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Mass Media & The Status Of Women In Sri Lanka

By

Chitra Ranawake
The very fact that I am here with you at this Seminar is an indication of the status of women in my country. Obviously we enjoy independence and some recognition otherwise I would not be let loose at an international gathering.

When collecting my thoughts to talk to you today I discovered some strange facts which may be unique to women in my country. Chronologically our women delicate, docile creatures that they usually are, are far ahead of our sisters in the so-called advanced West. Apart from the much bruited fact that Sri Lanka produced the world's first woman Prime Minister Mrs. Bandaranaike, our first woman State Councillor was chosen in 1936. We enjoyed the right to vote in 1931. Over 50 years ago, and men and women have equal rights to appear as candidates for election to the legislature and to public offices.

In marriage the Kandyan or woman of the up-country enjoys the privilege of keeping her maiden name even after marriage and she can get a divorce just on her say-so, if the marriage does not please her. Men and women enjoy equal opportunities for education, just as increasingly more avenues are open for employment.

We have come a long way from the woman's role of home-maker, wife and mother who if she is allowed to go out at all it was only as a teacher or nurse.

But these privileges seem to be layered according to education and social status — the status being determined a great deal by the possession of wealth or ability to earn. Our status goes back to long before the 20th Century. Buddhism, the main religion of the land gives great honour to a woman. In fact a mother is regarded as second only to the Buddha & his Sangha — that is, his bhikkus or monks.

Why then make such a point of the status of women?

I am reminded of a charming story coming down from the time of the Buddha. According to the Sutta, Soma, a highly educated advanced bhikkuni or nun, tries seriously to attain the ultimate in spiritual perfection, or arhatship. But Mara, interpreted variously as temptation or death, tries to turn her from her austere and self-inflicted goal. Come Soma, he whispers evilly, you are beautiful, you can do so much, enjoy such pleasures, make men mad. And she reports: "Iththi bhavo Kim Kaira" — what matters if I am a woman?
On the face of it "we have it good". There are outstanding women in all the professions. Recently the ranks of doctors and lawyers swelled with a larger number of women. We now have a women's corps in the army; a special reserve police, pilots and racing drivers; women in management and boards, chairmen and ministers—but surprisingly, as yet no Secretaries. I wonder why is it because they are the real go-getters in a Ministry?

Rather paradoxically the media was not so well off. While Radio has more than its share of women directors, even a Deputy Director General, the Press has lagged far behind. There are only two women editors—the earlier one is the Vernacular—but they have to fight every inch of the way. Unexpectedly again it is the mass-media that perpetuates the image of the limited woman with her avid interest in household chores, servants, and her determined slavery to demanding fashion. In response to this 'merry-go-round' the newspapers continue to dish out household recipes, beauty problems, and gossip; and the editors, usually males, keep this low-level going because it ensures the circulation of such 'tags'.

As I said at the beginning Sri Lanka started with outstanding women at the top over half a century ago. In fact we had heroines in history—inspiring Queens like Vihara Maha Devi who is immortalised in a lovely park; a daring poetess Gajanan Nona, who even had a Colonial Secretary for a lover in colonial times; but now when everything goes at the speed of a jet (or should I say rocket) women in certain respects remain static.

This anomaly has had fierce attention ever since the present government under the inspiring leadership of President Jayawardene formed a Women's Bureau, headed by a super-efficient Director Mrs. Vinitha Jayasinghe, who I am proud to say was a final year student of mine at school.

She and her go-ahead bureau were the catalyst for change. In 1978 she organised several seminars and meetings with the blessings of the Ministry of Plan Implementation and boosted her trial with full publicity in the mass media. First, with expert provision she scored a bull's-eye by training her guns on the Press. She got various vociferous members of our fraternity—who should I say sorority—and a highly charged Lady Professor, who though as feminine as a feather, in our first perhaps only powerful Women's Libber.

She behaved like a shoot-out.
With eyes blazing she shot down the offending members of the print media—papers, paperbacks and comics, for allowing women to be presented as inconsequential bits of fluff; limited in their outlook; or only as traps of the unwary male. Another stereotype is the woman portrayed by cartoonists—I still shudder when I remember the proud mother who produces her one and only for the admiration of her guest. "Nilmini is so clever" she boasts. "Say something in Algebra to this Aunty, darling" she croons.

The next most guilty, if not chief accused, at least an important accessory to the film, was the Film. Till not so long ago, our women were all victims of a fate worse than death—the cliche here is the poor village girl who was the helpless victim of the rich householder or his son; the poor wife left at home while her conscienceless husband goes the round of nightclubs, sampling the tasty morsels there—(here too the calculating female) or in else in a positive role the gangsters moll who uses her curves, not her muscle, to get what she wants from mesmerised men.

