

GENDER EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA: A MISMATCH BETWEEN ACCESS AND OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT. Sri Lanka has attempted to ensure gender equity in higher education through a non-discriminatory educational policy. Half a century after the establishment of the first university in Sri Lanka, women students have secured a majority of enrolments except in engineering and related fields. But women's achievements in respect of access and participation have not guaranteed equity in outcomes. University-educated women still continue to be unemployed for longer periods, to be employed in lower positions and face difficulties in gaining entry to management positions.

**ÉGALITÉ ENTRE LES SEXES EN ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR AU SRI LANKA :
DÉSÉQUILIBRE ENTRE L'ACCÈS ET LES RÉSULTATS**

RÉSUMÉ. Le Sri Lanka a tenté d'assurer l'égalité entre les sexes en enseignement supérieur en adoptant une politique non discriminatoire dans le domaine de l'éducation. Un demi-siècle après la création de la première université au Sri Lanka, les étudiantes sont maintenant en majorité sauf en génie et dans les domaines connexes. Mais les réalisations des femmes liées à l'accès et à la participation n'ont pas garanti l'équité dans les résultats. Les femmes ayant fréquenté l'université continuent d'être sans emploi pendant des périodes plus longues, d'occuper des postes de niveau inférieur et de faire face à des difficultés pour atteindre des postes de gestion.

Introduction

This article analyzes statistical data and reviews a number of studies on university education in Sri Lanka to identify trends in women's enrollment in different fields of study. It also examines the match between women's participation on the one hand, and women graduates' employment status and ability to gain entry to management positions.

Sri Lanka, in contrast to her South Asian neighbours, has made much headway in the area of women's education. Her progress towards a more equal education for men and women started prior to independence. In 1931 together with the grant of partial sovereignty, universal suffrage was also granted and all those over 21 years of age, irrespective of sex, became eligible to vote. From 1945, an educational policy that was non-discriminatory towards either sex sought to provide free primary, secondary and higher education. In subsequent years this policy was buttressed by such incentives

as scholarships for the needy, free school meals, free textbooks and free uniforms. The demand for education spurred on by these incentives was met by an island-wide network of primary schools and the establishment of well equipped Central Schools, mainly in rural areas with hostel facilities which provided education in Science, Arts and Commerce up to University Entrance.

These progressive policies in education were introduced to a cultural milieu of a mixed ethno-religious population. The majority of the population of the country was Buddhists, the adherents of a religion that was considered to accord equality of status to men and women. Rigid structures that restrict the movement of women in the educational, social and political arenas were, to a certain extent, absent in ancient Sri Lanka. Women enjoyed respect in the role of wife and mother in a close-knit family structure. The Buddhist tradition mentions famous Buddhist women being given the opportunity and being capable of making their worth felt in various avenues of life. But religion also stressed women's inferior and subservient role, evident in the custom that the father is obliged to support his daughter until she is married and also to arrange a suitable marriage and to provide a dowry for her. Kandyan Sinhalese laws of inheritance contain inequalities and even in the other two ethnic groups/religions similar inequities are seen.

The expansion of education without gender discrimination made women eligible to compete in the labour market on an equal footing with men. In the 1960s and 1970s the deterioration of the economic situation of the country, which made it increasingly difficult for a male breadwinner to support the family alone, necessitated a transformation of the economic role of women.

In Sri Lanka the proportion of women enrolled as students at university increased steadily from 1942 (the year of establishment of the University of Ceylon) until 1973 when the percentage had risen to 40.6, around which their representation became more or less stabilized. In 2001, the percentage was 51.7 (University Grants Commission, 2002). Much concern was being expressed, however, about the relatively low representation of women, in all scientific fields excluding medicine.

Table 1 indicates the representation of women in the University of Ceylon from 1942, the year of establishment in selected years until 1965.

Table 1 indicates how gradually the percentage of women increased from 10.1 in 1942 to 42.7 in 1965. Jayasuriya (1965) attributed the steady increase of female enrolment to a variety of factors such as 'limited opportunities available to women in higher education other than in universities, the greater diligence of girls, persistence of women rather than men students, their keenness to study and willingness to forego other satisfactions

for the sake of education and the gradual breakdown of the traditional concepts of womanhood and marriage which has created a new social and economic role for the women as breadwinning partner’.

