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**Women And Media In Asia :
The Sri Lankan Situation**

By

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WOMEN AND MEDIA IN ASIA

The Sri Lankan Situation

A) Perspectives

It must be stated, though it is axiomatic, that, the prevailing ethos in a given human community determines and influences the status of employment of women in that particular social group. It is in turn, the predominant environmental context, that ultimately decides the social ethos and the role of women it is.

The social ethos of Sri Lanka, has evolved over a period of more than twenty-five centuries, which was determined by the agro-based economy on the one hand and the spirituality imparted to Sri Lankan culture by the Teachings of the Buddha, on the other.

The flowering of Sri Lankan culture as exemplified by the remnants of art, architecture and giant hydrological constructions continued undiminished even after foreign incursions. In 1505, the Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka and controlled its maritime provinces for nearly one-and-a-half centuries. Traces of their influence still linger in the vocabulary and the artefacts of the Sri Lankan. They were followed by the Dutch, who continued to rule the coastal region until the British annexed the Island by convention as a Colony in 1815. The Dutch, influenced the administration and the legal system of Sri Lanka. The Canal system they constructed in and around Colombo is still intact in most places. Today too Roman Dutch Law is prevalent in the Island. Such Administrative reforms as compiling a census, were initiated by the Dutch. The Printing Press was first introduced to Sri Lanka by the Dutch rulers in 1739.

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The British in their effort to exploit the resources of Sri Lanka, created such infra-structure facilities as Roads, Railways, Ports, Communication systems and Postal Services. The oldest English Language Newspaper of Sri Lanka - perhaps one of the oldest English Language Newspapers of Asia - was inaugurated under the British in 1834. Today, Sri Lanka has a literacy rate of 86 per cent which is a South Asian record.

B. Employment of Women in Sri Lanka Society

In the traditional agro-based economy of historical Sri Lanka, the predominant presence in activities of economic productivity was that of the Male. Even when women were called upon to play a role in income-generating pursuits, it was invariably supportive to that of the Male. In the paddy-cultivation chores, for instance, the women had a whole series of minor activities to perform, but it was implicitly assumed that the man's was the main role. Traditionally it was taboo for women under certain circumstances to step into the threshing floor of the field. This symbolized the fact that at times the women were barred from central activities of economic productivity.

The traditional employment profile of women in ancient Sri Lanka has been profiled in some detail in the 15th century epic poem entitled "Kavyashekhara", written by the scholar-monk Sri Rahula. Here, a young Brahmin maiden who is about to become a bride, is affectionately instructed by her father, in the proper and seemly routine she should follow, when she settles down in her married life, at her husband's house. Part of the instructions reads this way:

"When the husband returns home from a journey, you must wash his feet yourself without getting the servants to do it".

"Cultivate a home garden, growing ginger and other spices and flowering plants".

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"Wear your cloth down to the ankle. Do not reveal your breasts and do not laugh displaying your teeth".

"Never step out of your house without informing your husband, or without your shawl on. Nor should you walk fast".

The poem quite strictly states that her sphere of activity is the domestic realm. She has been asked, of course, to enquire into her husband's business affairs and offer advice where due. But, nowhere does it state that she should seek employment on her own.

What is remarkable about the social role of Sri Lankan women, is that she was never condemned to seclusion. She took to religious pursuits almost from the inception of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Lady members of the royal household, were ordained Buddhist nuns as early as the third century B.C.

The Sri Lankan royal line consists of several Queens as well. The entrenched social attitude towards women being employed began to undergo a radical change during the late British times. As education became wider spread more and more women thought it fit to make use of the opportunities for learning. At first, education for women was a mere social accomplishment and did not serve any significant functional purpose beyond that.

But, in a gradual process, women began to seek employment, initially in the spheres traditionally identified as areas of female employment. Teaching and nursing were the primary contexts of female employment. Eventually women took to medicine as doctors. Women who did not have a worthwhile education, found avenues of employment in the plantation sector and in the urban industrial sector.

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In the initial stages of employment of women, the pattern of employment took on mostly the form of substitution. In nursing for instance, local women began to substitute for foreign persons who were the majority of nurses in the early 1920's. These non-Sri Lankan nurses were mostly nuns belonging to various religious orders.