So in 1979 the Women's Bureau set up the points of its fortress to do battle—the other forces being the Radio, the Press assisted by UNICEF.
The continued success of this strategy for improvement in our women's condition proves that not all seminars are just so much hot air.

This three-pronged attack, initiated by the Women's Bureau has as its aim the recognition of women in all walks of life; the provision of equal opportunity, equal wages, and greater participation in various spheres of national life. It very wisely also seeks to preserve the Sri Lankan culture and tradition in moral and ethical values as far as it affects women in the role of modernisation. This means that we do not lose any of our traditional values but rather gain through the new avenues opened to us. It seeks briefly to have women treated as people and not as a separate sub-species to be gazed at.

By involving all the agencies of communication, the Women's Bureau with the blessings of the Government now attempts to involve and inform women of steps taken towards developing them as an integral and important part of Sri Lanka. The media and the Bureau now have a symbiotic role, each supporting and feeding the other. But this happy state of affairs came about successfully from after 1978. In that year definite steps were taken to take stock of the position at that time.

These were representative from the Press and Radio - high ranking steps / I should emphasise and certain facts emerged.

The position was further complicated by the fact that there are several ethnic and religious groups each with their own language. So our combined efforts had to be at several levels, and in several tongues - a fascinating challenge. The official language in Sinhala spoken by the multitude of the people who are also basically Buddhist. Next comes Tamil with its roots in India and its influence in the plantation country - that is in the central hills which cultivate tea, and some rubber land, and concentrate in the northern peninsula of Jaffna and in the North East coastal towns of Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Then comes English, designated the link language, which provides communication between the two races and helps conduct commerce within and internationally.
The number of females is only slightly less than the males, assessed at 49.7% at the last count. The literacy rate is 71%. Differences in education at urban and rural levels are negligible. What does make a difference is the income level, and the social attitudes towards women's employment. Even when a woman is required to work, she stands a much better chance of acceptance if it can be done part-time, or better still at home. As a result the various forces have combined to point to new avenues of income.

The Sinhala Service now proudly presents women in new spheres of activity. In February a Muslim woman discussed how she saved Rs.3,000/- from her first agricultural venture, then went into sugar cane cultivation, and now she contemplates buying equipment which will help her extract bagasse from the molasses and guarantee further prosperity. All this while honouring her traditions, and remaining strictly within the confines of her home and garden.

Caste, which was division created originally by profession over the centuries, became a social distinction decreeing that some were high and exalted, certain caste of drummers were confined to playing their drums at temples, processions and ceremonial occasions. Their women were fated, by lack of education and discrimination, to prostitution. Now with the new rural societies which are formed in these areas, they have been taught cottage crafts as a source of income. Weekly feature programmes have gone on since to meet and interview and highlight the success, advancement and the adventures of this new band of women. They, who by lack of education, opportunity and social perseverance have been forced to remain in the shadows, who are limited in their freedom, are now allowed to go and learn, acquire new skills and contribute to the upliftment of the family and eventually to the nation. The improvement comes first in the home with better sanitation - pits and commodes instead of arbitrary defecation, which leads to hookworm and a variety of bowel diseases. Water is boiled and made safe. Children are given balanced simple diets - men are set at ease because of the financial responsibility is no longer their single burden. This gives a chance for the children to be better educated and contribute more effectively to their country's progress. And this cycle continues with greater momentum with the years.

Along with health and education comes families which are better cared for - better because they are smaller and planned for.

Family planning of all twentieth century improvements has been powerfully helped by the media. Women, singly and in groups, avidly
absorb the information and advice given by PF units. They are eager to
discuss their preferences and experiences and there has been a significant
drop of the growth in the population in the last few years.

As the children grow up and are placed in school, the women are free to
go to jobs even at night. The Free Trade Zone has opened up thousands
of new jobs to our women. An international commercial complex, its
business hums right round the clock. Pay is good and now hundreds of
young women rush out at the end of their shift and walk fearlessly
along the roads even late at night. Producers doing weekly feature
programmes visit these women on site at various projects, eloquently
prove the dramatic emergence of women from poverty and unemployment
to economic stability and participation. These examples imaginatively
dramatised over radio are an inspiration to yet other women who are
perhaps too timid to venture out and who need encouragement and moral
support before they do.

