

(2) "Structure" refers in this note to a bureaucratic apparatus: "Organization", to more varied political forms.

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## CHAPTER 5 GENDER AND INEQUALITY IN SRI LANKAN SOCIETY: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE (1)

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### Introduction

The sociological approach to the study of inequality takes into account the difference between inequalities inherent in the nature of human beings and those which are evident in their conditions of existence. Inequalities inherent from nature are of no interest to sociologists. But differences in life chances and life styles among people which result from different positions they occupy in society, is the area of interest to sociologists (Beteille 1972).

Thus the concern in this paper is, firstly, to bring gender into the main stream Sri Lankan sociological studies on inequalities where it has been neglected. Secondly, perhaps more importantly, to understand how, gender differences act as an independent dimension which can also cut across other dimensions such as class, caste, and ethnicity in determining one's life chances and one's status in Sri Lankan society.

Earlier studies on Sri Lankan society by sociologists and anthropologists did attempt to explain and interpret social inequalities evident in society. Their studies however, concentrated mainly on aspects of caste, kinship and land ownership. Passing remarks on gender relations in these studies never evolved into serious discussions (Ryan 1953; Pieris 1956; Leach 1961; Yalman 1967; Obeyesekere 1967).

Similarly, recent studies on social inequalities have also neglected the aspect of gender as their main concerns have been on factors such as income, occupations, ethnicity, landownership, correct political connections and caste (Hettige 1984, 1995; Perera 1985; Gunasinghe, 1966). However, some scholars have been able to break this tradition and to bring gender into focus. De Zoysa in her study of a village in the Mahaweli Settlement area, analyzes the relationship between gender divisions, gender ideology, power and resistance among different class groups of settlers (De Zoysa 1995). Perera tried to understand the manner in which female sexuality and gender roles were socially and culturally constructed in Sinhala society by looking at the restrictive sexual scripts that are imposed on women (Perera 1985).

### Feminist Critique of Sociology and Stratification Studies

One of the basic feminist critique on sociology is that, sociology is a male-dominated discipline and as such it has important implications for its theories, methods, research and teaching (Abbot and Wallace, 1990).

In the 1960s and 1970s, women sociologists became more and more concerned with the way sociologists interpreted the world. They felt that sociologists' interpretations were only from the perspective of men, where women were ignored and marginalized. Therefore they argued that existing theories and explanations could be challenged. Abbot and Wallace go on to say that sociology also played a key role in maintaining women's subordination and exploited position.

Feminist critique of sociology could be summarized as :

1. Sociological research has been mainly concerned with men and theories are for men.
2. Research findings are generalized for the whole population through male samples.
3. Women's issues and concerns are often considered unimportant and thus ignored in analysis.
4. When women are included in research the situation is distorted.
5. Gender is seldom used as an important variable in interpretations (Abbot and Wallace 1990).

However, there is some change. Sociologists can no longer ignore, distort or marginalize gender divisions in their studies, as Giddens says:

"There is a basic problem of theory, which hardly figures at all in orthodox traditions of sociology, but which can no longer be ignored. This is the problem of how we are to incorporate a satisfactory understanding of gender within sociological analysis" ( Giddens 1989 p. 703).

### Gender and Stratification

Although feminists have been challenging and questioning male bias in sociology since the 1960s, it took much more time than that for the question of gender to be addressed directly in stratification studies. It was only in 1984 that a seminar on gender and stratification took place in the University of East Anglia. The papers presented at the seminar, later came out as a publication titled "Gender and Stratification". This has clearly demonstrated the importance of gender in stratification studies.

Thus stratification studies were for many years 'gender blind'. But as Giddens says:

"Yet gender itself is one of the most profound examples of stratification. There are no societies in which men do not, in some aspects of social life have more wealth, status and influence than women" ( Giddens 1989, p. 230).

Then the relevant question would be: "why did 'gender blindness' operate in stratification studies?" In answering the above question it is worth quoting from Parkin:

"Female status certainly carries many disadvantages compared with that of males in various areas of social life including employment opportunities, property ownership, income, and so on. However, these inequalities associated with sex differences are not usefully thought of as components of stratification. This is because for the great majority of women the allocation of social and economic rewards is determined primarily by the position of their families and, in particular, that of the male head. Although women today share certain status attributes in common, simply by virtue of their sex, their claims over resources are not primarily determined by their own occupations but, more commonly, by that of their fathers or husbands. And if the wives and daughters of unskilled labourers have something in common with the wives and daughters of wealthy landowners, there can be no doubt that the differences in their overall situations are far more striking and significant. Only if the disabilities attaching to female status were felt to be so great as to override differences of a class kind would it be realistic to regard sex as an important dimension of stratification" ( Parkin 1971, pp. 14-15).

