

The Last 10_Q Years

Excerpts from "The Women's Movement in Sri Lanka 1985-95: A Glance Back Over Ten Years" give women the world over valuable insights.

Some say that the women's movement in Sri Lanka is defunct. They base their judgement on the contrast between the activism of the women's movement in Sri Lanka in the 1970s and early 1980s. But to say that the women's movement is now extinct is to make an inaccurate statement. Rather than being defunct or even in decline, the women's movement in Sri Lanka has expanded from the actions of small groups to a nationally recognized movement.

Feminism, once a taboo word and dismissed as a dangerous trend copied from the West, has become broadly accepted. The debate has moved on from discussions about whether feminism is a foreign ideology to the nature of equality and difference, to the role of the state and judiciary and to the need for changing laws and structures as they affect women's lives. The movement has entered a new phase of campaigning and lobbying for policy changes.

THE SHIFT TO RESEARCH

The slogans "action" and "consciousness raising" were popular among feminists in the 1970s, and research was then considered to be "ivory tower" or "elite" preoccupations. But in the 1980s and 1990s, not only was there a conscious shift to research but there were also important moves to expose the male bias in research and promote Women's Studies as an academic discipline.

There were debates on this issue. Some argued that every discipline taught should have a women's component while others felt that a separate course on Women's Studies was needed. Many local women during the 1980s had followed courses abroad in Women's Studies, especially at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in the Hague and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) in Sussex. Moreover, local students at foreign universities were influenced by feminist movements and by programmes of study which included a feminist component. The

result was the welcome appearance in recent years of young feminist scholars doing research on gender.

Several women's research organizations were formed in the 1980s, including the Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR) in 1984, the Women's Education and Research Centre (WERC) in 1992, and the Muslim Women's Research and Action Forum (MWRAF) which was revived in 1986.

Other non-government organisations, such as the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), Social Scientists' Association (SSA), the Centre for Society and Religion (CSR) and many others, have also done research on gender issues. The result has been a large number of valuable studies on women covering a wide range of issues. Moreover, CENWOR has organized four National Conventions on Women's Studies between 1989 and 1994, providing opportunities for local researchers to present their research.

WOMEN'S STUDIES

One major development in this area has been the launching in 1991 of a Master's Programme in Women's Studies by the Post-Graduate Institute of the University of Colombo. Previous to this, at an informal level, a few courses for women were conducted by women's groups and other non-government groups. The Master's Programme of the University is divided into course work and a dissertation. Feminist scholars teach course units in Methodology, Women and Development, Women and Law, Women and Ideology, and Strategies for Change. Each year around 20 women and men have followed the course for which there is now a good demand.

All these have had important consequences for Sri Lankan scholarship. The absence of gender awareness in the work of the most prominent Sri Lankan male scholars at home and abroad and the continuing chauvinism and sexism among sections of the academic community is now being seriously challenged.

Moreover, these "gender sensitizing" programmes have been launched by women's groups such as CENWOR and WERC which target organizations of both men and women in various sectors. Participants to these programmes are made

aware of women's subordination in society and the need for change.

WOMEN'S HISTORY

An important trend of the decade has been the interest in detailed research on women's history. These studies were prompted by the accusation that feminism was a foreign ideology imposed by the West.

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Those active in the women's movement in the 1970s were keen on knowing if there were earlier women's protests about their subordinate status and struggles for equal rights. Research revealed a "lost history" of women's achievements and resistance which had been bypassed or ignored by both local and foreign scholars.

The Gender Unit of the Social Scientists' Association, in a project to retrieve women's history, has unearthed a veritable archive on this topic covering the last 150 years. As a result of all the research undertaken by women and women's groups, Sri Lanka has now an impressive number of books, pamphlets, and journals

in Sinhala, Tamil and English, which help to keep women's issues before the public.

The fact that women's literacy is very high—nearly 83 percent—helps spread ideas on women's rights. National newspapers and magazines have been increasingly covering feminism and women's rights, despite some sexism in the media. Even the

women's magazines, which highlight the usual "feminine" themes, now occasionally have important articles and interviews on feminist ideology and women's activism. The current women's journals which cover feminist issues include *Nivedini* (by WERC); *Voice of Women*; *Options* (by the Women and Media) and *Da Bidu* (in

Sinhala by the Jaela Women's Centre).

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