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Making a better place for her: Gender equality for sustainable development in Sri Lanka

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By Sunimalee Madurawala

Recognising women’s struggles, achievements, and contributions in many spheres, International Women’s Day (IWD) is globally celebrated on 8 March each year.

IWD first emerged from the activities of labour movements at the turn of the 20th century in North America and across Europe. This year, the United Nations celebrates IWD under the theme ‘Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step It Up for

Gender Equality'. The aim of the theme is to provide more emphasis on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to build momentum for the effective implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

SDG 5; 'Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls', focuses on women and their empowerment. As a signatory to the development agenda for post 2015: 'Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', Sri Lanka has the responsibility to work towards achieving the targets proposed under the SDG 5 (see box).

The unfinished agenda

Although Sri Lanka was able to make remarkable progress in achieving most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, the country was unable to attain some crucial indicators related to gender equality and empowerment.

Out of the main three indicators under Goal 3 of MDGs, 'Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women', Sri Lanka was able to see a satisfactory progress only in one indicator (i.e., ratio of girls to boys enrolled in primary, lower secondary, upper secondary and tertiary levels). The other two indicators related to economic empowerment and political participation of women in the country did not progress as desired (Table 1).

Women's participation in the labour force has been low in Sri Lanka for a considerable period of time. Limited job opportunities for women, issues related to transport, social attitudes, personal safety and housing, gender wage gap, and high work related costs are some key reasons for this.

The Sri Lanka Human Development Report 2012 says political parties are the single biggest barrier to women's greater participation in politics. Political parties as well as the voters prefer males being nominated and elected. Violence involved in the election process is also discourages interested females from actively participating in politics.

The challenges ahead

With this unfinished agenda, achieving the SDG 5 to make a better place for women and girls by 2030 – is definitely a challenge. Among the critical challenges the country has to face are coordination and management of implementation process of SDG 5, awareness creation, generating more sex-disaggregated data, and resource allocation.

Facing the challenges

Given that the gender is a cross-cutting issue, a well-functioning central coordinating and management mechanism and a separate mechanism to focus only on matters related to SDG 5 are essential elements of successful achievement of SDGs.

Proper coordination is required as several parties (Ministries, INGOs, NGOs, CBO, etc.) carry out work targeting women and girls. There may be duplication of work while certain areas may get neglected. Awareness creation should cover all stakeholders along with the encouragement of attitudinal and behavioural changes.

Table 1 - Progress and status of indicators related to gender equality and empowerment under MDGs

Indicator	1995	2002	2006	2012	2015 Target	Status of Indicator
Ratio of girls to boys(number of girls per 100 boys) enrolled in:						
Primary	94.2	94.6	99.0	99.4	100	"Achieved"
Lower Secondary	91.2	94.8	105.7	102.6	100	"Achieved"
Upper Secondary	107.7	101.8				
Tertiary	75.4	113.8	n.a.	n.a.	100	"Achieved"
Share of women in wage employment in the non- agricultural Sector (%)	30.8 (1993)	32.8 (2001)	32.2 (2007)	32.0 (2011)	No Target	Need to increase
Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament	5.8 (1989/94)	4.2 (2000/04)	5.8 (2004/07)	6.8 (2010/14)	No Target	Need to increase

Source: MDG Country Report 2014, Sri Lanka

 Data GraphicsDesk

The Ministry of Women and Child Affairs could play a leading role in this regard, as the Sri Lanka Women's Bureau, National Committee on Women, as well as the Department of Probation and Childcare Services, National Child Protection Authority and Children's Secretariat fall under this ministry.

Generating and disseminating more sex-disaggregated data is important to reveal the differences between sexes and to reflect problems, issues, and questions related to women and men in the society. Further, such data will be essential for effective monitoring. In this regard, national institutions like the Department of Census and Statistics should be strengthened and encouraged to collect and disseminate more sex-disaggregated data.

Targets under SDG 5 Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

1. End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere
2. Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation
3. Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation
4. Recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate
5. Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life
6. Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for

Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences

7.Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws

8.Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women

9.Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels

However, the success of overcoming these challenges will depend on the availability of resources and resource allocation. Financial as well as non-financial (human resources, knowledge and skills) resources are needed for the successful implementation of SDG 5. Sufficient resources towards achieving gender equality must be ensured and allocated in the national budget.

Given that investing in gender equality can guarantee the paths to poverty reduction, inclusive growth and prosperity; giving emphasis and priority to making a better place for the country's women, will benefit the entire nation, leading to sustainable development.

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