TABLE 1. Enrolment in University of Ceylon by sex in selected years (1942-1958)

Year	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total
1942	89.9	10.1	904
1947	84.4	15.6	1554
1952	78.5	21.5	2232
1957	73.2	26.8	2718
1962	66.2	3.8	5177
1965	57.3	42.7	10723

Source: Annual Reports, University of Ceylon

TABLE 2. Percentage distribution of students by sex: Universities in Sri Lanka (selected years)

Year	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total
1960	75.9	24.1	4723
1965	67.8	32.2	14240
1970	55.6	44.4	11813
1975	59.3	40.7	12648
1980	60.3	39.7	17102
1985	56.6	43.4	18913
1990	57.0	43.0	31447
1995	55.5	44.5	32800
2000	50.9	49.1	55985
2001	48.3	51.7	54744

Sources: Annual Reports for relevant years, Vidyodaya University of Ceylon, Vidyalkara University of Ceylon, University of Colombo, University of Sri Lanka And Statistical Handbooks, University Grants Commission

In 1958, two new universities were established by the upgrading of two eminent seats of Buddhist learning, Vidyodaya and Vidyalkara *pirivenas* into full-fledged university status. These universities drew their clientele from among Buddhist monks and as a result, women were barred. As a result, when we consider the enrolment of students in all three universities (Table 2), we note that in 1960, the percentage of women had suddenly recorded a decline to 24.1 per cent. It was only after this decision was revoked in 1965 that once again, an increase of women’s participation became evident. This trend had more or less continued even after ten more universities were established and the total enrolment increased to more than 55,000. In 2002,

the year for which the latest statistics are available, the percentage of women in university population exceeded 50. During the last decade the competition to enter universities with only 2.3 per cent of the relevant age group (20-24 years) obtaining admission to universities has intensified in the absence of adequate alternative opportunities and disparities between the sexes have blurred.

The more dramatic increase of women in the university population in the 1990s can be explained by a similar trend, which has occurred at senior secondary school level, with more girls remaining in school than boys. In the late 1990s, as a result of an increasing difficulty in obtaining employment, even for the highly educated, aspirations to secure a higher education began to rise, irrespective of sex or other background factors. The limited opportunities in other areas of tertiary and vocational education also has led to an escalation of the demand for higher education.

Increased access of women to university education over the years has not provided equal access to all courses of study. This was evident in the early years at the University of Ceylon (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Full-time student enrolment in the University of Ceylon: By faculty & sex (1942)

FACULTY	Male (%)		Female (%)		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
Oriental Studies & Arts	574	88.9	72	11.1	646
Medicine	239	92.6	19	07.4	258
Total	813	89.9	91	10.1	904

Source: Annual Report, University of Ceylon, 1942

By 1973 the number of Universities and the Faculties had increased and there were greater options available to students to decide on their disciplines of study and careers of their interest. Table 4 shows this trend at the University of Sri Lanka. Because of the increase of women enrolled, their representation in most of the Faculties also had risen except in Engineering, which continued to enroll a low percentage.

Table 5 shows the distribution of university students by Faculty and sex in 2001, the most recent year for which statistics are available.

Table 5 indicates that except in four areas – medicine, science, engineering and architecture – men were in a minority. In medicine and science there was near parity. It is only in the case of Engineering and Architecture that women have failed to make headway.

