

The Continuing Challenges of Career Women in Sri Lanka

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Different cultures in the world have moulded the roles of men and women to fit their unique circumstances. Interestingly, these roles have not changed much with the socio, business, and economic environments of countries. This situation is true, at least for Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka has a population of 21 million. With more females in the population (51%) and high literacy rate for females (94.6%), one would imagine the woman's role in Sri Lanka to be of high significance. Women, certainly have come a long way from completely being away from the workforce. Today, young girls aspire to have blossoming careers and compete with their male counterparts in the workplace. By law, women have equal rights as men.

However, Sri Lanka has a patriarchal culture which has not changed much. The woman remains solely responsible for domestic duties and if the man helps her, it will be considered as a 'favor'. Even though many women share equal financial responsibilities with their husbands, their workload as mothers and wives is not shared adequately by their husbands.

The society's perception of a woman's role is very evident in the media. The local TV commercials and tele-dramas often portray the female as always doing household chores and children's work. It conveys the message that a woman should play the historic role of the full-time mother and wife, in addition to being an income-earner. Despite numerous gender development programmes, the norms and attitudes of the society have not changed to a great extent. Another example is parental leave. In the government sector, females are granted 84 working days of maternity leave, but fathers are granted only 3 days of paternity leave. In the business sector, some companies grant 1-2 weeks of paternity leave; however, the government is yet to recognize that it is not purely the mothers' responsibility to attend to the numerous requirements of a new born.

As the demands of the household and family increase, career women have opted to leave their careers and become stay-at-home mothers. This is evident from the alarming statistics reported in the Annual Report 2014 of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL). According to CBSL, the labour force participation rate (LFPR) of females continues to decline and stands at 34.8%, the second lowest in the region, whilst the male LFPR is 74.6%. The female unemployment rate is 6.5%, double that of males (3.2%).

With the emergence of nuclear families and rapid urbanization, couples have to look after their children on their own. Since the 'mother' is perceived as the parent responsible for childbearing and child-rearing, ultimately she is compelled to leave her job. Once the children are grown up, even if she wants to be employed, she would face difficulty finding work due to the career-break. This hinders the possibility and opportunity for females to be financially independent and add economic value to the country, thereby creating a disparity.

Another challenge for career women is the lack of safe accommodation and transportation facilities (CBSL, 2014). Rural women come to urban areas for work and face difficulty finding safe and affordable accommodation. Due to the distance, it would not be possible to travel daily.

Also, certain employers prefer male employees over females. Some reasons they cite are: women's difficulties in doing field jobs, and in staying at work beyond regular working hours, as well as having to stay away due to pregnancy. Therefore, even though women are educated and equally qualified as men, the fact that they are females limits their opportunities of entering the labour force.

From an economic point of view, this is a significant issue. On one hand, despite the investment made by the government in providing free and equal opportunities for education, the expected benefits cannot be reaped from females when they do not make an economic value addition. On the other hand, the country would not be able to achieve its set targets with a shrinking labour force (CBSL, 2014). Therefore, it is imperative for Sri Lanka to address these issues and attract more females into the labour force. It is also important that children are educated on the evolved roles of the mother and father, in order to achieve gender-equality in future.



Sri Lankan mother with her child



Sri Lankan graduates