

Women Education and its Trend and Issues: A Sri Lankan Perspective

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Abstract

This paper intends to explore the need and importance of women education, trends, prospects and challenges in Sri Lanka after Independence. The education of women is very essential for happy and healthy life at homes, the improvement of society, economic prosperity, and for national solidarity. There are enough constitution provisions in Sri Lanka which guarantee fundamental rights to women more equal to men. However, women are subjected to various issues and challenges. They face discrimination based on gender, harassment in schools, lack of separate transport facility, lack of toilet facilities, child marriages, etc. in the course of their life. In the recent development approaches carried out in Sri Lanka have brought a lot of opportunities for the women and not the trend of women education changed a lot. Most of the educational institutions are occupied with girls than boys. Most of the teachers are women. However, the issues related women still need appropriate attention.

Keywords: Challenges; Trends; Women education.

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Introduction

Education is one of the most potent tools for the regeneration and empowerment of women. It synergizes them to face challenges and to be part of national development of the country. Indeed, women play a vital role in all the progress of a country. For building robust nation with the pillars of democracy, women must be educated. They are the real builders of 'happy homes'. It is said that if we educate a man, we educate a man only, but if we educate a woman, we educate the whole family. This highlights the importance of female education. It is a fact that women are the first teachers of their children. It is in their lap children receive the very first lessons. Hence, if mothers are well-educated, they can play an important role in shaping and moulding their siblings. Napoleon was once

asked what the great need of France would be. He simply answered, "Nation's progress is impossible without trained and educated mothers. If the women of my country are not educated, about half of the population will be ignorant." It was the opinion of Napoleon about educating the women-folk. We must give up our conservative outlook and create an atmosphere in which not a single woman remains uneducated.

Women have three major roles to perform in the course of their life. They have to discharge their duties as good daughters, good wives and good mothers. Apart from these important duties, they have to prove themselves as good citizens of a free democracy. Hence, it is necessary to give women a different kind of education from the one given to boys. Their education should be such as may enable them to discharge their duties in a proper way. From education they become fully matured in all the fields of life. Educated women are well aware of their duties and rights. They can contribute the development of the country in the same way as men do.

Since Independence in Sri Lanka 60 years ago, girls are given the education they deserve. This is because the Constitution of Sri Lanka has made it

possible for girls to fully receive their education, access to schooling has improved and there has been a upswing in girls' enrolment. Education in rural Sri Lanka is poor due to poverty. Girls and women should get the education; this would lead to better job opportunities, so they can feed their children, and to better educate themselves.

The Challenges faced in women's education

The education of girls is lagging behind that of boys at all levels of school education. Their enrolment rate is low and dropout rate is higher than boys at all levels of education. Many girls leave schools even without completing elementary education. There are many socio cultural, economic and educational barriers, which hinder their participation in education.

Poverty

The rate of illiteracy is closely linked to poverty. Due to the poverty or low family income, if parents are not in a position to send both boys and girls to school, they usually send boys to schools and retain girls at home to do house-hold work. If Education is free-up to primary stage, there is a possibility to increase the participation of girls and it will not put any kind of financial burden on the parents all the same.

Number of children

In poor families generally, there are many children. According to the priority list of parents, girls' education is not compulsory and boys get a high chance of receiving education.

Child Marriage

Many girls in many states of Sri Lanka still get married at an early age, which affect their education to a great extent.

Customs and cultural practices

Many customs and cultural practices obstruct higher education of girls. For example many parents of a certain community do not send their daughters to schools when they attain puberty. If female teacher is not present in school, girls may not go to school, especially at upper primary level.

Lack of transport facility

One of the barriers for girl education may be the location of schools which are far away from their homes, particularly in rural areas. Adequate transport system is needed for girls to attend to

the schools. It will be more convenient for them if school buses take responsibility for pick and drop facility for the girl children. In rural areas, other modes may be tried out.

Sexual Harassment in school

Most of the parents feel insecure towards sending their girl children as instances of abduction, rape, sexual harassment and molestation of girl dampens the enthusiasm of parents and girl students in pursuing their education beyond a certain age.

Lack of toilet facility

This may be one of the reasons of lower participation rate of girls in education especially at upper primary level. The separate toilet facilities for girls must be created in the school premises. This must also cover the security aspect for girl. At the same time, toilet facility is needed for female teachers also.