The employment of women, evolved into a predominant social phenomenon, only after the Independence in 1948. In the 1950's in Sri Lanka, free education was introduced from the kindergarten to the University with no sex discrimination. A fair proportion of women began to receive higher education. When they entered the work-force of the country, they needed employment in keeping with the higher levels of education they were able to achieve.

The census of 1981 - which is the latest available - revealed that one-half of the population in Sri Lanka consists of women. Of the ranks of the employed in Sri Lanka 30 per cent are women, sixty-five percent of the employed women are in semi-skilled and un-skilled grades. Today too the majority are employed in teaching and nursing vocations. Women in these fields account for 35 per cent of all the employed women - There is hardly any sector in which women are not employed today. Women serve in all three Armed Services.

In some ways women in Sri Lanka have taken pioneering steps in asserting themselves. In 1927 when the Donoughmore Commission was conducting its enquiries, with a view to recommending Political Reforms, a Women's Organization was set up to give evidence before the Commission. Sri Lanka is among the earliest countries in the world to win Universal Franchise. As early as 1931, two women members were returned by popular vote to the Legislative Assembly. They were Mrs. Adleine Molamure and Mrs. Nasum Saravanamuttu.

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Sri Lanka possesses the singular honour of producing the first woman Prime Minister of the world - Mrs. Sirima Bandaranayake who headed the Sri Lanka Freedom Party Government in 1960.

The policy of open economy that is being implemented since the present Government came into power in 1977, has provided employment to women on an unprecedented scale.

In the sectors of engineering, surveying and scientific services, women receive ever increasing opportunities of employment. Sri Lankan women find a place in State Administrative Services. The Tourist Industry of Sri Lanka, a branch of economic activity of rather recent origin has afforded extensive employment opportunities to women. They are employed in the Tourist Industry even at high executive levels. Banking Institutions both foreign and local provide employment-placement to women almost on a par with men. In the field of public Relations most places have been acquired by women. Secretarial work is by and large an area dominated by women.

C. Women in Media

The employment of women in Media in Sri Lanka came about originally as an imperceptible and unplanned process. About three to four decades ago, the Media institutions that could generate employment were primarily Newspaper establishments and the one and only Broadcasting Station, which at that time functioned as a Government department.

In the Newspaper Establishments of Sri Lanka in the 1940's and the 1950's the occasional woman-employee was very much a transitory character. She would come in for a short period, either prior to marriage or after completing her higher education while awaiting some permanent placement. the woman journalist who was determined to make a career of Media employment was rather a rare species.

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The mode of approach adopted by women to Media employment at that time, at Newspaper Offices, could be described as one of 'coming and going'.

But the attitude of women who took to a media-career at the Broadcasting Station at that time was slightly different. Employment there, bred a sense of permanency. This persuaded the women who sought employment in that Media Establishment to make a career of their employment. The temptation to stay on was stronger there, than at a Newspaper office of the Forties and the Fifties.

Those women who sought employment in Media institutions in the sixties and in later times, were persuaded by a new philosophy of life and new imperatives. The economic pressures made it essential for them to add whatever they could to family incomes, since the husband, the traditional bread-winner, found it difficult to maintain the home, in an inflationary context, solely through his income. This new breed of women who sought media employment were determined to make an established career out of their job.

The introduction of television, the expansion of sound broadcasting services, and the proliferation of mini-publications, made it possible for more and more women to take to media professions. The two State-owned Television Stations of Sri Lanka, namely the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation and the Independent Television Network, brought into being a cluster of other television-related organizations. These included Private and State Television Companies, producers of various television programmes, advertising material and documentaries. In most of these set-ups women were preferred for employment.

The following figures indicate the present level of employment of women in media institutions :

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At Associated Newspapers of Ceylon (ANCL) 170 Males are employed in the Editorial Department to 40 female employees. According to these figures 19 per cent of the editorial employees are females. Of the Editorial personnel at the Independent Group of Newspapers 30 per cent are women. At the Upali Group of Newspapers the employment rate of women is 7 per cent. At Veerakesari, of 24 Editorial Staffers only one is a woman which works out to a rate of 4 per cent.

At the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, 28 per cent of the Media personnel are women. A female employment rate of 17 per cent is recorded for the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation.

