

## **Women in Sri Lanka: achievements and challenges**

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The world is meant to be a place that offers equal status to women and men. The Hebrew version of how the first woman, Eve, was created by God, by removing a rib from Adam's body says, that He did it to show that, in creation, women have equal status to men (1). Women have equal human rights as men (2). Partnership and leadership of women and men in the global economy and in politics, are identified as fundamental elements of success and prosperity (3).

However, the afflicted society in which we live, treats women unequally. Society expects all women and men to behave in a stereotyped manner. In general, men are assigned 'power' and are expected to take control over women. As a result, women are often denied their rights and opportunities, the freedom to develop their personal abilities, and to make choices in life. This systematic, unfavorable treatment of individuals on the basis of their gender, is termed gender inequality (4).

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles that a given society considers appropriate, for its men and women. The assigned role depends on the norms and values of each culture (4).

Gender inequality is a universal phenomenon. Inequitable attitudes and practices of individuals, families and society, gender insensitive policies and programs, gender prejudiced legislations and gender biased representation in political circles, are all potential sources of inequality. The extent, to which gender inequality operates in a society and the nature of inequality, varies widely (5).

Women's achievements require overcoming of the challenges imposed by gender inequality. Promoting gender equality is, ensuring that women enjoy equal rights and are offered equal opportunities in life as men. It does not mean that women and men have to become the same.

Promotion of gender equality calls for a dual strategy. Gender mainstreaming in policies and programs should be complemented with, specific interventions to address gaps or problems that are experienced by either sex (4).

Gender mainstreaming is defined as the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality (4).

Gender mainstreaming is a process. It is the process of assessing the implications of policies, legislation and programmes on women and men, with a view to making adjustments to ensure the rights and equal opportunities for both. At times, when making such adjustments, policies, legislation and programmes have to be made different for women and men, to cater to different needs and interest of either sex. This may even be women or men specific policies, legislations or programmes. Ensuring equivalence in life outcomes for women and men, recognizing

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their different needs and interests, which require a redistribution of power and resources, is referred to as gender equity (4).

Realizing the extent of gender inequality in the world and its adverse effects on women, many international efforts have been taken to solicit the highest level commitment of nations to ensure gender equality. Nearly every country in the world has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, CEDAW of 1981, which provides for equal enjoyment of civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights by women and men (6).

The member states of the UN made a commitment, to promote gender equality at the

1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (7) and at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (8). The third Millennium Development goal, is dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment (9).

#### **Women in Sri Lanka**

We see a mixed picture when we look at the status of women in Sri Lanka. In terms of physical well being, Sri Lankan women are on par with women from many other countries, and are far superior to women in regional countries.

We record the highest life expectancy at birth and the lowest maternal mortality rate among SAARC countries (Table 1).

**Table 1- Female life expectancy at birth and Maternal Mortality Ratio in SAARC countries**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Female life expectancy at birth (2003)</b>	<b>Maternal Mortality Ratio (per 100,000 live births)</b>
Bangladesh	63.2	260
Bhutan	64.2	180
Pakistan	63.2	260
Maldives	66.1	60
Nepal	62.0	170
India	65.0	200
Sri Lanka	76.8	35

Source: Tarique and Sultan. Status of women in SAARC countries: a comparative analysis.

Son preference is not evident. Extreme cases of male dominance such as dowry deaths and widow immolation are not reported. Repugnant socio-cultural practices such as female circumcision, are not prevalent in the country. Thus, it has been widely believed and stated publicly, that Sri Lankan women enjoy equal status to that of their men counterparts.

But, deeper analysis of the status of women in Sri Lanka indicates that, in some aspects, their status is one of general subordination, in a male dominant society which has prevented them from achieving their full potential. This has precluded the country from harnessing the capacities and talents of women, in national development.

Several global objective measures of gender inequality bear testament to my statement. The Gender Inequality Index and Global Gender Gap Index are two such examples.

The Gender Inequality Index is an index which captures the loss of achievement within a country, due to gender inequality. It assesses the dimensions of reproductive health, women empowerment and labour market participation in women. In 2013, Sri Lanka was ranked 75<sup>th</sup> among 187 countries, when arranged in the order of increasing inequality (10).

The Global Gender Gap Index examines the gap between men and women in a country in the dimensions of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. Sri Lanka was ranked 39<sup>th</sup> among 135 countries, when arranged in order of widening gap (3).

With this background, my intention today, is to discuss some achievements of women in Sri Lanka, which showcase the country's success in overcoming gender inequality. More importantly,

I will also focus on some challenges of inequality that prevent Sri Lankan women from achieving their full potential.

Health, education, work, political representation and violence are the themes I will be discussing. Before discussing the achievements and challenges, let me place on record a few facts relating to the national instruments that we have in place in Sri Lanka, to overcome gender inequality. The Sri Lankan Constitution guarantees freedom from discrimination on grounds of sex, and provides for special measures to realize women's right to equality (11).

The declaration of the United Nations' Women's Decade in 1978, resulted in the creation of the "Women's Bureau of Sri Lanka". Its mandate, is to advise the government on the formulation of policies relating to women, and to monitor their implementation. Sri Lanka ratified the foremost United Nations international standard on women, the CEDAW in 1981 (12).

