By Wimal Nanayakkara

Sri Lanka, though a developing country has been performing well with regard to human development. Free education and health services, being provided to all citizens and various social welfare programmes to assist the poor, which continued for more than five to six decades, coupled with various development programmes to provide housing, electricity, water and sanitation, and efficient communication facilities have contributed to this success and has helped Sri Lankans to achieve long, healthy lives and impressively high levels of education, which are reaching the levels of developed countries.

The status of human development in a country is measured using the Human Development Index (HDI), developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The HDI is a composite index, which could be used to measure the economic and social development of a country. It consists of three equally weighted components:

- Long and healthy life, measured by Expectation of Life at Birth
- Knowledge, measured as a combination of adult literacy and gross school enrolment
- A decent standard of living, measured by GDP per capita

The countries are classified into four levels, based on the value of HDI which varies from 1 to 0 [(i) Very High Human Development (0.800 and above); (ii) High Human Development (0.700 to 0.799); (iii) Medium Human Development (0.550 to 0.699) and Low Human Development (less than 0.550)].

The aim of this article is to look at where Sri Lanka stands in terms of human development, compared to countries in the SAARC region and a few selected, developed and developing countries in the Asian Region. The article briefly looks at Sri Lanka's achievements with regard to human development and few of the challenges based on the data provided in the Human Development Report – 2016.

Sri Lanka's achievements compared to countries in the Asian Region

Sri Lanka is classified under the 'Very High Human Development' category, with a Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.766 and was ranked 73 out of 188 countries in 2015. The Maldives with a HDI value 0.701 and a rank of 105, is the only other country in the SAARC region classified as 'Very High Human Development'. India, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan are classified as 'Medium Human Development', while Afghanistan is in the 'Low Human Development' category. Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia, are the only countries, with HDI above that of Sri Lanka, out of the 19

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News

- Killing off Lanka's Machiavellis Not so easy Bro! 4130
  2017-08-11
- Cabinet approves increased traffic fines 3624
  2017-08-11
- Angry Govt MPs gang up against Dinesh 5587
  2017-08-11
- UNPer to move no-faith motion against Muuthapaha 3904
  2017-08-11
- Should Shore Up Share Market Social elements compelled Ravi K's resignation 3638
  2017-08-11
- Supporters cheer RK 3622
  2017-08-11
- Mattala to India Cabinet okays feasibility study 3635
  2017-08-11
- RAVI's No-Faith motion out 3616
  2017-08-11
- Ravi's resignation came after serious lobbying – Handunneti 3636
  2017-08-11
- Ravi's resignation ushers in new political culture – Ranil 4478
  2017-08-11
- Bond scam claims first Probe victim Anger, pressure force Ravi's resignation Legal tenant of Monarch Flat was Arjun's company 5078
  2017-08-11
- Rajitha Slams Wijeyadasa's comment 377
  2017-08-11
- Tittawella Sr Adviser to Finance Minister 354
  2017-08-11

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It should also be their responsibility to make a voice for the thousands of voiceless women and children development of this country, to make it a better place for everyone to live. Sri Lanka will never achieve this target by 2030, with such low female representation in Parliament.

Female representation in Parliament

Low Labour force participation rate of females

Low participation of women in the parliament

Male suicides: Among the SAARC region, and other selected countries in Asian region, Sri Lanka ranks first followed by South Korea, Nepal, and Japan. Worryingly, out of the 188 countries in the World, Sri Lanka ranked third, in terms of male suicides. The two countries above Sri Lanka are Guyana (70.8 per 100,000 males) and Lithuania (51.0 per 100,000 males). Data on suicides in Sri Lanka show that nearly 6,000 people commit suicide each year and around 75 per cent of them are males. A special study needs to be conducted, covering those who have attempted suicide, to ascertain the causes for the high incidence of male suicides in Sri Lanka.

The Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine and Ministry of Social Empowerment, Welfare and Kandyan Heritage, may have to consider improving easily accessible counselling services for troubled persons.

Female Labour Force Participation in Sri Lanka: As already explained, most of the indicators related to 'Knowledge' show that females have performed better in terms of education when compared to their male counterparts. Statistics also show that in Sri Lanka, there are more girls than boys in Advanced Level classes and Universities. Even with these achievements, the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) of females remains extremely low (35.9% in 2015), compared to most of the countries in the Asian Region (Figure 3). Except in three countries [Afghanistan (19.1%), Pakistan (24.3%) and India (26.8%),] out of the 19 countries in Asian Region considered in this analysis, in all other countries, female LFPR is much higher than in Sri Lanka. In the three countries mentioned above, the level of education is much lower comparative to Sri Lanka.

One of the reasons for low female LFPR in Sri Lanka, despite high levels of education, is the unavailability of decent employment opportunities, in close proximity to their hometowns. Availability suitable employment opportunities, in their hometowns, will make it easier for them to balance their child-care and household responsibilities with work (MDG Country Report 2014). Flexible working hours and/or facilitating working from home in certain type of jobs (e.g. Information Technology related jobs), may also help in increasing the female LFPR. This will also help in increasing their family incomes and therefore raise the living standards of such families. This will also help to reduce the persisting income inequality to a certain extent.

Female representation in Parliament

Another concern is low female representation in Parliament in Sri Lanka, which is only 4.9 per cent and is the lowest in the SAARC region and one of the lowest in the world. In the SAARC region, female representation in Parliament is highest in Nepal (29.5%), followed by Afghanistan (27.4%), Bangladesh (20.0%) and Pakistan (20.0%). SDG Target 5.5 is to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political and public life*.

Sri Lanka will never achieve this target by 2030, with such low female representation in Parliament. More educated females will have to be encouraged to actively participate in politics so that they could get involved in the decision-making process at the highest level and to make their contributions to the development of this country, to make it a better place for everyone to live. It should also be their responsibility to make a voice for the thousands of voiceless women and children in Sri Lanka, who are facing various difficulties.

(Wimal Nanayakkara is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS).)

Challenges

While Sri Lanka can be proud of the achievements in many areas, there are a number of concerns which need to be addressed. However, only the following issues will be discussed in this article.

High suicide rate, especially among men

Low Labour force participation rate of females

Low participation of women in the parliament

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