

Why Does Marriage Only Have Implications For Women? Persisting Gender Inequalities

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“When a boy is born, his parents are elated.” This is a conventional saying common to many Asian countries. Having a baby boy is considered to be in the same league as winning the lottery, while having a girl is as exciting as watering a plant in your neighbor’s garden. You water it, give it sunshine and take care of it. But when it is time for the harvest, your neighbor has a better chance of reaping the rewards. It is as if all your efforts and sacrifice have been taken away by a stranger. This situation is more visible in Asian countries such as China and India where female births are even controlled in various ways.

Sri Lanka is somewhat exceptional due to the educational achievements of its people, especially women. However, there may be families in rural settings who still consider a daughter to be a burden to the family. This may be due to various factors. Some people are of the mindset that only boys will be the breadwinners of the family. Hence, boys should be properly nourished and educated as they are expected to support the family in the future. Also, there is a traditional perception that no matter how much you love and care for your daughter and enjoy her beauty and warmth, she does not belong to you after all. She will be with you, make you happy and care for you, but ultimately will leave you for another family from where she will continue to carry out her duties as a new daughter, sister and mother. Above all, parents feel that they are burdened with finding a dowry for their daughter when she gets married.

In many cases, women suffer when they marry, particularly due to dowry-related problems. Dowries play a major role in the lives of women who are of marriageable age in Sri Lankan society. While parents are not obligated by law to provide a dowry for their daughters, it is a tradition that some families continue to follow. If a woman’s parents are capable of providing their daughter with a dowry when she marries, she is often



Traditional Sri Lankan Wedding

well-accepted and given due respect by her in-laws. Consequently, parents struggle to secure money or property as dowry for their daughter.

In traditional Sri Lankan society, another social norm connected with marriage is the virginity of a woman when she marries. This way of thinking is still prevalent in traditional rural families in Asia, and is actually a form of gender discrimination as only women are supposed to remain untouched and maintain their virginity. If a woman is not a virgin when she marries, she will suffer eternally throughout her married life. It is true that safe sex should always be practiced and that adolescents should be educated about their sexual behavior. But requiring women to maintain their virginity cannot be accepted as a social norm. Even though women have proven to be equally stronger and fit in every way, these kinds of delusions keep women on the bottom row of the ladder to success.

In addition to the above mentioned issues, there are other discriminatory practices which negatively affect women. When a married woman is unable to produce children, she is often berated by society and condemned as a “barren woman of no worth.” In the past, a woman who did not produce a child was neglected by her husband and in-laws, and mocked and tormented by society, which led to a mental deterioration as she felt that being unable to have a child was her own fault for being unable to carry on to the next generation. In countries like India, the husband at this stage would be able to marry another woman and remain in the same house enjoying a happy life with his new wife and children, while his previous “barren wife” was ignored and endured tremendous pain and suffering. This view continues in many religions and caste-based situations as well where polygamy and polyandry are practiced.

Today we live in a technologically advanced world where medical science is able to provide solutions to most of our health and physical problems. With this, it has been proven in most cases that women are not to blame in many of the above-mentioned situations. Men have equal responsibilities and roles to play when it comes to producing children. Even though this is the case, even today, misunderstandings by a majority of people remain and the finger of blame is pointed directly at women.

In Sri Lanka in the past, families would be distressed if the first child is a girl. However, today, this way of thinking has dramatically changed. With the educational achievements of women, dowry matters are also receiving less attention. People are of the mindset that, if a couple is educated and earns a good income, they will have no trouble leading comfortable and happy lives. Pre-marital sex has also become more common among the younger generations in urban areas even though it is still not freely accepted, due to cultural norms. However, the issue of virginity for married women has

all but disappeared amongst the educated populace. Education has changed present Sri Lankan society in a very positive way. The status of women in Sri Lanka has been subjected to many great changes over the past decade with gender-specific interventions taken by successive governments in Sri Lanka. As a result, the women of Sri Lanka are fortunate to enjoy equal status with men when compared to their counterparts in Asia. But, there are still situations in which deeply rooted cultural norms continue to lead to discriminatory practices against women, particularly with regard to issues related to marriage.