In 1983, the subject of Women's Affairs was accorded a status of a ministerial portfolio. Over the years, the subject of "Women's Affairs" has been relocated under different ministries (Table 2).

**Table 2- Placement of the subject of women's affair in the Ministerial portfolios**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Ministerial portfolio</b>
1983	Teaching Hospitals and Women's Affairs
1989	Health and Women's Affairs
1994	Transport, Environment and Women's Affairs
1997	Women's Affairs
2000	Housing, Women's Affairs and Eastern Development
2001	Women's Affairs (from December onwards)
2005	Social Welfare and Women's Empowerment (interchanged with “advancement” in Sinhalese)
2006-2014	Child Development and Women's Affairs

Source: Ministry of Child Development and Women's Affairs

A sociological analysis of the logic behind the coupling of the ministries of Child Development with Women's Affairs indicates that it is related to the, traditional concept of the role of women in the family. This linking of women with children has several implications, including gender stereotyping of all women as mothers and reinforcing the idea that, only women should be responsible for children (13).

The year 1993 saw the formulation of the Sri Lanka Women's Charter, which is the local equivalent of the CEDAW. Though cabinet approval has been granted, the Charter is yet to be integrated into national policy and legislation (14).

The National Committee on Women was established in 1993, as the mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the Charter (12). Sri Lanka has adopted the Beijing Platform for Action, committing itself to promote

gender mainstreaming in policies and programmes and has also adopted the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations. Mahinda Chinthana, the Development Policy Framework of the government of Sri Lanka has explicitly pledged, gender equality (15).

#### **Women and health**

Women in Sri Lanka have achieved much in terms of health. An increase in life span is undoubtedly, a composite indicator of health achievement. Over the past 6 decades, Sri Lankan women have gained 25 years in life expectancy. They overtook men in late 1960s and at present, enjoy five full years of life expectancy over men (16).

This achievement is certainly a culmination of the effects of gender equitable policies, laws and programmes in the health sector, gender equitable attitudes relating to health and equitable health care practices of society.

In Sri Lanka, we are the fortunate recipients of a health service that is free of charge. We have enjoyed this privilege for several decades. The National Health Policy of Sri Lanka, has pledged its continuity. Although offering free health services was a step made to overcome social class inequities, it has undoubtedly helped women vulnerable to gender inequalities, to overcome barriers to accessing services.

The Sri Lankan health sector is rich in several policies which are implemented and are being drafted, which explicitly or implicitly pledge gender equality.

The most important contributor to the rise in life expectancy of women in Sri Lanka is the rapid decline in the maternal mortality rate, over the past six decades (17).

The maternal care services programme is a typical example, of a specific intervention to ensure gender equity. The programme ensures that the service provider reaches women in their own homes. This feature has left no room for gender inequality to bar women, from receiving services and attaining potential health outcomes.

There are many other examples of gender equitable situations, which have contributed to women's achievement of an increased life expectancy. In Sri Lanka, female infanticide is unheard of. Breast feeding is not sex selective (18).

Nutritional status data gives proxy evidence of the absence of sex preference in feeding (18). Female and male child immunization rates do not show any discrimination. These indicate gender equitable attitudes and practices relating to health in Sri Lankan society (18) (Table 3).

**Table 3- Percentage of children age 12- 23 months who received specific vaccines**

Sex	BCG(%)	DPT & Polio(%)			Measles(%)	All basic vaccines(%)
		1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>		
Male	99.5	99.7	99.6	99.3	96.8	96.5
Female	99.7	99.7	99.7	99.7	97.6	97.4

Source: Dept. of Census and Statistics, Demographic & Health Survey 2006/07

Having looked at some major achievements and how they were facilitated by gender equitable policies and programmes, I will now discuss, a few specific challenges woman face in relation to health.

As you know, Quality of Life is a better indicator of health challenges than mortality. Disability adjusted life years or DALY, is a measure of quality of life. One DALY equates to one lost year of healthy life. In identifying gender

inequalities, I looked at the leading causes of DALYs among Sri Lankan women and men over a period of two decades, from 1990 to 2010, using data generated by the Global Burden of Disease Study.

Global Burden of Disease study is a collaborative project of nearly 500 researchers in 50 countries led by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, University of Washington (19).

Of the top ten causes of DALYs among women in Sri Lanka in 2010, 8 were conditions related to non-communicable

diseases, indicating that non communicable diseases are a main cause of loss of healthy years among Sri Lankan women (Figure 1).

**Figure 1-Leading causes of DALYs among women in Sri Lanka**

1	Ischemic heart disease	Non communicable diseases
2	Major depressive disorder	Injuries
3	Diabetes	Communicable, maternal, neonatal and nutritional causes
4	Stroke	
5	Low back pain	
6	COPD	
7	Iron-deficiency anemia	
8	Self-harm	
9	Other musculoskeletal disorders	
10	Asthma	

Source: Global Burden of Disease Study, 2010

Figure 2 compares the leading causes of DALYs among women and men in Sri Lanka. DALYs of males show that the contribution of NCD related

conditions to the leading causes of DALYs, is less marked than in women.

