THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARIANS IN UPLIFTING WOMEN

Sri Lankan women are prominent in all sectors of the country’s society and economy except one: Parliament. Despite being unsurpassed in their region in other social indicators, women still have a long way to go in raising their parliamentary status, says one of its comparatively few female MPs.

Hon. Dr Sudharshini Fernandopulle, MP, in Colombo.
Dr Fernandopulle has been a Member of Parliament since April 2010. She was elected to Parliament representing the United People’s Freedom Alliance. She is a Specialist Medical Officer. She has an MBBS and MSc in Community Medicine. She is the Chairperson of the Jeyaraj Fernandopulle Foundation.

The Universal declaration of Human Rights states: ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights’. Hence, protection of women’s human rights is important and it helps to achieve sustainable development in any country.

Millennium Development Goal three too focuses on women’s empowerment. Parliament, as the highest law-making institution which exercises political power, should be committed to achieving the Goals. Therefore, Parliament has a crucial role to play in contributing to uplifting the status of women. The Sri Lankan experience provides a classic example.

Emergence as full partners
Sri Lankan women have achieved progress in all sectors over the years. Parliamentarians have contributed immensely in achieving such national goals so far. Parliament has already enacted a large number of progressive laws and established strong institutional frameworks which have contributed to uplifting women.

Sri Lankan women had been living in a male-dominated society from ancient periods; but now their position has changed and they play multiple roles from being mothers, wives and homemakers to contributing directly to the country’s economy. Compared to other South Asian countries, Sri Lankan women enjoy equal rights without being subjected to discrimination. They are represented in socio-economic and political sectors and enjoy equal rights under national, civil, and criminal laws.

In 1931, women were given suffrage and after the introduction of the open economy in 1977 the traditional roles and responsibilities of women changed from being homemakers to being active participants in the labour force, contributing to the country’s economy. Women’s contribution is visible in all national development strategies. The performance of women and children, including female
children, is unique in Sri Lanka. Life expectancy for females is 78 years while it is 72 years for males, which is a great achievement for a country ravaged by terrorism for nearly three decades.

The literacy rate among females is 97 per cent. While the economic benefits of educating girls are similar in size to the economic benefits of educating boys, recent findings suggest that the social benefits from investing in female education are far greater than those from investing in males.

**Achieving social benefits**

There is very good evidence both nationally and internationally to demonstrate the powerful role of women’s agency and women’s educational empowerment in reducing desired family size, fertility, population growth, child morbidity, child mortality and gender-bias in child mortality, while at the same time showing that men’s education matters comparatively less to these important social outcomes.

According to the latest statistics, the maternal mortality rate is 39.3 per 100,000 live births and 96 per cent of pregnant women deliver in hospitals while 99 per cent have skilled attendance at delivery. The contraceptive prevalence rate is 68 per cent with a total fertility rate of 2.3 and most indicators are considered the best in the region and on a par with some of the developed nations. The infant mortality, child mortality and under-five mortality rates are 10.1, 11.4 and 21 per 1,000 live births respectively, with no obvious gender discrimination. However geographical variations exist.

Net primary school enrolment is 97 per cent for both girls and boys, while literacy rates among young people aged 15-24 are 97 per cent for boys and 98 per cent for girls. In 2008, the ratios of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education are reported as 99, 105.7 and 187 respectively while the ratio of literate women to men aged 15-24 increased from 100.9 in 2001 to 101.8 in 2006/07. Despite being a lower-middle-income country, Sri Lankan indicators show gender equality on a par with the developed nations.

**Social and economic leadership**

Value placed on women in the Sri Lankan society is remarkably high when compared to the other countries in the region. Gender-based discrimination is minimal in all sectors and is clearly reflected in all indicators. These factors together with the high literacy rate have empowered women in decision-making, especially when it comes to child caring and rearing practices. The universally recognized achievements are attributed clearly to the free education and health provided by successive governments and considered as long-term investments for the country’s human development.

Progress in medicine, education, environment (both physical and social), gender and race relations, public policy, improvements in infrastructure and many social areas have made, and will continue to make, important contributions towards empowering females. Sri Lanka is a rare example where social
development preceded economic development.

Today, Sri Lankan women hold positions in all sectors such as the judiciary – where both the posts of Chief Justice and Attorney General are held by women – higher education, health, public administration and other civil society organizations.

Moreover, the female unemployment rate steadily decreased from 12 per cent in 2005 to 7.5 per cent in 2010. Sri Lankan women play a significant role in all development spheres, and the contribution of migrant workers, tea pluckers and garment sector employees to the national economy is enormous. In 2010, migrant workers who were employed mainly as domestic aids in the Middle East had remitted nearly Rs.280 billion out of the total foreign employment remittance of Rs.465 billion. A significant portion of migrant workers are women.

