

# 2020 Vision for Gender Sensitive Development and Environment:

Commemorative Article  
for the International Women's Day 2010  
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## Introduction

International Women's Day (IWD) is one of the most important days for global women and their solidarity. On March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010, IWD celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. IWD serves to change women's lives around the world by raising awareness about women's issues and by bringing change to women's political representation. In human history that has been largely patriarchal, women have been treated mostly as assets and objects of men. To overcome the disabilities that women have suffered historically, in the past few decades, women have come together to share a voice for solidarity, equal opportunity, representation, environmental conservation, peace, sustainable development, social harmony and freedom. Because of their strong voice, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is witnessing an increasing interest in society and academic community for women's issues. Some of the main issues include women's active participation in sustainable development. Forums such as the Global Assembly for Women and the Environment (Miami, 1991), the Global Forum for Women (Rio, 1992), Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) and the Women's Action Agenda 21 have resulted in a strong women's collaboration for environmental action and goes beyond the UNCED position on women and environment.

History has taught many lessons on women's rights and gender equity. Although Sri Lanka elected the first woman Prime Minister in the world, it still struggles to accommodate gender-sensitive policies in development planning and practices. This article written to commemorate International Women's Day 2010 emphasizes the importance of gender-sensitive policies in the development of Sri Lanka. More generally we explore whether women could be more optimistic today about a better future for themselves and their daughters and granddaughters. We attempt to answer this question using Sri Lanka as a case study.

## Gender Representation in Sri Lankan Development

Since the ethnic war ended in May 2009 the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) has initiated robust development programs throughout the country. In an environment where most of the decisions are made by men, opportunities for women to participate and raise their concerns are very few. Although many would agree that gender concerns must be addressed in the development process, many societies do not have the will to accept and practice these concerns. Sri Lanka is one such example.

Sri Lanka has a relatively well educated female population for a lower-middle income developing country. Sri Lanka's adult literacy rates in 2007 were 93% for males and 80% for females. In the 15-24 youth age group the rates were 95% and 96% reflecting the fact that in the past few decades girls' education has made great strides in the country. The female population undoubtedly plays a key role and has the potential to play even a more

important role in the improvement of the economy and environmental conservation in the country. However, in many areas of public, economic and social life a significant gender gap persists in favour of males. The voice of women has been historically marginalized and under-represented in all religious and ethnic groups and political parties in this plural society. Sri Lanka had a female prime minister from 1960 to 1965 and again from 1970 to 1977 and a female executive president from 1994 to 2005. However, that has not resulted in a significant enhancement of gender-sensitive policies, norms and practices. Therefore, the question is, how can we adopt a system that will accommodate women and respect their needs in the coming years and decades.

In Sri Lanka, the female to male sex ratio is 100:97. It is a reflection of higher life expectancy for females and is not associated in any way with a preference for male children as is the case in countries such as China and some parts of India. However, when it comes to politics women take a conspicuous back seat. Only 5 percent out of the 225 parliamentarians are women. The current political culture is highly inhospitable towards women who choose to actively participate in politics. Elections in particular are characterized by violence, brutality, killing, kidnapping, intimidating, threatening, and pillaging. It is essentially a main domain.

In major national development projects and programs the voice of women is not heard much. Consider the garment industry and the EU GSP+ (Generalized System of Preferences) tariff concession issue. Women form the bulk of the labor force in this industry that in 2008 earned Sri Lanka \$3.5b or about 43% of total gross export earnings. EU has decided to withdraw the concession effective August 2010 on account of alleged human rights violations by Sri Lanka. Most of these young women mostly coming from rural areas, who are employed in garment factories have little or no knowledge GSP+ and its political intricacies. Certainly they do not have a voice in the decision making process that is in the hands of politicians, bureaucrats, diplomats and businessmen. The women whose livelihoods are at risk are the least important stakeholders in so far as the decision makers are concerned. This underlines serious ethical questions concerning equitable development.

### **Gender and Environmental Management**

Another area is environmental management and women's role in it. India's state-owned National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) has signed an agreement recently with the GOSL to build a 500 MW Coal-Fired Power Plant in Muthur in the Trincomalee District in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. The media reports that there has been considerable public protest against the project. Large scale highway development projects and tsunami and war IDP resettlement schemes have also been launched in this area. None of these projects are inherently wrong or undesirable. For thirty years the ethnic war denied these areas an opportunity for development. These types of large infrastructure projects can be deemed necessary to bring jobs to the area and help it catch up with the rest of the country. However, even such anticipated positive results do not justify the lack of consultation of the local community before such projects are started. In particular the voice of local women is wholly lacking in this development model. A top down development process is not democratic and shows an inability to learn the lessons from thirty years of war and the causes that, in the first instance, led to the war.

### **Gender and Education**

Education is another area which needs more gender sensitivity. Men and women have reached rough parity in numbers in Sri Lanka's tertiary education. However, women are still under-represented in many professional disciplines and find more it more difficult than their male counterparts to secure jobs that match their qualifications. Mainly because of cultural norms women do not get the same opportunities as men.

Sri Lankan women in paid employment are mostly in low-status, low skilled or low paying jobs in peasant and plantation agriculture and in the garment industry. Currently, the female unemployment rate is approximately 22%; double that of men in Sri Lanka. Although garment workers and migrant workers are predominantly female and earn a substantial share of the foreign exchange coming into the country they do not get appreciation and due recognition for the work they do for the country.

The Department of State of the United States selected Ms. Jansila Majeed from Puttalam, to be one of ten recipients worldwide for the 2010 International Women of Courage award. Ms. Majeed has worked in women's rights, peace building, relief work, working with young people and in demining in the North and East. Her international recognition is an important landmark for Sri Lankan women and highlights how they could contribute to leadership, peace building and sustainable development in the country. If our women have more opportunities, they will make positive changes in our society and ten years from now we could expect to see more women like Ms Majeed.

Finally, the following are few ideas and areas that we could adopt and work on to make Sri Lanka more gender sensitive and give more opportunities for women to make their contribution to sustainable development and peace building.

1. Awareness to be increased among the top-level politicians, decision-makers and policy makers on gender sensitive sustainable development
2. Women to play a more high profile role in development
3. Environmental decision-making should involve more women
4. Women at the peace table
5. Female participation in resources allocation to ensure that gender issues are addressed
6. Gender sensitive political leadership
7. Women and men work together to end gender discrimination
8. Investing in women and girls
9. Women in leadership roles
10. Equal rights and equal opportunities for women