**Figure 2- Leading causes of DALYs among women and men in Sri Lanka**

**Women**

1	Ischemic heart disease
2	Major depressive disorder
3	Diabetes
4	Stroke
5	Low back pain
6	COPD
7	Iron-deficiency anemia
8	Self-harm
9	Other musculoskeletal disorders
10	Asthma

**Men**

1	Ischemic heart disease
2	Self-harm
3	Stroke
4	Diabetes
5	COPD
6	Low back pain
7	Road injury
8	Cirrhosis
9	Lower respiratory infections
10	Iron-deficiency anemia

Non communicable diseases

Injuries

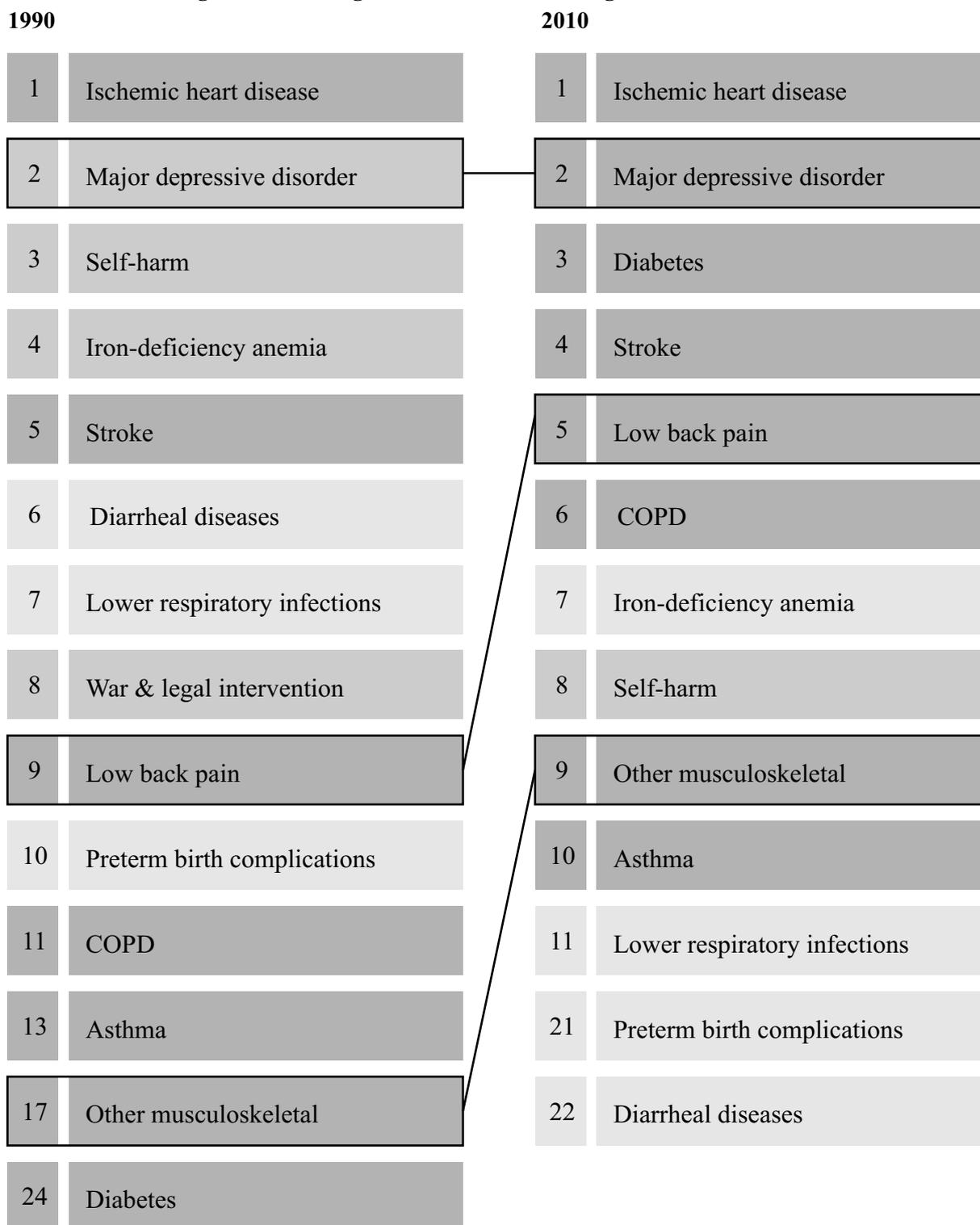
Communicable, maternal, neonatal and nutritional causes

Source : Global Burden of Disease Study, 2010

Another notable difference is the presence of a mental disorder, major depressive illness, as a foremost cause of DALYs among women. In contrast to the pattern among men, low back pain moved up in the rankings in 2010 when

compared with 1990, and 'other musculoskeletal conditions' came into the first ten places in 2010, indicating that their contribution to loss of healthy years has become more important over this period (Figure 3).

**Figure 3 - Leading causes of DALYs among women in Sri Lanka**



Source : Global Burden of Disease Study, 2010

These differences in diseases burden may indicate that addressing the challenge of NCD of women and men may need gender equitable approaches.

