuition fees and benefit cuts etc. among many other factors – in Sri Lanka too, this has become the norm in the recent years. This affirms that the intellectual and artistic abilities among female students are as prevalent as that amongst their male counterparts. In Sri Lanka, students need to pass the fiercely competitive Advanced Level (A/L) examinations and get a decent band score before being eligible to sit for the so-called 'aptitude test' that measures their intellectual as well as artistic ability to qualify them to receive an architectural education.

The statistics also show that female students also do well in their architectural studies, and a considerable number even reach the apex through academic distinctions and honors, at times even rivalling their male counterparts. However, once they qualify and venture out into the field, it is believed that things take a turn for the worse. These problems are common to female architects the world over, and can in fact be attributed largely to tradition, and consequent gender inequality it triggers. In modern day Sri Lanka, albeit its superficial sense of modernity, deep-rooted prejudices that hinder women's progression still lurk. Young women in their twenties are encouraged to marry and have children before they reach their thirties. Fulfilling the aforementioned social expectations in their thirties and later in life has always been mediated by a conservative society as a taboo. This cliché is a real impediment to women's participation in long academic/professional courses such as architecture, and also in pursuing higher levels of education such as obtaining doctorates that requires extended spells in universities. It is almost a painful statistic that a majority of women in architectural academia in Sri Lanka – especially the one who have advanced qualifications academically – are either unmarried, divorcees or childless. Further, it is evident that most of the successful women practitioners in Sri Lanka too have the aforementioned traits in common. This

The 27th Foreign Correspondent Report

manifests, just as in the West (mainly in the UK, Australia and New Zealand etc.) as statistics confirm, that Sri Lankan women in architecture too are victims of sorts.

As in the Western countries, in Sri Lanka too, qualified women architects complain constantly about mistreatment at the workplace or on construction sites. In certain architectural practices, the male workers are preferred over female counterparts owing to a number of reasons. Among many misconceptions, ‘male architects work harder’ is the most prevalent. An array of gender-sensitive issues ranging from expectation of late hours at work to time spent on the construction sites dominated by countless male contingents are seen as impediments to work progress if females are employed. This results in men in architectural offices earning more than their women colleagues. The construction industry dictates that architects are the ‘team leaders’ among all other stakeholders (as laid down by RIBA ‘Plan of work’). Despite this benefit, many women architects complain of prejudice against them by numerous working strata engaged in the male-dominated industry, where insubordination to gender-based comments/slurs is seemingly commonplace. Further, it is believed that women architects also find it hard to convince male clients as well as other building professionals such as engineers, quantity surveyors, consultants etc.; not to mention countless other participants of the game such as contractors, sub-contractors, material suppliers, skilled workers, work site laborers, etc. However, studies show that when women work together in the same workplace as a team, they are happier, and their productivity is always at its best. Unfortunately, this Western statistic does not apply to Sri Lanka.

Consequently, as in the world architectural sphere, in the Sri Lankan contemporary scenario too, there are not many successful women architects. Although lone figures who only won some acclaim in Sri Lanka such as Minnette de Silva set the trend for other more successful and world-renowned women architects such as Saha Hadid (originally of Iraqi Origin) to follow (at least in the UK), in her native country, things have hardly changed from the days she used to practice. Although Minnette lead a trend-setting practice from Kandy (in the hill country of Sri Lanka) that gifted to the world ‘Architectural Regionalism’ (as suggested by the famous architectural critique Kenneth Frampton), by the time she passed in the late 1997, she had not won at least partially the acclaim that was received by her male contemporaries such as Geoffrey Bawa. It is said that she did not get many commissions in a man-dominated field and ran a financially unsound practice.

In the architectural academia in Sri Lanka, the women participation in the recent years is said to be growing rapidly. Since an entrepreneurial venture of running an architectural practice on one’s own is risky business, many women architects try to settle for the more stable salaried academic employment. In the profession too, many female architects seemingly opt for the safe way out – that is seeking employment in the so-called ‘prestigious’ architectural firms that guarantee stable and continuous wages. This allows them to engage in the profession they are trained in, and at the same time fulfil their social obligations of getting married, raising a family and keeping up with their lady-like manners by minimizing chances of any potential clashes with the so-called ‘male chauvinists’ in the industry. Another common safe option for the Sri Lankan women architect is to find a husband who is also an architect either practicing on one’s own or being employed by a reputable practice. Even in this case, her role is relegated as she finds herself dedicating more time for the family than to work. The analysis of aforementioned observations tells us that the traditional role of the woman as a ‘mother’, ‘daughter’, and ‘homemaker’ is still deeply entrenched in the Sri Lankan psyche, even in this day of the twenty-first century. The Sri Lankan society is yet far from being receptive to feminist ideologies that are in the West coming to the fore, at least gradually.

The 27th Foreign Correspondent Report



Female architectural student facing 'crit'; an essential aspect of training for architects that entails development of self-confidence and competence.