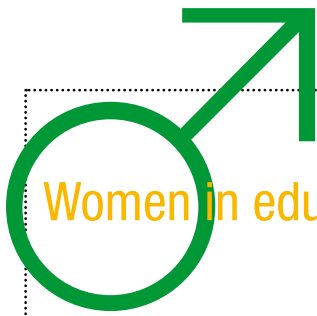




WOMEN IN EMPLOYMENT still gender blind?

By Sajith de Mel and Dr Dayanath Ranathunga

It is quite interesting to examine the participation of women in the labour market, in the face of dynamic socio-economic circumstances. One may be inclined to query as to the fact, whether women had been excluded, barred or more seriously been expelled from the labour market rewards originating in the course of globalisation. Women in the Sri Lankan society are modelled and stereotypically being viewed as housewives, thus clarifying the lower levels of female participation in the labour force. Delving into the history of the position and the status of a typical woman in the traditional Ceylonese civilisation, Robert Knox, a captive in the island of Ceylon for nearly twenty years presents a magnificent insight into the height of subordination of the Ceylonese women in his account, "A Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon in the East-Indies." Thus, what was expected of women remained unsophisticated and was to play a passive role as a housewife. As Knox elaborates, the women's housewifery was to beat the rice out of the husk; to cook meals; fetch wood and water; cut herbs, pumpkins, and to fetch home the cattle. It was also their duty to wait and serve their husbands while they eat, and when they have done, then to eat what they have left. Thus proving the gendered roles males and females play in the society, the eminent sociologist, Talcott Parson argues, that to function most effectively, the family requires adults who specialise in particular roles. Parson and Bales contended that women take the expressive and emotionally supportive role, and men the instrumental and practical role, with two complementing each other. As such the women become anchored in the family as wives, mothers, and household managers, while men become anchored in the occupational world outside the home.



Women in education

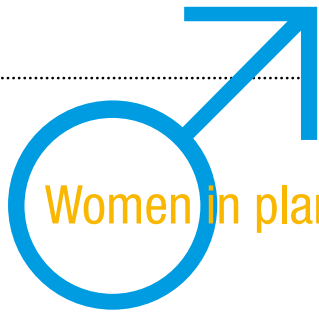
Irrespective of the enhanced female participation in the education system, one would witness lower levels of female participation in the labour force. As such, one may tend to conclude that the benefits of female education had not been passed on as labour market benefits for females. In the Pre-British Ceylon, the education of boys was given a prominent place as opposed to girls' education. The education of boys was carried out by a Buddhist priest at the village temple, the home of the incumbent of the nearest vihara. Although colonisation brought European-style education to Sri Lanka, especially to prepare students for positions in the colonial administrations, few women went to school and most people remained uneducated. Under the Portuguese system of schools, girls were given an elementary education in parish schools but were denied entry into the secondary schools and seminaries, which provided higher education. Under the Dutch, however, with their system of free compulsory education, large numbers of girls began to attend school, but parents showed great reluctance to keep their daughters in schools after their eighth year. Under the British rule in 1865, the Morgan Committee put forward the recommendation to open schools for girls. The issue of female education became controversial in the 19th century Britain with reverberations in the colonies. Missionaries, secular reformers, and feminists brought the question of girls' schools to the fore. The underlying argument for the above was that the conversion of men to Christianity would mean little if they married heathen women and was reverted to the old ways. In 1938 the education in government schools was made free of charge as a consequence of the Universal Franchise granted in 1931. With the introduction of free education, female participation in education rose significantly. Data for 2005 explains that of the 3,942,412 students in schools, 1,978,057 were females while 1,964,355 were males. For the year 2005/06, the number of undergraduate entrants was in total 15,305. This comprised of 7,051 males and 8,254 females.