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TABLE 4. Full-time student enrolment in University of Sri Lanka: By faculty & sex (1973)

FACULTY	Male (%)		Female (%)		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
Arts/O.S./Law	4114	51.2	3917	48.8	8031
Science	919	63.8	521	36.2	1440
Agriculture	187	68.7	85	31.3	272
Vet. Science	50	58.8	35	41.2	85
Medicine	635	55.9	501	44.1	1136
Dental Surgery	79	49.1	82	50.9	161
Engineering	1107	93.1	76	06.9	1183
Others	629	92.4	52	07.6	681
Total	7720	59.4	5269	40.6	12989

Source: Senate House, University of Sri Lanka

TABLE 5. Full-time enrolment in universities of Sri Lanka: By faculty & sex (2001)

FACULTY	Male (%)		Female (%)		Total (N)
	No.	%	No.	%	
Arts	7016	30.9	11058	69.1	18074
Education	30	31.6	65	68.4	95
Law	96	25.1	581	74.8	777
Management & Business Studies	4879	56.0	4709	44.0	9588
Medicine	3015	54.7	2487	45.3	5502
Science	5897	52.1	5250	47.9	11147
Agriculture	1168	49.6	1183	50.4	2351
Engineering	2744	85.9	448	14.1	3192
Fine Arts	475	24.5	1462	75.5	1937
Dental Science	194	44.8	239	55.2	433
Vet. Medicine	176	48.1	197	51.9	373
Architecture	216	61.2	131	38.8	347
Livestock, Fisheries & Nutrition	34	47.8	35	52.2	69
Labour Education	112	71.8	44	28.2	156
Indigenous Medicine	267	39.1	436	60.9	703
Total	26419	48.3	28325	51.7	54744

Source: University Grants Commission, 2001

Few Sri Lankan studies have focused on female participation in scientific and allied courses at higher education level. Jayaweera (1984) using data from a study in 1978, commented on the fact that very few girls opt for subjects such as advanced mathematics, geometrical and mechanical drawing, wood and metal handicrafts (at secondary level). She ascribed this fact to the cumulative result of social attitudes and stereotypes originating in

child-rearing practices, in the selection of toys for girls and boys and in curriculum organization. Subsequent curriculum reforms introduced to general education attempted to eliminate gender-role stereotyping in textbooks, and sex-based curricular options at secondary school level.

But more than a decade later, on the basis of study carried out in 1991, Gunawardena (1992) found that participation of women in scientific and technological fields was low. Amongst women enrolling for science degrees the preference was for biological sciences rather than physical sciences.

Employment of women graduates

The spectre of 'Educated Unemployment' surfaced as a critical issue in the wake of expansion of university education in Sri Lanka in late 1960s. In 1971, the Dudley Seers report (International Labour Organization, 1971) argued that unemployment among the educated had partly resulted from their high aspirations on entering white-collar employment and a desire for academic education. Analyzing the phenomenon of 'diploma disease' evident in several developing countries, Ronald Dore (1976) was also critical of the escalation of qualifications syndrome that was taking place in Sri Lanka.

Male and female graduate unemployment rates have been 6.1 per cent and 12.1 per cent in 1981, 7.5 per cent and 13.4 per cent in 1985/86 and 6.9 per cent and 12.2 per cent in 1999 (Dept. of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka, 1982, 1987 and 2000). Among these graduates, unemployment has been highest among Arts graduates, the majority of whom are women. During the last three decades, the situation has visibly worsened due to a combination of factors: a prolonged civil war which drained the country of resources to be channeled into development, economic stagnation and the constriction of the state sector which had often stepped into provide employment when the situation threatened to be volatile.

As a result of the combination of these adverse factors, the percentage of the labour force unemployed with high levels of qualification is considerably larger than that with minimal levels (Table 6).

The reasons for the high proportion of highly qualified unemployed may be the result of non-availability of employments, or the desire by those with high level qualifications to obtain employment only in a certain sector or occupation.

This situation has meant that the prospect of employment has become more remote for many women graduates. A study of women graduates from 1972 to 1978 found that 40 per cent were unemployed (Sri Lanka Federation of University Women, 1978). A study of men and women graduates during the period 1974-1979 found that 20.3 per cent of men and 36.3 per cent of

TABLE 6. Unemployment rates by level of education (% of the labour force)

Period	No Schooling	Grade 0-4	Grade 5-0/ NCGE	GCE (O.L)/ HNCE & above	GCE (A.L.) & above	All
2000-1 st Q	1.13	1.1	7.9	11.2	15.4	8.0
2000 2 nd Q	1.8	1.1	6.8	11.4	13.1	8.0
2000 3 rd Q	1.2	1.0	7.6	12.0	15.2	8.0
2000 (a)	1.4	1.1	7.4	11.5	14.6	7.7

(a) Average of first three quarters
Source: Dept. of Census and Statistics

women were unemployed in 1980 (Marga Institute, 1983). Ad hoc graduate recruitment schemes introduced sporadically succeeded in bringing down the unemployment rates between 1979 and 1984, yet this could not be continued in the face of economic stagnation. Aturupane (1996) found that employers had a strong preference for male employees and that their image of women and men workers was based on stereotyped perceptions of gender-appropriate occupations and differential behavioural profiles.