As an example, epidemiology confirms that major depressive illness is commoner among women and the Global Burden of Disease data demonstrates its negative effect on the quality of life of women in Sri Lanka is high. This situation warrants an assessment of the existing mental health services in Sri Lanka for their gender equality which may reveal modifications required to serve women better.

I also analyzed the risk factors that account for most of the disease burden in Sri Lanka, using the Global Burden of Disease study data. Attributable risk percent is the indicator used. It is the percent of DALYS that can be attributed to a particular risk factor. Attributable risk percent can also be viewed as the percent of healthy years that can be saved, if the risk factor is eliminated.

Analysis showed that the top risk factors that accounted for years of "healthy" lives lost in Sri Lankan women in 2010 were, dietary risks, high blood pressure, household air pollution from solid fuels and high fasting plasma glucose. The need for gender equitable approaches in our existing efforts to modify these risk factors, is worth considering.

I would like to draw your attention to the women specific challenge of intimate partner violence, as a risk factor which has accounted for the loss of 2.6% "healthy" years. This loss is even higher than the loss attributable to elevated plasma cholesterol level among women.

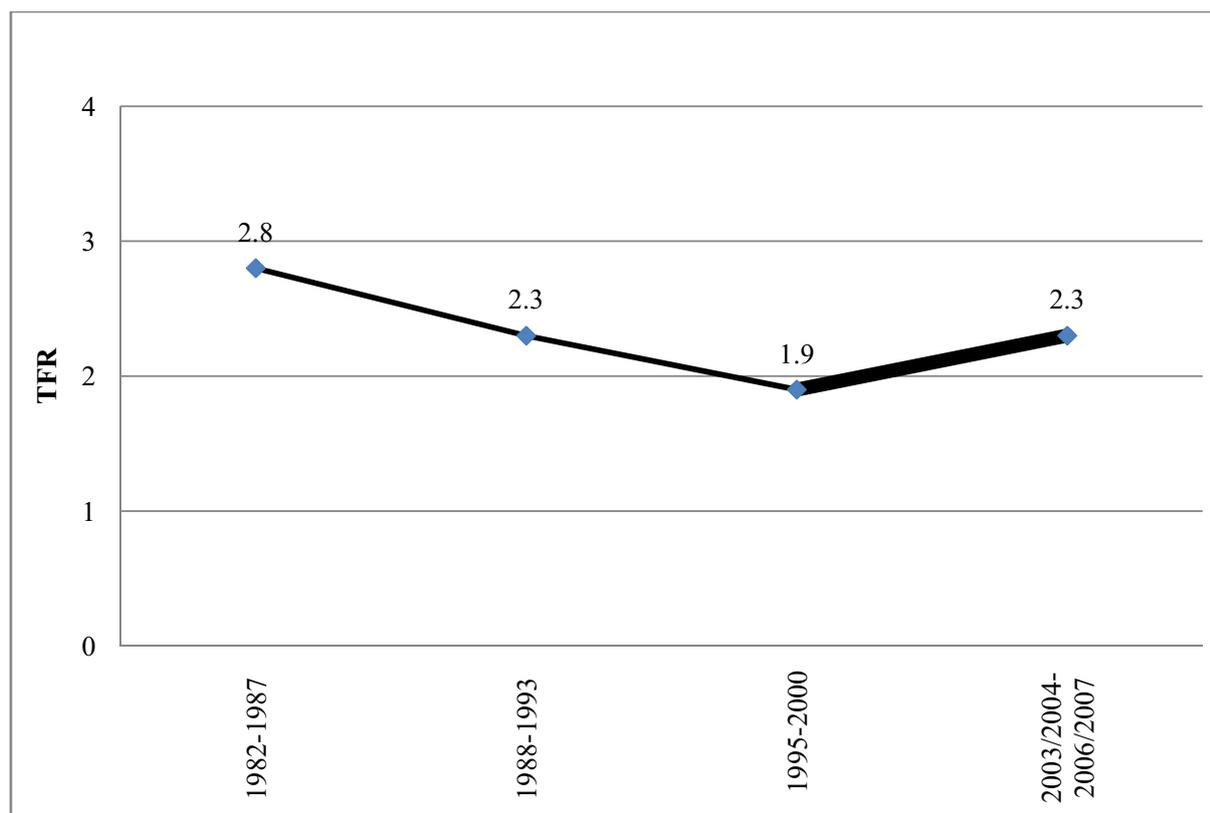
Violence against women is the most distressing form of unfairness experienced by women. I will discuss some forms of gender based violence and how Sri Lanka has dealt with this challenge, later.

In my effort to highlight challenges faced by women in the field of health, I would like to give one more example. This is the issue of the unmet need in family planning. The unmet need shows a slowly declining trend in the country (20).

I selected this as a challenge to be highlighted due to several reasons. Through the reproductive health policy of the country and by ratifying international conventions and declarations, we are committed to provide accessible family planning services to the women who need them.

The country is faced with an unexpected increase in the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) (18) (Figure 4). Total Fertility Rate is the average number of children that would be born alive to a woman during her lifetime if she were to pass through all her childbearing years conforming to the age-specific fertility rates of the given year.

