



Social perceptions on role of women must change

23 March 2021 09:44 am - 0 - 8

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Sunimalee Madurawala is a Research Economist at the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS). Her research interests include health economics, gender and population studies. Madurawala holds a BA (Economics Special), with First Class Honours and a Masters in Economics (MEcon) from the University of Colombo. She is also partly qualified in CIMA-UK. Following are excerpts from an interview with her.



Sunimalee Madurawala

How has the COVID-19 outbreak impacted women and SDG5 on gender equality from both a global and local perspective?

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of people across the world but not everyone has been affected in the same way. Past experiences of disease outbreaks and other crises show that men and women, boys and girls are affected differently. In most contexts, women and girls are disproportionately impacted and girls and women pay a higher social and economic toll. This is mainly because of their relatively disadvantaged situation and distinct social obligations and responsibilities. The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception and is exacerbating the existing gender inequalities in many areas.

The effects of the pandemic have already derailed progress made towards achieving gender equality (SDG5). The labour market, health, education, nutrition and food security and safety are some of those areas facing setbacks due to the pandemic. The negative impacts can be expected to widen (i.e. more individuals are affected) and deepen (i.e. the conditions of some individuals worsen) the already unfavourable situation.

Although women account for 52 percent of the population, Sri Lanka's female labour force participation (FLFP) rate has stagnated at between 30-35 percent for the last two decades. What does this low FLFP mean in terms of female empowerment and also from an economic point of view?

FLFP is important for an economy for many reasons. It indicates the utilisation of labour in an economy and it also acts as a signal of the economic empowerment of women. The low level FLFP rate and higher female unemployment rate imply that the economy is not utilising its economic resources (labour) at full potential and the investments made on them do not generate the expected economic returns to the country.

Research indicates that eliminating gender discrimination in job opportunities and pay increases not just women's income but also national income. Raising female employment levels has a direct, positive impact on GDP. Further, women who are better educated, healthier and have greater control over household financial resources are also more likely to invest in their children's health and education—an investment in the workforce of tomorrow.

Sri Lankan women are well equipped with the skills to contribute to the country's economic growth. They are highly literate, comparatively more educated and healthy. Despite this, their economic participation levels and their contributions to the country's growth is not on par with their potential. Removing the barriers that prevent women's economic participation is pivotal to create an 'enabling environment' for women so that they could participate more in economic activities.

Women currently represent a mere 5.3 percent – 12 out of 225 legislators – in the Sri Lankan Parliament. What explains the gross underrepresentation of women in policymaking and leadership positions?

Despite women's gains in education and employment over the years, men still outnumber women in leadership, especially in top positions. This can be observed from the local to national level. There are several reasons for this gap.

The widespread public perception that politics is a male domain and that a woman entering politics is transgressing her proper role in society is the main reason. Other reasons include the lack of recognition for female leadership, lack of support from family members and community, inability to spend enough time and space on public affairs due to family responsibilities, reluctance to spend money on politics as women mostly occupy jobs that tend to have a lower status and pay and the climate of violence characterised by thuggery and intimidation discourage women from entering politics.

What strategies, mechanisms or policies can be implemented to advance gender equity in the country?

Strategies, mechanisms or policies that are 'gender transformative' are needed. This means that having policies that address the causes of gender-based inequalities and work to transform harmful gender roles, norms and relations. It is also important to recognise and accept the differences of women from different backgrounds and to acknowledge the fact that a blanket approach is not effective in solving their problems in the long run.

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