

Utilizing Women's Potential for Socio-Economic Development in Sri Lanka

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Women contribute largely to Sri Lankan economy and are the backbone of several of the most economically important sectors in the country; tea, garment and foreign employment. In addition, women's participation in formal-sector employment has grown rapidly during the past few years. As more girls become qualified and gain access to higher education than boys, the proportion of females who join the public sector through competitive examinations has become much higher than that of males. Consequently, it has been observed that the public service sector is getting feminized at all levels. Similarly, a large proportion of women work in the private sector as well. With an increasing number of women joining paid employment, the country is now facing new challenges to support young married women to balance their roles at work and in family.

Generally, women's domestic responsibilities exceed those of men. They cannot ignore their responsibility as mothers. In Sri Lanka, women are allocated three months of paid maternity leave. But when returning to work, they face the problem of keeping their infants and young children at home. In Sri Lankan culture, mostly, parents or in-laws undertake the childcare responsibility for their daughters. In the absence of this support, these young mothers face severe problems. Quality and affordable day-care facilities for small babies are lacking in Sri Lanka. Employing a domestic helper is also not so reliable since most of these domestic helpers are not trained to give proper childcare. Due to this situation, some young mothers are even compelled to drop out of employment at some point in their lives. Also, many employed women take more leave from work than men do. This has resulted in lost income, impeded career growth, and the depreciation of skills, among other things. In addition, women suffer promotion-related discrimination in male-dominated careers.

In Sri Lanka, several Government institutions and some private sector employers have set up day-care facilities. These work places are very popular amongst young mothers. In recent years, the government has committed to providing tax concessions and some other facilities for private sector employers to set up day-care facilities. However, only a few employers responded to the pledge. Now there are proposals to establish day-care facilities at local authority level. However, securing trained personnel to operate those institutions would be a problem. Hence investment in training childcare providers is crucially important when establishing such day-care facilities.

Disregarding the gender, any human being should be able to realize their potential and achieve economic independence. Availability of equal opportunities is not sufficient to achieve gender equality. There should be a level playing field in which both men and women can equally enjoy the benefits of available opportunities. Sri Lanka is proud of the contribution made by women to the economy. But there are many issues and concerns pertaining to Sri Lankan women that require attention in utilizing their potential for socioeconomic development of the country. Establishing day-care facilities for working women is one of the major concerns. In addition, there are so many other issues pertaining to women who contribute to the economy through various ways.

Women represent the majority of Sri Lankan migrant workers, and mostly they are between the ages of 25 and 40. Despite various difficulties, they leave their families with young children behind to go abroad for the wellbeing of their families. In the absence of mothers, their children suffer a lot of hardships without proper care and affection. Similarly, thousands of women who work in the plantation sector do not have adequate day-care facilities. Whether it be foreign employment or local self-employment, they equally need support for childcare. In Sri Lanka, there are a huge number of female-headed families. In a male-dominated world, it is a daunting task for a woman to make ends meet single-handedly. There is something more than heroic about the women who are struggling to survive on their own.

Women enjoying political power are best suited to change this situation. Unfortunately, however, Sri Lanka's goal to achieve even semi-balanced equal representation in Parliament has yet to be realized. Even the recently-elected cabinet has only two female ministers. Despite other achievements, women's interests, whether it be in the societal or political sphere, are often underrepresented. Appropriate policies to support working mothers are still pending due to this situation. Hence, Sri Lanka has to make strenuous efforts to have more women who possess charismatic leadership and political power change this situation.