

## Women's Situation in Sri Lanka

Although there are no legal impediments to the participation of women in politics or government, the social mores in some communities limit women's activities outside the home, and the percentage of women in government and politics does not correspond to their percentage of the population.

In November 1994, a woman was elected President for the first time; she was reelected in December 1999 for a second term. Eleven women held seats in the Parliament that completed its term in August 2000. In addition to the Prime Minister, the Minister for Women's Affairs, and the Minister of Social Services, a number of women held posts as deputy ministers in the last parliament. Of the 5,000 candidates for the October 2000 parliamentary elections, 116 were women and 7 of them won seats in the October elections. Only one woman (Minister of Women's Affairs) was appointed to the new cabinet formed after the December 5 elections.

At present there are only 4.8% women in parliament and according to 1997 statistics, there were a mere 3.4%, 2.6% and 1.7% women representatives respectively in Municipal Councils, Urban Councils and Pradeshiya Sabhas.

The quota system can be used as an effective tool to increase women's participation in politics. In 1997 Sri Lanka's government proposed a constitutional reform, which contained a 25% reservation for women at the local government level. However, little progress has been done and the provision was not even stated in the August 2000 constitutional reform. The reason given by the government was that the Muslim and Tamil parties felt that they would not be able to find sufficient women candidates.

Women have equal rights under national, civil, and criminal law. However, issues related to family law, including divorce, child custody, and inheritance, are adjudicated by the customary law of each ethnic or religious group. The minimum age of marriage for women is 18 years, except in the case of Muslims, who continue to follow their customary marriage practices. The application of different legal practices based on membership in a religious or ethnic group often results in discrimination against women.

Around 22% of all households in Sri Lanka are female-headed. Many of these women have been thrust into the role of breadwinner with little knowledge of income-earning methods and few coping skills. Moreover, the word *withawi* (for widow) has connotations of a deplorable and pitiable condition. Social isolation and poverty are inevitable for these women, many of whom are widowed at a young age.

Female literacy has remained at 87% for several years. Urban and rural disparities still exist, and are not represented in national gender development indexes. Female literacy in urban areas is 91%, while the rural rate is 78%. Furthermore, some statistics, such as the 65% rate of anaemia among women, are not even included in some printed documents.

Education is another matter. Although the percentage of Sri Lankan women entering universities increased from 42% in 1989 to 52% in 1999 (bearing in mind that only 1% of the population has access to university education), women are still under-represented in many disciplines, and tend to find employment at the bottom of the employment pyramid.

The Constitution provides for equal employment opportunities in the public sector. However, women have no legal protection against discrimination in the private sector, where they sometimes are paid less than men for equal work, often experience difficulty in rising to supervisory positions, and face sexual harassment. Women constitute approximately one-half of the formal work force. When they do find work, it is usually in low-status, low-skilled and low-paying jobs in peasant and plantation agriculture. In addition to this, the female unemployment rate, at 22%, is double that of men in Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, a majority of jobs available to women are in the unorganized and informal sectors, which are outside the purview of labor regulations. An example of this is the growing number of women engaged in the garment industry, who are prone to suffer physical disabilities directly linked to long hours of hard labor.

Sexual assault, rape, and spousal abuse (often associated with alcohol abuse) continue to be serious and pervasive problems. Amendments to the Penal Code introduced in 1995 specifically addressed sexual abuse and exploitation and modified rape laws to create a more equitable burden of proof and to make punishments more stringent. Marital rape is considered an offense in cases of spouses living under judicial separation, and laws govern sexual molestation and sexual harassment in the workplace. While the Penal Code may ease some of the problems faced by victims of sexual assault, many women's organizations believe that greater sensitization of police and judicial officials is required. The Government set up the Bureau for the Protection of Children and Women within the police in 1994 to respond to calls for greater awareness and attention. Police statistics indicated that there were 26,660 crimes against women during the period from January to July 1999, compared with 26,565 crimes between January and June of 1998. Although laws against procuring and trafficking were strengthened in 1995, facilitating the prosecution of brothel owners, trafficking in women for the purpose of forced labor occurs.

Sources:

The truth behind Sri Lanka's gender development statistics

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Increasing women's representation in local government

[http://www.kit.nl/gcg/html/sri\\_lanka\\_ices\\_projects.asp](http://www.kit.nl/gcg/html/sri_lanka_ices_projects.asp)