

50% OF THE POPULATION, 50% OF THE POWER

Key points from a conversation on feminist movements and leadership in Sri Lanka with Dr. Sudharshini Fernandopulle, Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy and Mohammad Naciri.

THE ISSUE

Women make up over **50%** of Sri Lanka's population.

We have never had more than **7%** of women in national legislature since 1931.

Yet, only **5.3%** of women are in parliament.

WHY ARE WOMEN UNDERREPRESENTED IN POLITICS?

- Party systems do not provide space for women and they rarely hold position as office bearers.
 - Preconceived notions of women - women are seen as unable to compete because of a dual burden of caring for family and so are largely limited to mid-level positions.
 - Women within parties are confined to women and children's issues, and supporting male candidates.
 - Violence against women in politics.
- However, women who are elected remain in their positions because they have proved themselves to be successful.**

PROGRESS MADE FOR WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

25% quota for women in local government.

More women trained to lead and enter politics.

More awareness on women's rights among men and women.



WOMEN, PEACE & SECURITY

Women affected by conflict are trained to do low-skilled & low-paid jobs, which lead to micro-credit loans and debt traps.

Peacebuilding processes must involve more women at decision-making levels, on peace, security and development.

Meaningful leadership of women is vital for genuine and sustained peace.



HOW HAVE THINGS CHANGED?

40 years ago, women who were in positions of power followed in the image of male leadership – with bravado.

Women in leadership now - recently seen within a COVID-19 context - shows an effective feminist leadership style which is empathetic, collaborative, inclusive and goal oriented.

MORE WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

- Introduce stronger action to ensure women are included at all decision-making levels.
- Encourage men to champion equal representation from within political parties and places of power.

We need to ensure that 50% of the population is equally represented.

SHARE THE CARE

Key points from a conversations on unpaid care work and its implications for women's economic empowerment in Sri Lanka with Dr. Ramani Gunatilaka, Nayani Peiris and Prashani Dias.

THE ISSUE

In Sri Lanka, women's involvement in unpaid care work is

27%

higher than that of men and boys.

This impacts women's economic empowerment.

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

- Most women who work are pushed into sub-par work within the formal labour force.
- Financial independence of a woman is a vital part of a family's foundation - it brings opportunities and benefits everyone in the family.

What is important about women's ability to earn their own income is that they are independent to make their own decisions. Women who want to work should have the choice and equal opportunity to do so.

LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION: A SHIFT IN PERCEPTION

There is a gradual shift in the way society perceives women in the workplace. Several job positions which were originally reserved for men, are now opening up for women.

Employers are gradually moving towards enabling a diverse and inclusive culture with more employment opportunities for women.



ROLE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR

- Implement anti-sexual harassment policies and support employees who have experienced domestic violence.
- Introduce flexible hours and work-from-home options and provide child care facilities.
- Challenge stereotypes to create a diverse and inclusive workforce.

We should be bold enough to make ambitious targets to support women employees.

IMPLICATIONS OF UNPAID CARE WORK

Care burdens and housework often fall on women. Therefore working women face a triple burden.

The stress of coping with a job while taking care of a family, can be overwhelming and affect mental health.

Women do have commitments to family within their community; to enable them to excel in their careers and break the glass ceiling, they need a strong support system.



MOVING FORWARD

- Adequate female representation in parliament.
- Reform labour legislation.
- Share the care work within families.
- **Enable women to enter into roles where they can progress in long-term career paths.**

LOCKING IN NORMS = LOCKING IN VIOLENCE

Key points from a conversation on gender-based violence in Sri Lanka with Aritha Wickramasinghe, Zahrah Rizwan and Esther Hoole.

THE ISSUE

1 in 5 women in Sri Lanka have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime.



Since the outbreak of COVID-19, gender-based violence has intensified.

HARMFUL GENDER NORMS PERPETUATE VIOLENCE

- Stereotypical norms for men are that they must be masculine and dominant, and women must be passive and quiet. They make no room for those outside this binary.
- This attribution of gender norms and roles creates a drastic power imbalance between the genders. This creates a sense of entitlement in men, while women are conditioned to tolerate violence.