In Television establishments and in the Broadcasting Corporation, women work as producers and production assistants as well. In these two areas of electronic journalism, women hold technical positions too.

Occasionally women are employed in Media Executive Grades. The Deputy Director General of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, for instance, is a woman, who started her media career in Newspaper Journalism.

In television, women media-professionals are employed as Newscasters, programme producers and production assistants.

Some women employed in media professions in Television have become national celebrities.

D. Access of Women to Journalism and to Communication Education

Today's women in Sri Lanka have access to journaistic positions at all levels. It is more or less the usual arrangement for a woman to be the Editor-in-Chief of a Women's Journal. But those exceptionally gifted women have access to the chair of Editor even of consumer journals and Newspapers that do not necessarily specialize on women's affairs.

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The management of Media Organizations in Sri Lanka does not have any bias at all against women being employed as journalists. On the other hand, some at Management level in Media Organizations display a special preference for women journalists under certain circumstances.

In Sri Lankan Newspaper establishments, a few decades ago, the Sub-Editors' Desk was considered an exclusive male citadel. But, today women journalists have access to this sector of the profession and work harmoniously and efficiently with their male colleagues.

The access of women to communication Education has to be considered as part of the larger picture of available Communication Education in Sri Lanka.

The history of Communication Education in Sri Lanka is relatively short. Formal arrangements for imparting Communication Education came into being from around 1969. That year marks the first Communications Course on record, at Higher Education level, in Sri Lanka.

i. Junior University Communication Course

The first-ever course in Communications Education in Sri Lanka was launched in 1969 at the Junior University at Dehiwela. The Junior University System was inaugurated at that time to train personnel for certain specific professions.

The original group selected for Communications Education at that Institute, consisted of men and women almost in equal proportion. Eleven were men and ten were women.

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The core-curriculum of the course consisted in Principles of Mass Communications, Journalistic Studies, News gathering and News Reporting, Familiarisation Studies of Cinema, Broadcasting, Public Relations and Advertising, Creative Writing and Sub-editing. The course had areas of instruction in Photo-Journalism as well.

Over and above the Theoretical knowledge practical in-job training also was provided at Media Establishments. Those who followed the course were also required to produce a Dissertation on a selected subject.

What is especially note worthy about the course was the fact that both men and women had equal access to all areas of the course.

Unfortunately the Junior University System was discontinued after 1970.

ii. University Course in Communication

The only comprehensive course in Communication leading to a first degree is conducted at the Kelaniya University. The course was inaugurated in 1972. This course is exclusively for the undergraduates of the University of Kelaniya. Candidates for the course are selected after the first exam in Art. The Communications students can read the subject either for a General First Degree or for a specialized First Degree.

This Communications Course is open to both Men and Women and is conducted in both Sinhala and English.

Some women graduates of this course have found placement in Media Establishments as Journalists.

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iii. Diploma Course in Mass Media - Colombo University

In 1986, a course in Mass Media was launched at the University of Colombo. This course leads to a Diploma Award.

The Candidates for the Course have been selected from among Mid-career Journalistic practitioners. The course is conducted in two language streams - Sinhala and English. In both these streams, Men and Women are almost of equal proportion. This reflects in turn the fact that a goodly number of women are employed today in Media Jobs. These candidates are required to obtain practical training at Media Institutions in addition to following theoretical lectures. They are also required to produce a Dissertation as part fulfillment of Final Examination requirements. The Mid-career Journalists receiving training at this Diploma Course include practitioners in electronic media as well.

iv. Mass Media Course at Vocational Training Centre, Gangaramaya

Periodic Mass Media training Courses are conducted at the Vocational Training Centre at Gangaramaya, Colombo. Both men and women have access to these courses. These training courses provide broad-based orientation in Mass Communication and are directed towards the developing of basic communications skills.

In the two courses that have so far been conducted women have participated without any restriction.

v. Writership Course at Sri Jayewardenepura University

A recently launched Communications Course at Sri Jayewardenepura University, focuses special attention on creative writing. Both men and women are enrolled in this course. Only mid-career journalists

In recent times, women in Media professions have received the opportunity of obtaining training in various aspects of communication. Women media professionals have been sent out for communications training to the Federal Republic of Germany, Japan and Malaysia on something of a continuing basis. In addition they receive Communications Training from time to time, in other countries as well. Regional Training Courses in Communication have begun to take place in the countries of the SAARC Sector. Women journalists from Sri Lanka have already participated in SAARC seminars on Malnutrition.