Lack of separate girls' schools

Many parents do not want to send their daughters to coeducation schools especially at upper primary level. There is an urgent need to open separate schools for girls especially at upper primary level as a powerful strategy for bringing conducive school environment for girls. There must be strong provision of good quality schools for girls if demand is there.

Lack of hostel facilities

One of the obstacles in girls' education is that schools are away from their homes, they cannot avail themselves of this facility due to lack of hostel arrangement. The girls belonging to villages would continue their education particularly in rural areas, if they are provided with free or inexpensive residential facilities nearer to the school.

Gender based discrimination

A number of practices within educational system reinforce gender-differentiated practices and promote inequality, gender bias and gender stereotyping. You might have observed some others barriers, which are specific to your (Community, village and district etc. Most of the time gender differences are observed in home, in society, schools, at work places and in political decision-making within the democratic process itself. More specifically it is reflected in the distribution of care work, household responsibilities and the decision-making powers at home and also this discrimination is seen in the parents' behaviors and choices as well as in total school environment.

Strategies for improving women's education

The following strategies are used to improve enrolment, retention and participation of girls in schools. Awareness Generation

Sensitizing the nearby community/society provides equal access and opportunities for growth and development of both boys and girls. You can visit nearby village or town, interact with parents and local community and discuss with them the need and ways to promote gender equality and girls education. You can also take help of drama, radio, and local folk media.

Curriculum Transaction

Teacher's expectation, encouragement and attitudes influence self-concept/self-perception of children which in turn affects their academic performance. A large number of girls especially from rural areas have very low self-concept right from very early age. The socialization practices lead girls to believe that keeping quiet, restrained and subdued are womanly virtues. The low self-concept among girls affects their participation in classroom activities, their academic achievement and later on their participation in non-traditional courses and occupations. Very few girls raise their hands to answer difficult questions even if they know the answer especially in some subjects like Science and Mathematics. Number of girls studying Science, Mathematics, Technical-professional courses is gradually increasing but is comparatively much lower than that of boys still today. The attitude and practices must nurture positive self-concept among girls.

The following suggestions may be useful in improving participation of girls in schooling/classroom process.

- Give opportunities to both girls and boys to participate in all types of activities.
- Discourage gender-based distribution of roles and responsibilities in school like asking girls to receive a chief guest and boys to demonstrate gymnastics.
- For group activities make mixed groups of boys and girls.
- If girls in the class are passive listeners, make special efforts to improve their participation e.g. by asking them to read aloud in class and directing questions at them and encouraging them to answer.
- Avoid gender based allocation of activities under work education or work experience

e.g. cooking, sewing work for girls and maintenance of electrical gadgets for boys.

- Discourage gender based participation of children in games, sports and cultural activities organized in and outside the school (Altsteinand Simon 2008).
- Gender equality needs to be promoted through transaction of different subject areas.

Teaching of Language

Avoid use of sexist language denigrating either sex. Communication using gender inclusive language in the classroom has to be provided.

Use language as a means to develop a sense of mutual respect and dignity, cooperation and sharing among boys and girls.

It is better not to communicate in stereotypical language of calling boys as strong, intelligent and girls as delicate, emotional etc.

Teachers should tell true stories of local brave women, educated women, women writers/poetess, women entrepreneur, eminent and talented women using their own resources such as newspapers and life sketches, magazine

Conclusion

Gandhiji believed that, education was the most potent instrument for the regeneration of women. Consequently both the government and the public paid more attention to the establishment of women's institutions. The education of women is very essential for happy and healthy homes, improvement of society, economic prosperity, and national solidarity.

Education is something that everyone should get regardless of gender. Girls are more than capable of learning as just as boys. Girls are more intelligent than boys; it has been scientifically proven that girls mature faster than boys. We should step up efforts to help girls and women in our country to get education that they rightfully deserve and need. Education is the key to a better lifestyle. No girl should be left behind in the race to get better education. Girls can do great things too. Who knows? Maybe something incredible will be discovered that would help the entire world. Girls need to be educated and education is required for all in Sri Lanka. It is very important that all people, men and women, get education they rightly deserve. Teacher's role is very crucial in improving education of girls at secondary level. Efforts to

bring girls to schools, retain them and improve their participation and achievement too have to be consciously made.

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