**Lagging behind in Parliament**

Although the women in Sri Lanka have done considerably better than their counterparts in the South Asian region in many fields, we are far behind where politics is concerned. Although 51 per cent of our society is composed of females, their representation in Parliament, Provincial Councils and local government authorities is of great concern.

Although we produced the first woman Prime Minister in the world and a female executive President, we now have only 13 women Members of Parliament out of the total of 225 which is approximately around 5.7 per cent. They are a mere 5 per cent and 1.8 per cent female representation in provincial and local government bodies respectively.

Of the 13 in Parliament, many either belong to a political family or are celebrities. The chances of a woman without any such background entering and surviving in this field are very remote. There is also reluctance by many females to engage in politics. The attitude of the general public does not favour females entering politics. Further, the preferential voting system, together with the violence involved, makes it difficult for female candidates to compete with their male counterparts.

**Legislative powers to improve women’s status**

The Parliament is the highest law-making authority which contributes to the promotion of good governance.

Parliamentarians have a critical role to play in spurring and sustaining national action towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Parliamentarians should use their legislative powers to support the development of comprehensive legal frameworks to enhance women’s equality and their rights.

Parliamentarians could play a crucial role as partners of government and civil society in achieving gender equality, accountability and sustainable development.

Parliamentarians can contribute positively in preparing, updating and monitoring the implementation of gender equality plans, strategies and programmes by initiating effective legislation.
towards gender equality is clearly evident in the 1978 constitution which protects women's rights under Articles 12(2) and 27(6). Article 12(2) opposes any discriminatory actions based on sex and it further states that the state is able to take legislative or administrative actions for the advancement of women.


Sri Lanka's legal age of marriage is 18 years for both men and women under the Marriage Registration (Amendment) Act No.18 of 1995 and teenage marriages are very rare. The Women's Charter was approved by the government of Sri Lanka in 1993.

The Constitution recognizes women's equality based on The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.

In addition, the government has ratified many international treaties, covenants and declarations and protocols such as: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women of 1979; the Fourth World Conference on Women's Beijing Declaration of 1995, and the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action of the World Conference on Human Rights.

**Political commitment and institutional framework**

The political will of Parliamentarians can play a vital role to ensure gender equality and dignity for all women at the domestic level.

In the Sri Lankan context, strong political commitment to ensure gender equality is evident at the highest level. H.E. Mahinda Rajapaksa, the President of Sri Lanka, has committed to providing equal status for women. It is stated clearly in the government's policy document "Mahinda Chinthanaya": "Women make a major contribution to the economy of our country. The contribution of women in the plantation sector, in foreign employment and the apparel sector has increased significantly over the years. In such a context, I believe that the women in our country should not be afforded "equal" status, but should be given "higher priority". Further the livelihood development programme (Divi Neguma) of the government has focused on empowering females at household level by improving food security through promoting home gardening, backyard poultry and livelihood development.

Institutional frameworks help implement national legislation which contributes to maintaining law and order and the rules and regulations for implementation. The government has established a separate institution for women's empowerment called the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Affairs. This is the national machinery entrusted to develop, implement, monitor, evaluate and co-ordinate the policies and programmes for the realization of the rights of women. It is responsible for the international human rights treaties formulated within the socio-cultural framework of Sri Lanka in order to ensure women's development and protection and ensure participation in all affairs.

The Women's Bureau of Sri Lanka was established under the ministry in 1978 for the advancement of women. The bureau ensures equal opportunities for women before the law and in the social, economic, educational, political and cultural fields through the promotion of equality between women and men. It safeguards the right of women to protect them from gender-based violence and mainstreams gender in all development policies and programmes to create awareness of women's rights as indicated in women's conventions.

The National Committee on Women was established in 1993 under the ministry with the objectives of achieving the convention that embodies government policies pertaining to women. It has several other functions such as: to create awareness on women's rights as indicated in the women's convention, to receive and review complaints on indifferent treatments based on gender equality and refer them to relevant authorities and others.

Children and Women Bureau Desks, under the Sri Lanka Police, are also established to prevent violence against women.

**Women Parliamentarians’ caucus**

The Women's Caucus provides capacity-building initiatives for women in Parliament. Furthermore, it creates an access point for advocacy by civil society and provides a focal point for women Parliamentarians to communicate with women's organizations in civil society.

The caucus was established in 2006 under Parliament to help to promote gender-related decision-making and discuss and debate gender issues et cetera. Women Parliamentarians can discuss country-related gender discrimination issues as part of the caucus. Further, Members of the caucus actively participate in parliamentary debates, including adjournment debates, on women's issues.

Discussions of gender issues in a women's caucus can improve women's confidence and their ability to articulate and address issues within their communities. Within the caucus, women are able to assist each other with information and access to women's organizations. Their approach is entirely apolitical.

Parliamentary caucuses can play a leadership role in the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, in particular by working for gender equality legislation, overseeing its implementation, and ensuring that gender perspectives are systematically integrated in all legislation.