Therefore, it is not that gender inequalities are not visible in the society, but they are not seen as a significant factor to be considered, because women's position is determined by that of their husbands or fathers. Parkin, in a way accepts gender inequalities, but conveniently ignores it. This is because he interprets such inequalities through a male or patriarchal ideology where male supremacy is endorsed.

The omission of gender is not only seen in Sri Lankan sociological and anthropological studies, it is also reflected in the university curriculum at both undergraduate and postgraduate studies. However, a Masters Degree programme on Women's Studies was launched in 1991 by the Faculty of Graduate Studies in the University of Colombo. Although this is a major development, a need still exists, to bring a gender perspective into the courses offered at the university. As an initial step towards this goal, an optional course on 'Gender and Development' will be offered to undergraduates specializing in Sociology at the University of Colombo, in 1998.

Until recent times, sociologists viewed that class inequalities largely determined gender stratification. Although, this idea was debated and discussed in the 1980s in the west, it is still important for Sri Lankan studies. Therefore, I wish to outline this debate briefly in the following paragraphs.

The critiques on stratification studies challenged the use of household as the unit of stratification as it dealt inadequately with households which did not have an adult male or where the wife earned more than the husband or where husbands did not work at all. They argued against the idea of taking the class

of the man to determine the position of other members in the household unit. (Goldthrope 1983) made a strong attempt to justify the conventional position by arguing that women's paid work had very little significance in determining the class position of women and it was determined by the male adult in the household (Goldthrope 1983). Sylvia Walby also raises questions on later criticisms made by others on Goldthrope's work. Walby says:

"The questions at centre of conventional stratification theory have not been criticized and replaced; rather women have simply been added on to existing concerns. Gender inequality is not examined in its own right in these analyzes, despite claims that women are being put back in. While these critiques are necessary revisions, they are not sufficient. An adequate attempt at a theory of stratification must also attempt to explain gender inequality and changes in its form and degree. Stratification theory should be seeking to specify and explain the changing nature of relations and inequality between men and women as well as that between conventionally defined classes" (Walby 1986, p. 30).

Thus, Walby in her discussion takes inequality between men and women as a key feature of contemporary society and gives attention to issues of gender relations and gender politics. She argues that women do not constitute a class, but nevertheless have some features of their social situation which are common to all women.

The discussion that follows attempts, briefly, to explore and interpret the gender relations in spheres of education, employment and violence to understand inequality in Sri Lankan society. Therefore, the attempt would be as Walby says, not to argue whether or not the woman's class position is determined by her husband or by her own employment or whether the household is a proper unit of study, as it would not take us to our task of analyzing gender inequalities. Therefore, the task would be to explain the gender relations in the above mentioned three areas and to argue that gender should be considered as a separate dimension in the study of inequality as it cannot be always explained through other divisions such as class, caste and ethnicity.

### Education

Gender disparities in access to general education have almost been eliminated due to educational policies introduced in the 1940s free education in state institutions at all levels, primary, secondary and tertiary, providing scholarships and bursaries and establishing schools around the country (Jayaweera, 1995a). Therefore the disparities in the literacy rate is more between sectors rather than men and women. It is being noted that the drop out rate of boys at secondary level is higher than girls as boys opt out for employment. Therefore, poverty is the main reason for non-schooling and dropping out of the school system and not gender.

Gender disparities and inequalities tend to occur not at the stage of entering the school system but at the stage of selecting the stream of study to pursue at the secondary and tertiary levels of education and at the time of entering the labour market. Gender seems to be an influencing factor in the choice of curriculum offering in the senior secondary grades and in the university. A higher percentage of girls are in the arts stream 75% in 1985 and 68.7% in 1993 and a relatively lower percentage in the science stream 46.2% in 1985 and 45.5% in 1993 (Jayaweera 1995a). Gender stereotyping is further demonstrated in vocational and technical training which is a sub-sector in the educational system. Although the enrollment in vocational and technical institutes has increased among women, the skills they obtain from these institutes are limited to those occupations which are socially determined as 'feminine' work (Jayaweera 1995b). Once again the determining factor for receiving a certain skill remains independent to one's own wish or abilities, but molded by external factors - the society and the culture.