Women graduates who did find employment were concentrated in teaching jobs and at the lower levels of the occupational hierarchy. A study of a cohort of graduates admitted to universities in 1987/88 also found that the most disadvantaged in access to remunerative employment were Arts, Commerce and Management women graduates (Table 7) (Jayaweera and Sanmugam, 2002). In general, professional jobs were scarce for all graduates, but they were even scarcer for women graduates.

A more recent unpublished study conducted by university authorities (UGC, 2002) found similar trends (Table 8).

Table 8 reveals that except for Engineering, which enrolls a majority of men students, in the case of all the other degrees the major proportion of the unemployed were women graduates. Medical graduates have generally had no difficulty in obtaining employment as up to now government jobs have been available for them. But, amongst the small number unemployed women predominate. The largest numbers of unemployed are women Arts and Law graduates.

The government of Sri Lanka has often had recourse to recruit graduates for teaching when graduate unemployment posed a threat to social order. In the 1990s the state decided not to appoint any untrained graduates to the teaching profession, and this decision also affected women graduates more adversely than the men, as teaching had long been a preferred job among the former. Women predominate in the teaching profession as Table 9 shows.

TABLE 7. Distribution of jobs of 1987/88 graduates in 2001

Type of Job	Prof. Sc. 1		Prof. Sc. 2		Science		Prof. Arts		Commerce & Arts		Total		
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Professional	No.	144	67	55	7	55	24	13*	16*	26	12	242	126
	%	95.4	98.5	73.3	24.1	32.9	23.1	23.2	28.6	9.6	3.9	36.2	22.3
Middle Level	No.	4	-	16	17	88	68	28	25	178	240	315	350
	%	2.6	-	21.3	58.6	52.7	65.4	50.0	44.6	65.9	77.9	47.1	61.9
Non-Graduate	No.	-	-	02	01	03	01	06	07	12	12	23	21
	%	-	-	2.7	3.4	1.8	0.9	10.7	12.5	4.4	3.9	3.4	3.7
Not Reported	No.	-	-	-	-	12	06	05	04	23	22	40	32
	%	-	-	-	-	7.2	5.8	8.9	7.1	8.5	7.1	5.9	5.7
Unemployed	No.	03	01	02	04	09	05	04	04	31	22	49	36
	%	1.9	1.5	2.7	13.7	5.4	4.8	7.1	7.1	11.5	7.1	7.3	6.4
Total	No.	151	68	75	29	167	104	56	56	270	308	669	565
	%	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

* Law professionals M – 66.7%, F – 66.7%
 Professional Sciences 1 – Medical, Dental, Veterinary, Engineering I & II, Architecture & Quantity Surveying
 Professional Science 2 – Agriculture
 Professional Arts – Management and Law

Although teaching is very much a ‘feminized’ occupation, it is seen that even here the top strata are dominated by men (Table 10).

The above table shows that at all levels of Principals’ Service, men are in a majority. This situation is also reflected in the Sri Lanka Educational Administrative Service (Table 11).