Occupational sex discrimination

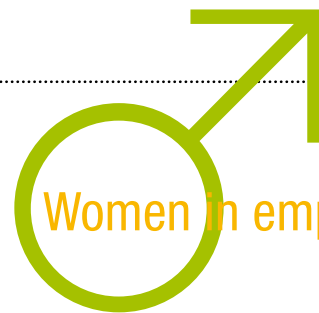
A plethora of literature exists explicating the lower levels of female employment in diverse sectors. One major explanation for the lower prevalence of female employment results from gender discriminatory recruitment and hiring practices. Many advertisements instead of merely stating the educational qualifications required and the necessary years of experience, state the required sex of the employee. This is due to the fact that many managers have a strong preference for males over females when confronted with similar educational qualifications. A recent newspaper survey undertaken for the period, May 2006 to April 2007, analyses local vacancies by sex and by occupation. Of the total, 32% of the vacancies specify the gender required while 68% does not specifically state the required gender. However, of the vacancies which specify the required gender, 21% prefers females, while 78% prefers males. Employment data for 2007 explains that the female participation in agriculture, forestry, fishery was 41%, while it was 46% in manufacturing, 2% in construction, mining, quarry, electricity, gas and water supply, 24% in wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles, motorcycles and personal and household goods, 28% in financial intermediation and real estate, renting and business activities, 27% in public administration, defense and compulsory social security. Another feature with respect to women in employment is the paucity of women in decision making positions. A research carried out on one hundred private sector companies reveals that irrespective of the fact that women comprised almost 46% of the total number of employees, 95% of the women were in the 'workers category, skilled and unskilled,' where jobs at this level requires little decision-making. It also finds that, of the total 104 representative of the apex decision making bodies, only five were women, thereby illustrating the paucity of women in the decision making positions.

Women have been more vulnerable to unemployment particularly in the context of their rising educational levels. Women in employment portray a social blindness that is appalling in the light of extensive analysis and writing on the role of women in employment. In the recent past, the female labour force participation rates have been growing at a much faster rate compared to males. It is not due to the women's rising levels of education, but due to proliferation of opportunities in the labour intensive industries that demand low skilled low cost female labour. One should not underestimate the contribution made by women in employment to the local economy. Numerous policies, programmes and initiatives have been initiated at a macro level to address this labour market inefficiency of discrimination of women in the labour market. However it is our conception that the answer lies in a bottom-up approach. A revolution in the ideology with respect to women's subordinated position in the society would bring lasting solutions to this dilemma.



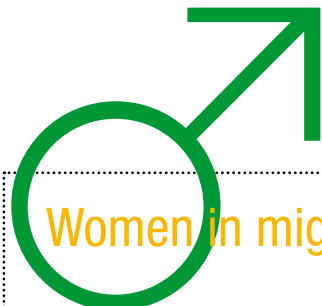
Women in plantations

Another significant feature of women in employment in Sri Lanka is the concentration of women into sectors that are dominated by low cost, low skilled female labour. Presently tea, garments and labour exports are the three cornerstones of the economy contributing over 90% of the total foreign exchange earning of the country. Women are the majority in the labour force of these three major sectors. The British who started the tea plantations brought in South Indian labour as the locals were reluctant to accept estate sector jobs. From the point of view of the British, the Indian labour was much cheaper and more flexible. Initially both men and women in equal numbers were employed in estates. With changes in the macro-economic environment, men moved out from the estate sector as they were exposed to more promising jobs. Women, trying to balance their work with their traditional gendered role were stuck with the estate sector jobs. The estate culture is based on a strong hierarchical structure and the female is considered less privileged. This specific nature contributed women towards vulnerability and discrimination. Numerous studies on gender-based violence in the plantation sector reveal dreadful circumstances women face. Gender-based violence is defined as any act that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. A study executed with respect to gender-based violence in the plantation sector reveals that, in terms of gender based violence at the workplace on a daily basis, the victims identified the kangani as the most frequent perpetrator (44.4%). Other daily abusers were identified as the supervisor (22.2%) who ranks above the kangani and others such as the field officers, assistant field officers and even strangers (22.2%) and the superintendent (11.1%). With respect to the type of gender based violence, the women victims reveal that in a majority of cases, it took the form of physical abuse (43.3%), verbal abuse (35.8%), while sexual abuse was 19.5% and mental abuse was at least 1.5%. Alcoholism is seen as another major cause resulting in gender-based violence in the plantation sector. Women happen to face a lot of hardship to feed the family while their husbands spend their income totally on alcohol. Financial pressure also puts additional pressure on the females with the major responsibility of running the family. With the transition of young females from the estate sector to towns, one could sense the change in this trend. Yet again, the urban migrant faces problems of trafficking and sometimes ends up with illegal businesses including prostitution.



