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By

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WOMEN, MEDIA AND PROSTITUTION : THE CASE OF SRI LANKA

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"The full moon shining over that city reddened by the lustre of the rays of red gems of the pandals constantly caused doubt in the minds of the courtesans whether it was the morning sun". (Kawsilumina¹ of 13th century)

The above and similar ones from Sri Lankan poetry of 13th to 15th centuries indicate the presence of "courtesans" in the cities of ancient Sri Lanka. "courtesans" and their beauty have been sometimes extolled in literature, but often described as ignoble. It is clearly evident that prostitution existed as a social institution, although on a small scale. Connotations attached to the activities of prostitutes even in the religious literature, however, were different from the moralistic tenor of Western literature, say of the 19th century.

REALITY OF PROSTITUTION IN SRI LANKA

There are no serious studies, hard facts and figures on prostitution with which we could compare the depiction of prostitutes in the media. One study that claims to have based on an extensive survey is blatantly feudentious and sensational as much as the coverage in the media.² The most reliable information on the number of prostitutes in the country, could be drawn from a few studies done on women prisoners.³ They indicate that the number of women prisoners at any time in Sri Lanka are in the order of 300 (100 convicted and 200 unconvicted), ^{and around 200 prostitutes.} out of a total prison population of 12,000 of which 6000 are awaiting trial. Even if the total figure of prostitutes could be 50 times the number that have been caught, it would not be more than 10,000.⁴

Some of the major factors that could have led to an increase in prostitution are the increase of urbanisation in Sri Lanka, mobility of men and women and tourism. Urbanisation rates in Sri Lanka have been significantly

low compared to other Asian countries. Thus the growth of population in Colombo has been minimal compared to cities as Bangkok, Manila, Delhi, Calcutta or Bombay. Therefore the number of women migrating into the city from rural areas in search of jobs and subsequently taking to prostitution would be small.

Tourism grew rapidly for some time with a rate of growth as high as 25% a year with tourists numbering around 400,000 a year. Although there are no open symbols of sex for sale with Girlie Bars as in the case of Bangkok or Manila, prostitution is becoming a developed arm of tourism with women from different socio-economic backgrounds catering for different types of tourists. Film and stage stars, models, bored housewives and women from "respectable" families cater for big hotels. It has been revealed in interviews with prostitutes that leaders of prostitutes' mafias control the business of prostitution in big hotels. It has also been found that taxi drivers and other employees in the tourist industry make an extra income by supplying prostitutes to tourists. A study of the impact of tourism on a village in the Southern Province in Sri Lanka revealed that the prostitutes in the village came from the lowest socio-economic strata in the village and that they do so because of dire poverty. Prostitution is the only income-generating activity open to those without any financial resources.

With the introduction of the open economy and the growth of foreign and local business enterprises, expatriate businessmen and the local nouveau riche have given a boost to prostitution in the recent past.

Girls working in the Free Trade Zone are generally viewed as women of easy virtue. Except for the detection of a few cases of V.D., however, there is no evidence for the widespread of prostitution (Newspaper ads for brides sometimes mention "No FTZ girls")

A Phenomenon which has grown with tourist industry is boy prostitution. Some European travel brochures advertise Sri Lanka as a haven for homosexuals, ^{giving details about boys who are available.} It has been estimated that 2000 boy prostitutes are found in Sri Lanka, half the number being in Colombo.

DEPICTION OF PROSTITUTION IN THE MEDIA

The depiction of prostitution in the media reflects partly the factual basis of prostitution and partly the audience to whom the media is addressed to in terms of class, language and the medium. By and large, it could be said that the Sinhala press carries stories of prostitution more than

the English or Tamil press. This is partly due to the class character as well as the cultural milieu each of these media represent. (Of the three major newspaper groups, one is State-owned and the other two are private establishments.)

Education in schools and Universities in Sri Lanka has been in national languages of Sinhala and Tamil for nearly 50 years. English language newspapers generally address the upper middle classes who still control significant opinion in the country while the Sinhala language newspapers cater for the middle class and the below. The Sinhala language newspapers contain a wide spectrum of locally written articles from the sensational to the more serious, although the more serious are not sufficiently technical unlike those syndicated columns from abroad that appear in English language newspapers. A middle rung broad spectrum populism seems to be the dominant tone of the Sinhala language newspapers. (There is no dictonomy between mass newspapers and quality newspapers as in Europe).

