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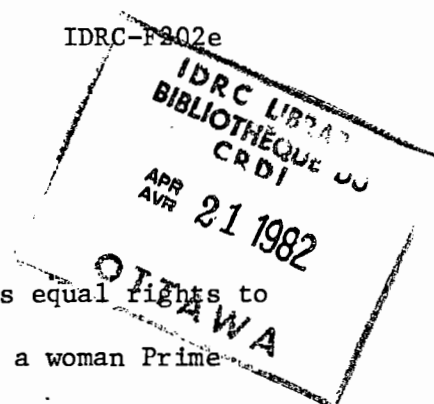
A monthly features service about science, technology, and development

Approx. 1000 words

WOMEN WORKERS SAVE THE DAY

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IDRC-F202e



COLOMBO, IDRC -- The Constitution of Sri Lanka guarantees equal rights to women. This was the first country in the world to elect a woman Prime Minister, and it is more than 50 years since the first woman sat on Sri Lanka's State Council.

But if the Buddhist ethic has gone a long way towards giving Sri Lankan women an equal place with men in the scheme of things, the process has not always been even.

Women make up 27 percent of the country's labour force of 6 million, but the largest numbers of women are to be found in manual and semi-skilled jobs; very few hold high-level management and professional positions.

Despite societal constraints, women are beginning to find their way into these male-dominated preserves. But Sri Lanka's women do not echo the shrill, aggressive tones of Western "Women's Lib". They are not in confrontation with men in that sense; nor would many of them want to be carbon copies of the male.

Both boys and girls have equal access to free state-paid education in Sri Lanka, from kindergarten to university. This makes Sri Lankan women more literate than most, and has made them more open to new ideas and less receptive to the traditional restrictions placed on women in all societies.

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Sri Lanka's comparatively low birthrate, at 2.7 percent, is partly attributed to the high level of education among its women. More women are going out to work and postponing marriage. In 1946 they married at 20.7 years; in 1975 they were marrying at 25.7 years.

Enrolment of women in the universities is high -- nearly half the total. Women have been entering the professions in a bigger way than ever before. They have become doctors (35 percent), dentists (39 percent), attorneys at law (8.5 percent), and chartered accountants (5.6 percent), according to 1975 figures. The engineers are few, but even that situation is changing.

Large numbers still become teachers and nurses, the most traditional of occupations for women. Both government and private sector offices have their proportion of women clerks and stenographers.

In the booming tourist industry, which has become Sri Lanka's fourth largest earner of foreign exchange, there is a growing number of women -- from travel agency executives to hotel clerks, from waitresses to housekeepers. But when it comes to cuisine, Sri Lanka is no exception to the situation that exists the world over -- the chefs are still men.

Half of Sri Lanka's 14.7 million people are women. Of its 5.94 million labour force, 1.63 million are women, according to 1981 figures. The largest numbers of women workers are found in the plantations, in the fields, in all forms of agriculture, where they form half the work force. In the mines and quarries, factories and industries, women form 34 percent of the work force.

In these lower-level jobs women sometimes work in uncongenial conditions and receive poor wages. Women who work as farmhands within families that cultivate the land are often unpaid partners. On the plantations they pick the tea and help to process it in the factories. They tap the rubber, tend the tobacco fields, pick and cure the leaves, wrap the beedies (small local cigars), and work in the fisheries.

They toil in the sun in the brick and building industries. They help in the manufacture of anything from pins and envelopes to furniture, textiles, soap, and matches. And it is in these jobs that there is legalized discrimination in wages. In all these industries wage rates are governed by Wages Boards, and in the unskilled and semi-skilled grades women are paid less than men for equal work. In all other grades women are paid the same wages as men.

There has been agitation among concerned and thinking women in Sri Lanka in recent years demanding that this anomaly -- a legacy from colonial times -- be corrected.

Women also figure very heavily in Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zone at Katunayake. Of 18,000 workers in the FTZ, 85 percent are women, performing jobs they have never done before. They are making electronic equipment, cutting and polishing gemstones, turning out jewelry, footwear, leatherwork, electrical machinery, toys, musical instruments, sports goods, umbrellas, fishing gear, and all kinds of clothing.

The work regime is strict in the FTZ, but the money is good. It was from the women here that the first suggestions came that the government withdraw the prohibition on night work for women. Ten years ago the government signed the International Labour Organization's Convention No. 89, which prohibits work for women past 10 p.m. Women, particularly in the FTZ, took the position that the ban deprives them of opportunities to earn more, and militates against promotion. Some employers were accused of shutting women out of certain jobs because they were not allowed to work at night.

The women demanded equal work, equal pay, and equal opportunity for advancement. And they won their case. The government withdrew from the ILO Convention in February this year.

Where the old stereotyping and prejudices are strongest is in the higher echelons of the public and private sectors. In 1980 women formed 6 percent of higher-rung professionals, administrators, and managers. Although this is a great improvement on the situation in 1948, when the country got its independence, the decision-making top levels are still male-dominated.

The government is now trying to remedy this by appointing women as senior secretaries to Ministries. In the private sector a few women have come to the top, but these are usually in smaller firms with family connections.

While Sri Lankan women are knocking on the doors to the real corridors of power, many at the middle and lower levels have been adventurously breaking into jobs that up to now have been considered exclusive male preserves. They are turning up in the army and the police. As engineers they work shoulder to shoulder with men on the giant Mahaweli River diversion scheme, and women are prominent in other construction projects.

There is a building boom in Sri Lanka, but the carpenters, masons, bricklayers, plumbers, and other tradesmen have gone off in droves to the Middle East. The exodus could have left a hiatus that would have slowed the momentum of the industry. But the women, who until recently have been merely fetching and carrying sand, cement, and water on the building sites, have stepped in to fill the gap.

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April 1982