As things are, women journalists in Sri Lanka are likely to receive concentrated training on communication issues and Media themes selected as areas that especially matter to women in the SAARC area.

Three Media Establishments in Sri Lanka, - namely the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd. (ANCL), Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC), and Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) conduct in-house Training programmes on an adhoc basis. At times, foreign experts too participate in these activities. Women media professionals too benefit from these training courses.

Sri Lanka Television Training Institute (SLTTI) conducts courses specifically for Television personnel. In most training programmes conducted by the SLTTI, women trainees are included.

In Sri Lanka so far, there have been no note-worthy communications courses exclusively for women media personnel.

E. Skills Development

Communications Education aimed at improving the performance of women journalists who are already in media professions has to concentrate the development of a series of essential skills. These skills could be summed up as followed.

1. The skill in developing News Sense
2. Creative Writing Skills
3. Skill in acquiring knowledge regarding current affairs and contemporary world trends, and
4. Interviewing skills.

Training modules to develop these skills should be included in any curriculum for communications Education. In courses conducted in Communications Education, a special segment should concentrate on sources of International News, and on the skills of recognizing significant news. Creative writing skills include effective reporting, editorial writing, writing news objectively, accurately and yet in a manner that would arrest attention, feature-writing and headline writing.

Women Media practitioners should be especially trained in the skill of acquiring knowledge about the world they live in. International affairs and significant world trends include developments in frontiers of Science and Technology in computers and automation and in Space Exploration. Outstanding issues like Population Growth, World Malnutrition, Arms Race, Regional Organizations (ASEAN; SAARC) etc, should be given concentrated attention in Communication Education.

In Training Courses for women in media, training and work -shop modules should be devised to develop these skills.

One major reason why women in media have not been able to achieve higher grades in media vocations is their one-sided view of exclusive women's issues, neglecting those other areas that matter for a holistic human view of life.

Although women media personnel are called upon to conduct interviews their interviewing skills are not sharpened to the proper trim of efficiency. As a result, interviews that could be lively and dramatic do not rise above routine level. Here too, workshop sessions will help.

Women who are already in media professions have seen these as the areas in which they need improved skills. This is evident from the attitudes of women who participate in Media Training course.

F. Portrayal of Women in Media

As an inevitable result of the lack of a wider view in women in media the woman portrayed in Media, in most instances turns out to be a limited person.

Women's journals portray 'woman' as being in a perpetual pursuit of middle class social values. The Women's Journals brought out by the Upali Group of Newspapers experienced a serious circulation drop when it discarded the traditional women's interests like Cookery, dress making

and beauty care. This journal did away with these, ~~on~~ⁱⁿ the assumption that women today needed a deeper awareness of current issues. But, the circulation drop proved them wrong.

Although some Women's Journals try to treat such issues as psychological problems of adolescent girls, conjugal problems, drug addiction, job opportunities, laws that affect women the evidence is that women prefer the traditional women's features. Love-lorn columns are favourite reading.

Over ~~and~~ above exclusive women's journals, most consumer newspapers have sections devoted to women. Even in these the woman is portrayed as a person interested mainly in dresses, food and beauty.

Such issues as Child Care and Malnutrition are taken up for authoritative discussion occasionally. But generally the woman reader does not seem to be interested in anything but a narrow range of issues. Women employed in West Asia have become a frequent topic in women's journals. Perhaps this is one of the areas in which today's woman-reader is interested.

In Sound Broadcasting, there has been a women's feature sustained over a long period of time. A semblance of seriousness is evident in this programme. The portrait of the woman emerging from this feature is a slightly upgraded version of the reader of women's journals

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The woman in television is a composite of commercials portraying women. A good eighty per cent of Television Advertisements have women as their central attraction. Cosmetics, Textiles, Food varieties, soft drinks, and even Video Cassettes use the woman as the central motif. Women invariably come into Milk Food Advertisements.

Since there is no special women's programme on Television yet, we have to assume that the projection of women in Television commercials, is the portrayal of women in that medium. If that were so, the woman portrayed there is a person who is perpetually in pursuit of glamour, food and drinks cosmetics and clothes.