Figure 4 - Trend of Total Fertility Rate in Sri Lanka



Source: Dept. of Census and Statistics, Demographic & Health Survey 2006/07

This is a situation which requires scaling up of contraceptive services to the women who are in need of it.

Several challenges have surfaced in the country to dampen such efforts. One is the current milieu of pro-analistic ideas among the general public. The move of certain nationalistic organizations to push this as a national agenda is a greater challenge. As a result, certain limitations have been imposed on the family planning services. An assessment of the implications of these limitations for women and men and their effect on the country's national policy and international commitment to gender equality, and institution of corrective actions are, imperative.

#### **Women and education**

Women in Sri Lanka have achieved many successes in education. Gender inequality in

literacy rates have dramatically reduced in the past century in Sri Lanka. Literacy rate is defined as the number of persons aged 10 years and above, who can both read and write as a percent of the total population of that age group. The gap between women and men which was 26 percentage points in 1881 has come down to 2.4 percentage points in 2011 (21).

When only the youth are considered, the literacy rates among young women have increased to the extent of reversing the gender gap in favour of them, since the early nineties (21). This success story remains true for Sri Lankan women, even when more refined indicators such as participation, survival and performance in school education are considered.

The participation rates among those in grades 1-10, those in the 5-14 age group, has improved

over the years. Participation rate is defined as the number of children of a given age who participate in any regular educational institution public or private for systematic instruction as a percent of the total population of that age group (22-26).

However, it should also be noted that neither sex has reached 100% participation, in spite of school attendance till 14 years being made, compulsory in 1998. When considering the 15-19 year group, those in grades 10 to 13, girls show a prominently higher participation in school (22-25).

Survival rates among girls in Sri Lanka are higher compared to boys, across all school grades (27). Survival rate is defined as the proportion of students from a cohort enrolled in a given grade at a given year who would get promoted to the next grade in the following year.

Other than participation and survival, there is ample evidence that girls perform better in school than boys. Performance at all major public examinations reveal that girls have fared better than boys, throughout the past two decades.

These striking achievements among Sri Lankan women in the sphere of education, can be considered as the result of the provision of gender equitable education opportunities. The education policy of 1946 offered citizens free school education (28). Offering free services was a means to overcome barriers of social class and gender. Subsequently, many other incentives such as, scholarships at the end of primary education, free textbooks and uniform materials, subsidized transport and free school meals for disadvantaged children were added on. These catalytic policies resulted in the expansion of educational opportunities without gender

discrimination, as parents with fewer resources no longer needed to invest in educating only their sons. However, among these data highlighting better education access for girls, data on utilization of special education indicates that girls with disabilities are less likely to attend special education units than boys with similar difficulties (21). Qualitative studies have indicated that gender norms in our society do not value education of disabled girls.

A main challenge in the education sector is that, though it has achieved gender parity, it has not succeeded in moving beyond, to facilitate gender equality.

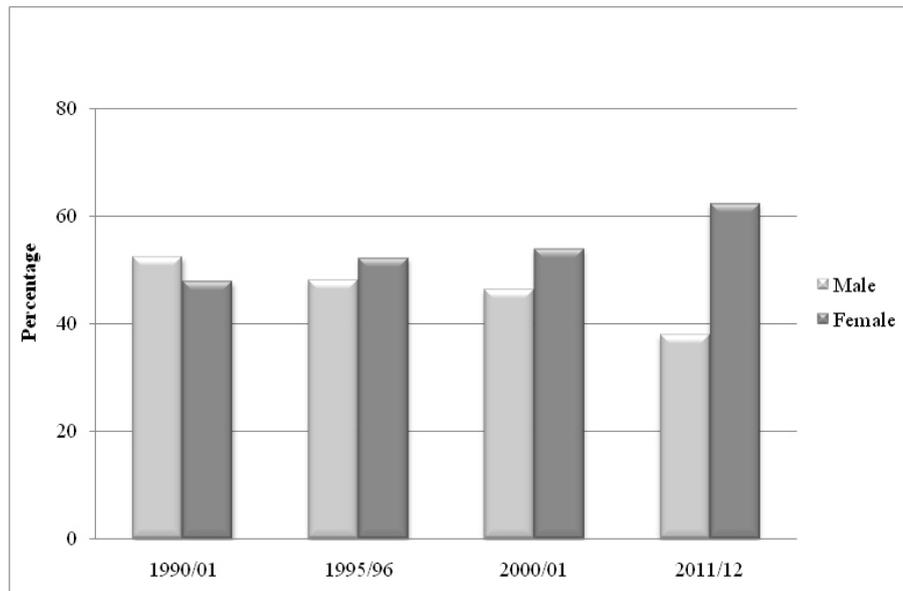
The present school curriculum is not designed to inculcate gender equitable attitudes and practices among students or, to empower them to challenge oppressive gendered social practices that may hinder their opportunities in life. Instead, the curriculum and textbooks continue to operate as a mechanism that reinforces gender inequality. The consequences are seen in the gendered selection of subjects at senior secondary level, resulting in the choice of 'feminine' courses of further study by most girls (29,30).