One weak area that has still not been effectively influenced over the
years is, the enrollment of women in decision-making jobs. In the
mercantile sector the prejudice is palpable. There are few women at
management level, and even fewer chairmen or directors of business combines, if any. The only possibility is "Swaraj Aakhyawa", that is doing your
own thing as they say in the west. Its alright if you are your own
boss, but try confronting a male director with a mike or a note paper
and pencil and he squirms, fingers his collar and thinks its time for
a drink.
Sri Lanka has no real militant Women Libbers. Our methods are most subtle, and infinitely more deadly. Let us take a look at the Tamil speaking section next. This community is an interesting admixture of the old and the new. Tradition demanding the modesty and chastity of the woman is not jeopardised, but occasionally the highly educated Tamil lady is able to blaze a trail of glory without sacrificing the cultural ideal. A case in point is our Lady Ambassador in Germany. She is a career diplomat, a bachelor girl, the one and only child of a fire-eating politician. She is able to fulfil her diplomatic duties with gracious dignity. The educated Tamils have brilliant doctors and eye specialists, one of our leading gynecologists is a woman, we have lawyers and lady MPs and a few Professors. But they are cushioned and protected by family and strict tradition in every other respect.

The Tamil Media Service concentrates on upholding the position of women as loving loyal homemakers. This aspect is covered in a weekly programme "Kun Kunam". They have expert advice on home gardening, handicrafts and family planning. But the trust of many of the support programmes still maintains the cloistered lives and virtues of women; and dramas depict the disasters that await women who flout parental opinion. In the last few years the Tamil Services devote special attention and care to the less privileged semi-educated rural women living in unhealthy clusters on estates. In an entertaining form they are given detailed instruction on environmental health, child care and gardening. There are weekly half hour programmes on the commercial beam. These have proved to be highly popular and women are now shyly coming out of their shells to contribute and share their gains. They are grateful for gradually being made aware of economical ways of living within their limited income, and at being trained in adding to it by poultry farming and other homed oriented businesses. They are taught to keep clean, control their families, and significantly of separating superstition from modern medical and scientific fact. They are provided a little window on the world and are learning to peer out and enter the mainstream of national development.

The enthusiastic listener response, mainly through letters, shows the steadily increasing awareness of the world around them. Stemming from this because of a shared language, Tamil, is the world of the Muslim women of the Islamic faith. The Muslims of Sri Lanka trace their ancestry to the Arabs, Indians and the Javanese. The Muslims while intermingling with the national culture have retained their religious and cultural identity, while accepting the fact that...
they cannot be a group apart from the integration processes in national
development. On the whole they have mainly contributed to the different
spheres and enjoy a high status as an intrinsic part of national
society. Yet there are regional differences, in customs, ritual, marriage
formalities and attitudes among Muslims concentrated in pockets in
certain areas of our island. This has resulted in diverse opinion and
views on specific issues pertaining to Muslim society in general.

Newly emergent Muslim women societies are playing an active role
in ensuring that while preserving the Islamic way of life, the position
of their women should be improved. The Chairman of the Hijra Committee
celebrated its 15th century by appointing an action committee to take
up cudgels on behalf of Islamic women. Education, social economic
factors, legal and related fields and research were demarcated as the
special areas of action. This in conjunction with the activities of the
Women's Bureau highlighted in the press and radio continuously play
a significant role. However the Muslim Service proper is guilty of
restraining women actions considerably.

The English Service programmes on radio on the other hand are to
a great extent a symbol of how smoothly women are forging ahead. For
instance it was discovered there were no "Women" programmes but rather,
intricate and informative programmes for the entire family. Why a
programme for women when there aren't any programmes for men, the director
asked impishly. Rather, special areas of interest like medical and
child care, marriage problems, home economics, nutrition, career
opportunities and so on are slotted into magazine programmes with
a wider reach. The other language services defended their stand by
saying that the rural women prefer special programmes with "homely"
material as there was not that degree of sophistication among the
listeners. The English Service has invaded the private sector, button-
holing the evasive chairman, and astute general manager who keep
women out of key roles by introducing cunning provisos which automatically
"include Women out". Radio challenges this attitude and pin-points
discrimination

It also attacks through its various literary programmes, the sale
uxpin of pulp literature in which harmful images are projected, and even
its rival media, the press which continues to denigrate women by placing
scantily-clad woman on a motor car, with a double-barrelled comment
on "superb lines and chassis built for comfort." A woman is not a
mere sex symbol.

The English Services particularly aid in co-ordinating the work
of international bodies like UNICEF who naturally communicate in the link
language English.
The over-all picture you will agree is rosy. I have been asked by people of many advanced countries how this is so. I find several reasons. Among them that our women, though they do important jobs, gladly assign a supplementary or even superior role to the men of the house. After all, what is nicer than a strong man arms round your waist at the end of a tiresome day. And Sri Lankan women, like all our Eastern sisters, have the imagination to remain completely feminine.

I'd like to end with the full line I quoted at the beginning. "Ithiki Bhavo Kim Kaira", but this time I'd like to add my own personal jet-age interpretation "I'm a Woman - so what?"