Jayaweera examining the impact of education on women for the period since the UN Decade for women says that there is no positive linear relationship between the educational levels of women and their employment status. As this is an important aspect of gender inequalities it would be discussed in the following section.

### Employment

With regard to employment status of women, Jayaweera says, during the last few years women had access to new employment opportunities, but they were mostly in the garment industry which reinforced gender subordination and inequality. She says that women concentrate largely in peasant and plantation agriculture, traditional feminine and modern assembly line industries, teaching, nursing and in domestic services (Jayaweera 1995b). Gender role stereotypes in the school and vocational training programmes confine women to a narrow range of skills which invariably restricts employment opportunities.

Women unlike men are also constrained in their economic participation as they are still seen as the home-maker and because the unequal gender division of labour within the household still exists. This limits their participation in the labour market. Similar to Weber's analysis of class, gender relations act as a social closure to exclude women from certain occupations which would bring better financial rewards and prestige. Therefore, one could argue that gender acts as an important factor in determining the social status in Sri Lankan society.

### Violence

Gender based violence is on the increase. Newspapers daily report on rape, incest, assaults and killings of women and all other forms of harassments in work place, public places, transport and home. Child prostitution and trafficking in women is a major social problem in the country. Violence against women is not confined to a particular group-class, caste, ethnic, urban or rural sectors, but all women are vulnerable.

Gender based violence is violence directed against women by men. Since men consider themselves as superior, dominant and more powerful than women, they make use of their superior power against women. Studies on rape and other types of sexual harassments have revealed that it is not just a fact of sexual desires but it is a form of demonstrating superiority and power. Domestic violence is a reflection of the unequal power relations between the man and the woman in the household. The unequal power relations is a result of the unequal access to resources within the household. Thus gender based violence is a result of gender inequalities and therefore could not be explained through other divisions in the society.

### Conclusion

Gender which was neglected or marginalized in the traditional sociological analysis is gradually being discussed and examined. However, still gender is not included in the main stream Sri Lankan Sociological studies on inequality. Gender inequalities are evident in the areas of education, employment and violence. Such inequalities cannot be explained fully by other social divisions such as class, caste, ethnicity and political power, although at times they can override gender. Further research is needed in the main stream studies to establish the fact that gender differences cannot be explained by other sociological concepts such as class, caste, ethnicity, and political power. Thus, this is a task for sociologists studying Sri Lankan society, for the future.

### Note

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## CHAPTER 6 NGO FAILURE AND THE NEED TO BRING BACK THE STATE

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The phenomenal rise in the number and influence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) worldwide over the last two decades, has given rise to the emergence of a new development 'paradigm'.<sup>(1)</sup> Along with the public and the private sectors, an NGO sector has established itself on an equal, if not greater, footing in the delivery of economic and social development. Today, NGOs are considered to be a far better conduit for the distribution of multilateral and bilateral aid, for the dissemination of new ideas and concepts with regard to social and economic development, and as a means to foster participation and democracy in order to improve 'civil society'. This 'New Policy Agenda' (Edwards and Hulme, 1996), has shifted the onus of sustainable development on to non-governmental organizations, which are increasingly seen as a panacea for all the ills that afflict underdeveloped countries. NGOs are expected to address and resolve issues which range from those that affect the environment, gender inequality, sustainable development, law, political emancipation and participation, and almost every other shortcoming that is supposed to convey some meaning to the term 'underdeveloped'.

Issues or areas that the private or state sector cannot address, are automatically expected to be undertaken by NGOs. The fact that the NGO 'movement' has failed to do so is now increasingly recognized by observers and analysts of the process.<sup>(2)</sup> The reasons for this failure are numerous, perhaps also based on the high and unfair expectations from NGOs after all else had seem to have failed. In this paper, we examine the nature of the failure of the NGO movement following its explosive rise, and suggest that by simply rejecting all things statal, donor agencies targeted NGOs to disseminate their funds. In many ways, NGOs are a creation of funding agencies, possibly a major explanation for their failure. This paper argues, that it is now time to bring the state back in, into development and politics, but with the need to redefine and rebuild a new form for the state.

### The State vs NGOs

The principle justification and driving force behind the new found Conventional Wisdom regarding the emphasis on the NGO sector is state failure. It is