In spite of many advocacy efforts by interested parties, gender is considered a non-issue by educational policy makers. A notable example is the Education Sector Development Framework Programme, 2006-2011 which has clearly ignored gender issues. Achieving gender parity in school participation and performance appears to have generated, a sense of complacency among education policy makers and administrators (13).

### **Women and higher education**

As shown in Figure 5, women in Sri Lanka achieved gender parity in university admission, two decades ago (13).

**Figure 5 - Percentage of women getting admissions to Universities in Sri Lanka 1990-2011/12**



Source: University Grants Commission, 1990/91, 1995/96, 2000/01, 2011/12

The education policy of Sri Lanka offers its citizens free university education. University education being free, is one key feature that contributes to its access by girls. In addition, in 1975, the government introduced the system of District Quotas to the university admission process (32). Though this policy did not have a discernible interest in promoting gender equality there is evidence that it facilitated women's entry into university.

Financial assistance schemes for undergraduates have also benefited women students who are more likely to decline university admission due to economic difficulties.

The main challenge women face in higher education is their low participation in subject areas of Science and Technology.

A high proportion of university admissions forth subjects of Arts, Law, Commerce and

Agriculture, are women. Furthermore, the proportion of women undergraduates in these fields has increased over the last three decades. The subject stream of Engineering shows an all-time low in the percentage of women students.

This is a consequence of the gendered approach to education in schools that we discussed previously which directs girls to 'feminine' subject streams. My discussion on women and work will highlight to you that this deficiency continues to disadvantage women in securing employment, especially highly paid employment.

Similar to the situation discussed previously about school education, none of the higher education reform recommendations in Sri Lanka since 1995, have shown any interest in promoting gender equality (13). Thus, it is clear that, as in the education sector, gender has been considered as a non-issue in the national higher education sector.

However, there have been a few attempts by individual faculties to sensitize its students to gender-related issues. Some faculties of Arts in the country have introduced courses on gender into the curriculum. The Faculty of Graduates Studies of the University of Colombo introduced a Masters' programme in Women's Studies in 1980s (33). Establishment of the Centre for Gender Studies in University of Kelaniya in 2011, can be considered as a step towards addressing concerns of gender equality in the higher education sector (31).

Exploration of the percentage of women taking up postgraduate studies reveals that it was only 44.7% in 2012, a percentage much lower than the corresponding 62.2% for undergraduate programmes.

There is a lot of evidence from qualitative studies, that issues related to gender inequality have had an influence on this non-transfer of the gains of undergraduate education of women to the post graduate level (13).

Sri Lankan society which values the school education of girls and boys and encourages university admission of girls, does not believe that married young women should seek career advancement through post graduate education. The gender norm is that women are primarily responsible for household chores and childcare, irrespective of whether they have a high potential for career development. Gender division of labour within the home has not changed in Sri Lanka, even among educated couples, limiting the time available for the woman partner to engage in higher education (13).

*Being an academic myself, I also chose to explore whether women in academic positions are faced with challenges related to gender, in career advancement.*

The percentage of women in the academic staff in the public sector university system was 41.5% in 2012. When the proportions of women in different academic positions are considered it is shown that the proportions in senior positions are lower, with the lowest being at the level of a professor. Thus, it indicates that access to promotion in the university sector is difficult for women. I will later discuss some gender inequitable influences on the career advancement of women.

### **Women and work**

The labour market in Sri Lanka is seen as a major source of gender inequality, depriving women of their equal rights and opportunities to obtain remunerative employment. During the past two decades, unemployment rates among women have continued to be double that of men, in spite of gender parity in education and higher education. Unemployment rate is defined as the proportion of persons available and/or looking for work, and who do not work as a percentage of the economically active persons over 15 years. Even among the equally educated, the magnitude of the disparity is similar. The failures of the education system to provide women with the wider spectrum of skills that is in demand in the labour market, is thus confirmed.

Gender inequality also has an influence on the type of employment. Analysis of selection of work indicates that, women prefer jobs that allow human interactions, over jobs in managerial and technical fields. The proportion of women workers in thick force is only 29%. Among industrial workers, women are concentrated in semi-skilled and unskilled jobs. A great majority of migrant women workers are, domestic workers, the category of workers most vulnerable to exploitation (Table 4).

**Table 4- Percentage of women in specific employments in Sri Lanka 2012**

<b>Employment category</b>	<b>%</b>
Information and Communication Technology	28.7
Semiskilled and un-skilled workers in industries	67.4
Domestic workers out of all women migrant workers 2012	85.9

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, 2012; Information and Communication Technology Agency of Sri Lanka, 2013

Gender inequities also challenge the upward mobility of women in their jobs. This is what is referred to as the 'glass ceiling' which is a complex of factors that prevents women rising up the career ladder. A study in 2008 found a very low proportion of women in high positions (34).

The reasons given were, gender bias of senior officials, the gendered association of the leadership, constraints in combining family responsibilities and employment, and political interference. Gender role assumptions among women also have led to non-acceptance of managerial posts by them (34,35,36).

This differential selection of employment by women and low representation of them in high positions, leads to non-utilization of the specific talents and capabilities they may possess. The recently implemented National Human Resources and Employment policy is unique in that, for the first time at the level of a national employment policy, it proposes to mainstream gender (37).