There are direct consequences of how we impose gender norms, and in its worst form is violence. We have to acknowledge that a disproportionate and huge amount of violence is committed by men, against women.

PSYCHOSOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

20% of LGBTQ+ people were victims of physical or sexual violence.

About 50% were terminated from their jobs or denied employment because of their sexual orientation / gender identity.



GENDER NORMS ARE ENTRENCHED IN OUR SYSTEMS

Current education system reinforces the onus of women and creates a culture of victim-blaming.

Legal System: several laws fail to protect women and the LGBTQ+ community from discrimination and violence, and instead infringe on their rights.

Law enforcement often fails to protect and bring justice to victims of gender-based violence while sometimes perpetrating the same.



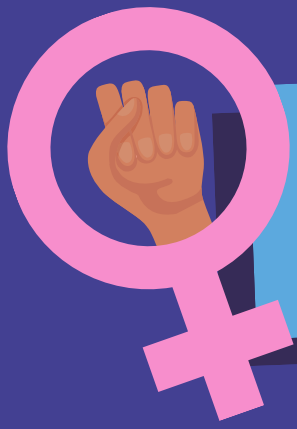
HOW HAVE THINGS CHANGED?

- Young people are more informed and confident to challenge stereotypes. They are not afraid to use their voice.
- **More people - including strong women's groups - are out there working to resist the patriarchy, heteronormativity, and authoritarianism on a daily basis.**



NO TO VIOLENCE

- Introduce non-discriminatory laws, and reform discriminatory laws.
- Engage and inform religious leaders and policymakers of the harmful effects of gender norms.
- **Strengthen legal protection for victims and survivors of gender-based violence.**



FEMINISTS FOR THE PLANET

Key points from a conversation on what climate change means for women in Sri Lanka with Dr. Asha de Vos, Visakha Tillekeratne and Dr. Ananda Mallawatantri.

THE ISSUE

Climate change affects everyone, but not equally.

Women are more likely to be affected because of existing gender inequalities.

Yet, they are rarely part of the solution.

CLIMATE CHANGE THROUGH A GENDERED LENS

- There is a large proportion of women in the agriculture sector who are unaccounted for in Sri Lanka.
 - Women barely own 16% of the land area & less than 5% have access to major irrigation, which limits them to small-scale agriculture.
 - Barely 10% of women are members of pension schemes for farmers.
 - Women are more vulnerable to effects of climate change.
- We always talk about the threat of climate change as a threat to livelihoods. In reality, climate change affects men and women differently.**

MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

Marginalized communities are excluded from accessing ocean resources & relegated to polluted places – they bear the greatest brunt of climate change, but have the least say in countering its impact.

If we address the issues of the most marginalized, then all our lives will change.



INCLUSIVE VIEWPOINTS

How can we protect a planet for 100% of the population if only 50% are making the decisions?

We live in a world where women have to work a lot harder than men, which is unfair, still, work so hard that you become a necessity.

We need to make sure ALL genders are at the table and ALL viewpoints are heard.



CLIMATE ACTION

We cannot wait till the next disaster to happen for us to wake up and make a change.

Recovery from COVID-19 requires urgent climate action. We cannot go back to business as usual.

Health and environment policy should not be considered separate. Our health depends on the planet.

WAY FORWARD

- Gender-mainstreaming in policymaking, actioning and research.
- Gender responsive budgeting to transfer resources equitably according to needs of different communities.
- More women in leadership on climate action - in government and in communities.

MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN

Key points from a conversation on media and technology for gender equality in Sri Lanka with Deepanjali Abeywardana, Raisa Wickrematunge & Avanthi Kalansooriya.



THE ISSUE



There is a stark difference in the way men and women are portrayed in the media.

Women are:

- Prone to harmful stereotypes.
- Portrayed as guardians of cultural norms.
- Prone to gendered sensationalism, objectification and sexist references.