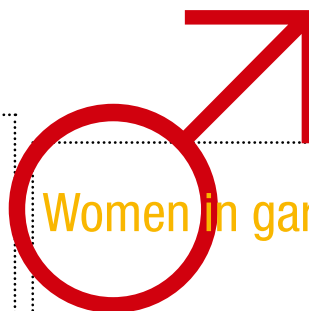
Women in employment

Irrespective of the higher participation of females in the education sector, the benefits of such have not been transferred on to the labour market, in terms of women in employment. The labour force participation rates for females are almost 50% to that of the males. For 2007, quarter 1, the male labour force participation was 68.1% while for females it stood at 33.2%. Considering the unemployment rates, it becomes evident that the female unemployment rate is almost twice that of the male unemployment rates. For 2007 quarter 1, the unemployment rate for males stood at 4.4%, while for females it stood at 9.5%. Further analysing unemployment rate by educational level (G C E A/L and above) gives evidence of an 18.4% unemployment among females and 7% among males for 2007 quarter 1. Another factor that concerns females is the lower empowerment levels. The gender empowerment index in Sri Lanka stands at 31% which is lower than the average for all developing countries (37%). A perusal of available statistics shows that women's involvement in the labour force is mostly at non-decision making levels. In the major occupational categories, women's involvement in administrative, managerial, professional and technical occupations is far less than in clerical work, sales work and semi-skilled and unskilled labour.



Women in migration

Migration for employment on a regular and a systematic basis began in the 1980s with the opening of the economy and the liberalisation exercise initiated by the then government. Feminisation of migration is one of the foremost trends that a reasonable observer would witness consequent to screening the data available. The enhanced female partaking in the foreign employment market is no doubt most convivial, and one might even construe this as a symbol of triumph on the part of women pressure groups' struggle for equal employment opportunities for women. Approximately, 60% of the emigrants are females while the average annual out-migration of females for foreign employment is around 126,119. It is rather attention-grabbing that a majority of females out-migrate as housemaids. The female out-migration as housemaids in the year 2000 was 99413, while in 2005, it stood at 125,054, representing a 25% bump over five years. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and United Arab Emirates represent the major destinations of domestic workers in Sri Lanka. With all due regards to the enhanced female participation in the foreign labour market, we should never forget that women migrants are one of the most vulnerable groups in all countries. Countless stories of emigrant Sri Lankan women being sexually and physically abused by the host employer is never an extraordinary episode. Most migrant women are from underprivileged milieus and a countless lack of professional training as housemaids. On the other hand their English skills lie at a very low level. Lack of English skills coupled with low levels of professional skills make their labour flexibility and mobility inflexible to vulnerabilities. As such even in the midst of rape and abuse, these female workers have no option, but to hang about with the assaulting employer. The local agencies that recruited these women have very limited control at the receiving end and some even do not engage themselves in solving the problems of their clients. Irrespective of the enormous positive economic externalities emanating through migration, it also carries its negative social externalities. A female's decision to migrate is usually a function of their low levels of income, and respectively, lower levels of consumption. The money transferred to the country in many occasions is being wasted by their drunken husbands. Many husbands during the absence of their wives carry extramarital affairs and the education of the children is being disrupted. As such one should never assume that the feminisation of migration is without its social costs.



Women in garment industry

In the globalising economy free trade zones are dominated by young female workers. The bulk of these are repetitive at the low-skill and low wage end of the spectrum. Between 70-80% of the labour force in the garment and apparel sector consists of women. The majority of these women are unmarried and have secondary school leaving qualifications. The jobs do not typically correspond to their training and educational attainments or to their aspirations. The majority are concentrated in low skilled pursuits with poor career prospects and many leave after marriage. Even after two decades of the creation of the zones, married women make up scarcely 10% of the total workforce. Free trade zones were a result of the open economy. The investors prefer to have more female employees as the wages for women are comparatively low and they can be easily controlled compared to men. In other words females can be easily exploited as opposed to males. Most female workers in the free trade zones are from rural areas. Lack of basic infrastructure in the zones makes their living harder. Although migration occurs within the country they face enormous cultural pressure thus putting them to more danger. These females are being exploited and harassed in the factories by their authorities through unrealistic targets and verbal abuse. These frustrated and depressed situations are taken advantage of by males outside who cheat these innocent women.

(Sajith de Mel holds wide experience in labour markets. He has working experience with the United Nations – International Labour Office Colombo, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent. He is presently working for United Nations – International Labour office in Kabul, Afghanistan as an International Trainer. He graduated from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura in Bsc Business Administration. He also holds a Masters in Economic and a Pg Dip in Applied Sociology from the University of Colombo. He is also a member (ACA) of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Sri Lanka, and is a passed finalist of the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants. Dr Dayanath Ranatunga (MBBS) is a medical doctor presently working for United Nations – International Labour Organisation HIV/AIDS workplace education programme. He graduated from University of Peradeniya in Medicine and also holds a Masters in Mass Communications from University of Kelaniya and Pg Dip in Applied Sociology from University of Colombo.)