Table 11 indicates the rare phenomenon of more women occupying the highest echelon of the Sri Lanka Educational Administrative Service, Class I. Selections to Sri Lanka Educational Administrative Service are made

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TABLE 8. Classification of unemployed graduates by degree and gender – 2001 (%)

Degree	Female	Male	Total (N)
Arts	68.7	31.3	16050
Commerce	55.2	44.8	2080
Education	57.6	42.4	53
Engineering	29.0	71.0	138
Science	52.0	48.0	5912
Law	80.0	20.0	130
Medicine	40.0	60.0	10
Not Given	60.2	39.8	274
Other	58.2	41.8	868
Total	63.1	39.9	25515

Source: University Grants Commission, 2002

TABLE 9. Distribution of teachers by sex – 2000 (%)

Category	Male	Female	Total (N)
Graduates	36.7	63.3	51092
Total	31.1	68.9	186097

Source: Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka

TABLE 10. Classification of Sri Lanka principals' service by gender – 2001 (%)

Class of Service	Male	Female	Total (N)
Class 1	61.7	38.3	281
Class 2-1	67.7	32.3	4008
Class 2-11	61.5	38.5	1548
Class 3	55.9	44.1	990

Source: Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka

from among serving teachers and principals. The significance of greater representation of women in Class I is reduced by the fact that the total number is only 9.

A study carried out in the late 1980s (Davies and Gunawardena, 1992) offers some explanation for this situation. The study revealed that there were no significant differences between the career appraisals by men and women teachers and that their expectations from the organization of school

TABLE 11. Classification of Sri Lanka educational administrative service by gender – 2001 (%)

Class of Service	Male	Female	Total (N)
Class I	33.3	66.7	09
Class II	66.7	33.3	156
Class III	57.3	42.7	157

Source: Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka

were not vastly different. Yet men teachers exhibited greater confidence in handling duties considered essential aspects of management, that is, curriculum development, teacher supervision, finance, chairing meetings and taking assembly. Women teachers considered they were strong in aspects in which interpersonal relations mattered more. Early socialization appears to have left some impact on women teacher managers. They considered that they should shoulder the caring but passive role and retreat to the background, allowing men to play the more dominant role.

In the Sri Lanka Administrative Service, which recruits public sector administrators through a competitive examination for graduates, there is a similar under-representation of women, in spite of their increased visibility in university education during recent years (Table 12).

TABLE 12. Classification of the Sri Lanka administrative service by grade, age and sex – 2001 (%)

Grade	Below 40 years			Above 40 years		
	Male	Female	Total (N)	Male	Female	Total (N)
Class I	00	00	00	81.2	18.8	609
Class II – I	72.2	27.8	36	61.9	38.1	328
Class II – II	64.9	35.1	430	68.8	31.2	784
Total	65.5	34.5	466	57.0	43.0	1802

Source: Ministry of Public Administration, Sri Lanka

When the percentage of women in the academic staff of universities is considered it is seen that their representation has increased yet women continue to occupy the lower grades. (Table 13).

It is interesting to note how as one proceeds up the hierarchy the percentage of women in both academic and administrative positions decreases. The first woman Vice Chancellor was appointed to a Sri Lankan university only in 1999 and since then another woman has been appointed to that position. But by 2003 the total number of women Vice Chancellors had reverted back to one. Similarly, while a quarter of the Heads of Departments in the university system are women, the percentage of women Deans was reduced to 14.3.

TABLE 13. Classification of academic & administrative staff of universities by gender – 2001 (%)

Designation	Male	Female	Total (N)
Academic Staff			
Professor	80.0	20.0	256
Associate Professor	77.3	22.7	119
Senior Lecturer – Gr. I	72.3	27.7	523
Senior Lecturer – Gr. II	65.8	34.2	865
Lecturer	61.9	39.1	1238
Administrative staff			
Registrar	80.0	20.0	12
Bursar	70.0	30.0	10
Senior Asst. Registrar	66.0	34.0	47
Asst. Registrar	69.1	30.9	68
Asst. Bursar	100.0	00.0	04

Source: University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka

TABLE 14. Classification of academic administrators by gender – 2002 (%)

Designation	Male	Female	Total (N)
Vice Chancellor	92.3	07.7	13
Dean	85.7	14.3	56
Heads of Departments	75.4	24.6	333

Source: Universities of Sri Lanka

The study by Gunawardena and Lekamge (2002) which specifically focused on the possession of leadership attributes as rated by managers themselves from two Universities in Sri Lanka, the Open University and the University of Colombo, sheds some light on possible future scenarios. It revealed that, in general, there are similarities in the ratings of leadership attributes by men and women managers and that significant differences were minimal. This may be an indication of future prospects where women university personnel in Sri Lanka would willingly accept positions of leadership without being constrained by inhibitions stemming from gender role stereotyping as in the past.