These observations are generally true also in the depiction of prostitution. News stories with sensational headlines often with highly moralistic undertones mixed with occasional background information seem to mark the situation in the Sinhala ^{as well as English} language newspapers. Some samples of headlines from the Sinhala language newspapers are given below-

"Twenty seven women remanded"

"Two brothels raided"

"Several shanty dwellings turned into brothels"

"Ten students arrested in restaurant"

Prostitution has rarely been a subject of discussion and debate in the media except in reference to Sri Lankan women working in West Asia as housemaids. (Rape seems a subject of discussion generally when the woman raped is killed). During the recent past, there have been two instances which brought prostitution to the fore and at the same time diluted the seriousness of the issue by sensationalizing and exaggerating facts and figures.

The first is a reportage of a recent public seminar on social diseases ^{which} was slanted to arouse public opinion on the issue of prostitution. The seminar was given by medical personnel and social workers and one of the speakers had made a casual remark to the effect that a large number of non-professional prostitutes in the city of Colombo could be University students and girls working in the Free Trade Zone. The news story of the seminar on social diseases in one Sinhala paper focussed not on the major content of the seminar, but on the 'casual remark' and captioned "University Students in prostitution". The news item led to a furore among the Sinhala readers with prompt letters to the editor and features articles with strong moralistic undertones and reflecting shock and disgust. A follow up article by a staff writer of the same newspaper

containing interviews with a cross section of medical and University personnel revealed that it was a story without foundation. Medical officer who was alleged to have originated this story, when interviewed stated that he had come across only one female student out of over 100 VD patients seen during a period of three years. Some of the ^{University Counsellors} interviewed also pointed out that it was possibly a smear campaign against the vast majority of rural students (who form the bulk of the University population today). It is significant however, that no University student bodies protested against the original news story.

^{The second instance is in reference to}
One of the most sensational series on prostitution that appeared in Sinhala language newspapers which masqueraded as sociological articles by a professor in a University. Taken as a whole, they purported to give case histories, facts and figures of the ^{in the country} moral decay, and covered matters such as prostitution, sexual promiscuity and social diseases. Many of the stories and statistics were blatantly false that the sociological Association of Sri Lanka made a public statement drawing attention to the series as being non-scientific and bound to mislead the public.

The articles claimed that there were 25,000 prostitutes in Colombo alone, where the total female population is around 125,000. If we consider the age group prostitutes could belong to, every other woman living in Colombo is a prostitute.

A popular mode of coverage of prostitution in the Sinhala newspapers is the presentation of life histories in the form of life stories. Certain Sinhala newspapers, specially the only evening newspaper exploit the sensational to the maximum with conventional descriptions of irresistible lust of women who turn prostitutes reducing almost to the level of sex thrillers. Some of the short stories deal with the theme of poverty as cause for prostitution and evoke deep sympathy for the victims. One Sinhala language newspaper carried several true life histories in the form of short stories which became conversation pieces among the Sinhala readers.

Articles analysing prostitution as a social and a women's rights issue had appeared rarely in Sinhala ^{or English} newspapers. Two out of four male journalists when asked as to the reason for the absence of analytical articles stated that it was due to the lack of space. The answer of the other two was that it was no priority issue in the country today. Three out of four female journalists thought that it was no priority issue for the dominant male editors. One felt it was due to the lack of space.

It was only after the women's issue came to the forefront that the women's newspapers in sinhala (there is only one newspaper in English which caters only for beauty and fashions) began to carry articles on prostitution analysing it as a social and a women's rights issue.

It should be noted, however, that not a single of over 50 established women's organizations has made any reference to the presence of prostitution in Sri Lanka, leave alone discussing the issue. ^(The Sri Lanka Women's Conference had devoted a project on rehabilitation of female prisoners) is interesting to note in this regard that the Women's Bureau carefully avoided even the phrase 'Violence against women' and instead used 'Women and safety' as the theme for the Women's Day celebrations of 1984.

It is even more interesting to note that a recent poster put out by the Rural Women's Organizations Network that contained the slogan 'Rural Women unite against violence' roused the anger of some women leaders of established women's organizations.

Only the alternative feminist groups, such as Kantha Handa, Kantha Shakti, Progrseeive Women's Front, ^{and the Rural Women's Organizations Network} have focussed on prostitution and other forms of violence. Their journals and newsletters regularly highlight these issues from a women's point of view.

The three top decision makers of the three major newspaper establishments, in interviews with the present writer presented a cautious attitude on the whole. All three thought that media could not possibly do more than they do at present. They also thought prostitution is not a social priority at the present juncture in Sri Lanka. It was clearly evident that they were on the defensive when they emphasized that prostitution is portrayed in their newspapers in the most possible humanitarian manner.

It is clear that there is still a long way to go till major moulders of opinion are sufficiently conscientised to present the issue of prostitution in a proper perspective. However there are hopeful signs among some of the younger writers, both male and female that such perspectives have begun to emerge. Even with a high coverage in a proper perspective, prostitution will remain a problem until the restructuring of the socio-economic system takes place.