LANGUAGE IS NOT A MERE TOOL OF COMMUNICATION

Language mirrors thinking patterns of a society and it shapes peoples attitudes.

- Words with negative connotations such as දූෂණය/கற்பழிப்பு translate to 'impure' / 'removal of virginity' which doubly victimises survivors of sexual violence.
- Terms such as 'mistress' have no male equivalent in English.

QUESTIONS FOR MEN VS WOMEN

Men in the entertainment industry are often asked about their work and future career plans.

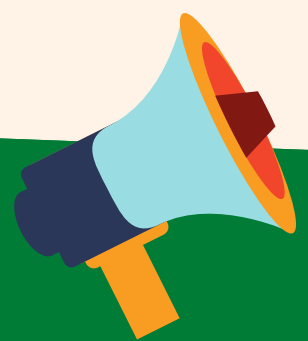
Women are often asked if they would get 'permission' from their husbands to continue their career.



ONLINE SPACES

Social media has opened up a space for women to raise their voices to share experiences on sexual harassment in the workplace where due processes have not worked.

Women that come forward should not be threatened with legal action or asked to quit their jobs.



MEDIA REFORM

- Avoid using sexist language for 'rape' in legislative courts & in the media.
- Avoid unnecessary references to religion & gender.

It's time to stop dehumanizing people based on gender and sexual orientation.

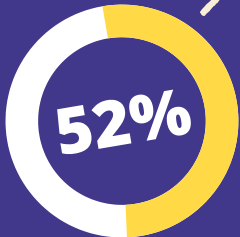
SYSTEMATIC INJUSTICE MUST BE ADDRESSED

- More formal and informal processes for women to raise their concerns and be heard impartially.
- Access to justice for victims of online violence, without fear of shame or coercion.
- More women in leadership in media and governance.

WHY IS MENSTRUATION A LUXURY?

Key points from a conversation on period poverty in Sri Lanka with Anuki Premachandra, Dr. Rashmira Balasuriya & Pradeepa Kulasekara.

Sanitary napkins in Sri Lanka are taxed at



THE ISSUE

30% of women cannot afford to use them.



COVID-19 HAS WORSENERD PERIOD POVERTY

Period poverty = inability to afford sanitary products of choice due to high costs.

- Daily wage workers have not had consistent work for more than a year.
- A packet of sanitary napkins in Sri Lanka costs MORE than a tin of salmon.
- Women and girls don't have a choice on the kind of product they use, because our culture of taxation makes menstrual hygiene products a luxury.
- Women and girls don't have bodily autonomy to make informed decisions about their bodies without the risk of violence and coercion.
- We cannot wait for the next disaster to happen to realise that we need to address this issue.

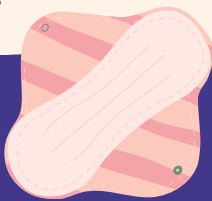
MORE THAN A FINANCIAL ISSUE

Period poverty:

- limits women from performing daily activities
- affects a girl's education

A girl misses at least 1-2 days of school every month because of her period, which is a huge loss in productivity.

We cannot continue to have girls foregoing school because of menstruation.

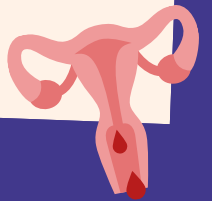


TAXING SANITARY PRODUCTS = TAXING A BIOLOGICAL PROCESS

Taxing sanitary products:

- makes menstruation seem 'unnatural'
- perpetuates stigma
- affects mental health and menstrual health as women lose out on opportunities and move towards unhygienic alternatives

Lack of comprehensive sexuality education means that more misconceptions are being added on while nothing is getting clarified.



WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

- Reform laws which limit women's bodily autonomy.
- Educate policymakers and religious leaders on the gruelling effects of period poverty.
- Advocate for comprehensive sexuality education in schools for girls AND boys.

It's time for women and girls to know their rights to make informed decisions about their bodies!



REDUCE THE TAX!

- Make sanitary products affordable to EVERYONE.

It's time we start asking questions.

It's time to have open conversations with those at the decision-making level.