With the objectives of enabling women access to jobs and access to jobs that pay better, it proposes incentives such as supportive child care services, flexible work hours, training for high skilled jobs and women's entrepreneurship development.

Initiatives are also proposed to address gender inequitable attitudes to combat sexism, and gender norms related to employment choices and most importantly, inequitable sharing of domestic chores in the household between men and women.

#### **Violence against women**

Violence against women in Sri Lanka remains a hidden practice. its incidence under reported and its perpetrators under-penalized, despite laws that reinforce its gravity by declaring it a criminal action. It has been reiterated as the most important obstacle to the achievement of the equality of rights and fundamental freedoms of women.

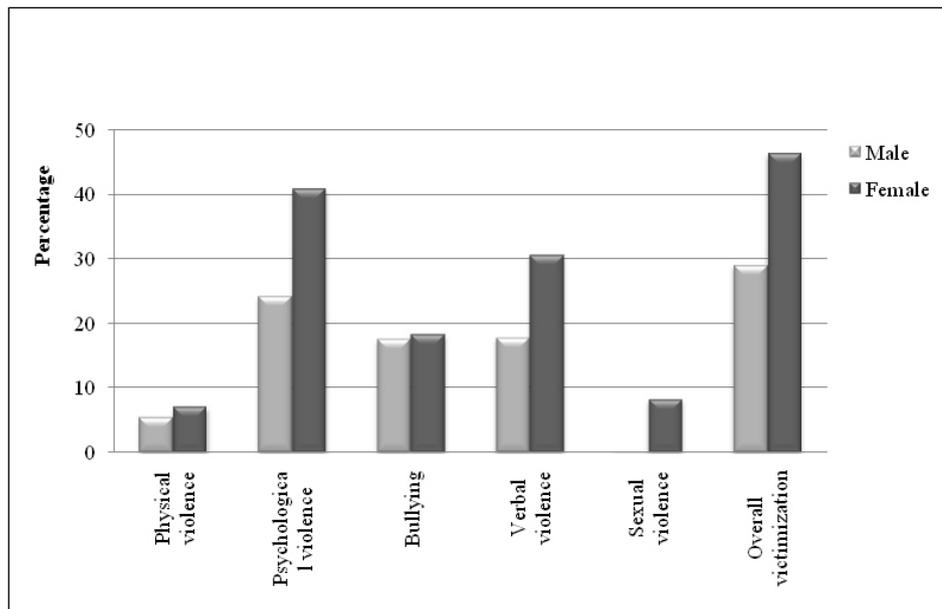
Of the many forms of violence against women, I would like to draw your attention to two forms, workplace violence and violence in universities.

Research on workplace violence is sparse. Most research has been on women workers in lower categories of employment. They have reported high proportions of different forms of violence. The perpetrators in the plantation sector were mostly their supervisors. Migrant domestic workers have been abused by employers of both sexes.

Supervisors, administrators and co-workers have been the perpetrators of workplace violence in garment factories (38-40). A study in the private sector revealed experience of serious forms of workplace sexual harassment in,6% women workers in various capacities.

The perpetrators were mostly superiors within the organization (36). A recent study on workplace violence in the health sector found that, victimization to all forms of violence was higher among women doctors (41)

**Figure 6- Distribution of the medical officers in Galle district by the prevalence of victimization to workplace violence and sex**



Source: Mudalige, 2012

The pattern was similar among nursing officers. Perpetrators were mostly patients and relatives of patients. Women victims of workplace sexual harassment have not had fair justice, to their complaints due to, gender inequitable attitudes and practices of those in positions of authority (36). Women have experienced reprisals and continuing harassment, or haven't countered problems such as being disbelieved or even been accused of desiring men's attention and exposing themselves to sexual harassment.

Gender analysts see the basis of workplace violence to be partly similar to that of domestic violence where, patriarchal societies support

men to use 'power' over women. Work place violence is also a form of institutional micro politics, that prevent the achievement of women (36).

This grim situation in Sri Lanka continues in spite of some positive steps to overcome this challenge.

The definition of sexual harassment in the Penal Code No. 22 in 1995 has been made more relevant to include forms of violence occurring in work places. Women in the public sector can take legal action under the Bribery Act for demands for sexual

favours. However, this relief is not available to working women in the private sector, where the demand for sexual favours may be more prevalent.

Amendments to the Foreign Employment Act of 1994 and National Labour Migration Policy of 2008 aim to avoid migrant women workers being exposed to exploitation.

Universities are part of the Sri Lankan polity, and may, on occasion even form a, miniature model of society as a whole. Universities are the ideal institutes to counteract gender unequal attitudes and practices of future leaders of the country.

However, several research studies have shown that women students in Sri Lankan universities are subjected to many forms of violence and sexual harassment, under the guise of ragging and, even within romantic relationships (42-44).

This is despite of the law of the land which has prohibited ragging in universities by the Prohibition of Ragging and Other Forms of Violence in Educational Institutions Act No. 20 of 1998. A circular of the University Grants Commission No. 919 of 15<sup>th</sup> January 2010 provides clear instructions on how to prevent ragging and, procedures to be followed (45).