Comparative reflections

The Sri Lankan situation has many features in common with other Commonwealth countries. As access to participation in higher education expands in many countries, the differences in the patterns of course-taking

becomes more important as these differences are related to different educational and occupational opportunities that various courses lead to. Certain courses of study are more restrictive by nature of the greater financial investments such as laboratories and equipment, required for their being offered. Studies have shown that course-taking patterns vary substantially according to background factors, including gender. Thus the Australian Youth Survey data collected between 1990 and 1998 showed that in year 12 about one in five boys enroll in mathematics and physical sciences compared to one in twelve girls (Lamb and Ball, 1998). Girls preferred biological sciences to chemistry or mathematics. In South Africa, Ogude et al (1997) present an overview of the exclusion of women, particularly Black women, from the science and technology fields. Sex differences in different curricular streams appear to be even more pronounced in the low income countries. Evidence from South and South-east Asia pinpointed the low participation of women in science and technology in higher education (UNESCO, 1987).

A growing body of research has explored probable factors which may deter young women from majoring in science and technology, leading to the reduction of employment opportunities in better paying careers for them and a valuable source of talent for the society. A variety of factors have been mentioned as contributing to this phenomenon such as parental expectations (Campbell, 1988), the lack of exposure/experience with scientific observations and experiments (Markert, 1996), peer pressure to conform to traditional expectations in career choice, influence of guidance counselors, the teachers' role of attracting or discouraging girls to science (Campbell, 1988), textbook driven nature of methods and content in science teaching and the proportion of female teachers for Mathematics and Science.

In addition, Third World researchers emphasize the importance of additional factors. It is argued that so far as girls and women are concerned, access is 'culturally defined' and the relevance of formal education is determined by the societal expectations of what is feminine. Rola (1987) points out that socialization of girls is heavily weighted in favour of tradition and social institutions of family, kinship and marriage. The process of socialization begins at home, enters the school and spreads into the world of work. Thus the construction of femininity is continuous and girls are moulded in subtle and not so subtle way so that their educational and employment choices are linked and their movement is directed.

While limited access to scientific and technological fields impact on career advancement of women, the paucity of women in management has also been noted. Among the factors affecting the participation of women in management, discrimination, overt or otherwise against women has been highlighted (Marshall and Mitchell, 1989; Hassan, 1997; Kalugama, 1999). Other studies indicate that because of their early socialization process,

women have developed values and characteristics that result in leadership behaviours that are different from the aggressive, competitive and controlling leadership behaviours of men (Hegelson, 1990; Gunawardena, 1992; Thorpe et al, 1998; Odejide, 2001). These include the reasons that women do not aspire to management jobs, and have low aspirations towards career advancement (Adler and Izrael, 1994; UGC, Sri Lanka, 1999), lack of self-confidence and low self-image (Singh and Kaur Gill, 2001), the inhibiting influence of the concept of women's place or the perception of women as 'out of role' in management jobs (Davies and Gunawardena, 1992) and conflicting demands at home and at work (Pavan, 1987). Others have argued that self-selection of those who choose senior administrators leads to particular gendered choices (Wirotstad et al, 1992; Eagley & Johnson, 1990, Gunawardena & Lekamge, 2002). Many of the trends identified in Sri Lanka have resonances in other Commonwealth countries for a range of reasons linked to particular histories and contexts.

The above discussion reveals the achievements of Sri Lanka in respect of the fulfillment of the goal of gender equity. To a commendable extent, equity in access and participation has been achieved yet these achievements have not paved way for equity in outcomes, particularly with regard to employment. Recent labour market trends such as free market economic policies, globalization and advances in information technology on the whole tend to overshadow the concern for equity in all areas including gender. While education is a potent force breaking the shackles of such discrimination, lessons from other Commonwealth countries indicate that removing gender stereotypes and providing equal chances, purposive measures of gender sensitization and gender focused policies in staff development need to be utilised to work towards gender equity in outcomes.

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