Despite these mechanisms, universities are often seen to ignore the frequent presence of violence including sexual harassment, within their premises, especially in instances such as ragging. There appears to be a tendency for Universities to resolve matters internally, without making use of the law of the land, reiterating the impunity of violence. Even the courts of law do not seem to exercise available provisions fully, when it comes to university students. The proposed Strategies for Preventing Sexual and Gender-based Violence for

Universities by the Center for Gender Studies, University of Kelaniya is a promising intervention to be launched shortly (46).

### **Women and political representation**

Women's equitable representation in political institutions is, important for several reasons.

Given that women constitute half the population, equal participation in politics will deepen democracy, and ensure more equitable development outcomes. Under representation will not allow the different views, experiences and interests of women to be included in governance (3).

At present, the percentage of women in national government in Sri Lanka is 6.7%. There are only 13 women members in the 7<sup>th</sup> Parliament of Sri Lanka (Table 5).

Women's representation in politics at provincial and local government level in the country is even less (Table 6).

**Table 5 - Women's participation in governance in Sri Lanka 2012**

	No. of women	No. of men	% of Women
<b>Executive</b>			
The President and Cabinet Ministers	2	64	<b>3.0</b>
Deputy Ministers	1	30	<b>3.2</b>
Secretaries to the Ministries	10	52	<b>16.1</b>
<b>Legislative</b>			
National Parliament	13	212	<b>5.8</b>
<b>Total in National Government</b>			
	<b>26</b>	<b>358</b>	<b>6.7</b>

Source: Civil Society Monitoring Report, 2013

**Table 6 - Percentage of women's participation in governance from 2006 to 2012**

Government	2006 (%)	2009 (%)	2011 (%)	2012 (%)
National Government				6.70
Provincial government		4.90		4.00
Local Government	1.87		2.03	1.90

Source: Civil Society Monitoring Report, 2013

As a country which has performed well in women's education and health, the reason for the lower presentation of women in politics in Sri Lanka, has always been queried. This is despite Sri Lanka having produced the first female Prime Minister in the world and having had a female president in the recent past. This challenge is very much related to gender inequalities

The gender norm in Sri Lanka is to assign the sphere of politics both ideologically and practically to men, rather than women (34).

Women also do not self-select themselves for a political career as it involves negotiating with a masculine model of politics. Political parties are organized according to male norms, values and even lifestyle, characterized by late hours, informal decision-making processes, drinking and gambling.

Stereotyping of women as having no role in politics, is also perpetuated through the popular media. An example would be the recent provincial government elections in 2013, at which the media was quick to point out that most of the women candidates were actresses or from political families. Although there were almost as many young men who were actors or linked to political families, they were not subject to the same level of scrutiny. Stereotyping leads to most women not only displaying a lack of interest and confidence to engage in politics but considering politics as an illegitimate activity for themselves (47).

Sri Lankan history shows that the few women who have been able to wield political power have done so because, they have been part of a network of privilege and influence. Such factors have been shown to work negatively as women

view that connections are a necessity to survive in politics.

There is also the reality of many women's lives that their burden of 'work' does not give them time or space to get involved in politics. Even the unemployed women are involved in subsistence agriculture and informal income generating activities. The unequal gender division of labour within the homes was highlighted earlier (47).

Available evidence suggests that political parties are the single biggest barrier to women's greater participation in politics. They do not nominate an equitable number of women to contest elections which is connected to gender inequitable acts of

**Table 7 - Women in elected political office in Sri Lanka**

		Nominations of women		
		Total nominated	No. of women nominated	% of women nominated
Parliament	2004	6060	375	6.2
	2010	7619	n.a	n.a
Provincial Council	2004	4863	373	7.7
	2008-2009	9356	711	7.5
Local Councils	2006	25911	n.a	n.a

n.a not available

Source: Civil Society Monitoring Report, 2013

The process of elections in the country also discourages women. They are often associated with violence. Some have witnessed gender specific and sexualized forms of violence. Elections in Sri Lanka necessarily entail massive spending. Connected to gender norms, male candidates who are recognized as 'winnable' are supported by private contributions and the corporate sector, unlike women candidates (48).

Many attempts to adopt gender equitable measures to increase women representation in politics in the country, have not been fruitful. The main campaign has been the call for a legal quota for women in all political institutions, by the Women Parliamentarians Caucus, National Committee on Women and several non-governmental organizations (34). Though the 1997 Amendment to the Act of the Local Authorities Elections required reservation of 25% of seats at local government for women and youth, a flaw in its expression has led to ignorance of its implementation (48). Training and capacity building of women to enter politics, taken on by the government as well as civil

society organizations for several years, do not seem to have impacted this situation (49).

In Conclusion, women in Sri Lanka enjoy important achievements and, equally so, face major challenges.

There is clear evidence from the fields of health and education that, promoting general equality in policies and programmes as well as gender specific interventions, help women achieve their full potential.

The reason for non-transfer of these gains to the fields of higher education, work and political representation is seen to be linked to, gender inequalities.

Gender inequality is something all of us in this audience can work to overcome, in our personal or official capacities. My wish today, is to inspire you to raise the visibility and voice to overcome the challenge of gender inequality in Sri Lanka to help women achieve their fullest potential.

**Competing interests**

None declared.

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