



"Grinding poverty, unremitting toil, heavy family burdens, and minimal support—these are the hard realities of life for most women in the developing world. Too many children, too few skills, and too little recognition of their worth have stunted their lives—and hence the lives of their families, communities, and even countries. Yet this also implies an opportunity: helping women overcome such limitations means helping e".
 Kristin Helmore 'Christian Science Monitor'.

WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT III

In 1976, at the beginning of the UN Decade for women, the 'Economic Review' published the first comprehensive report on the situation of women in Sri Lanka, focussing on their real participation (or lack of it) in the political, economic and social life of the country. Five years later, in 1981 the 'Review' discussed the same theme and found the "situation not very much different". At the end of the Decade we return once

again to assess the progress made inviting two researchers to review how far women have been really involved in the development process and the impact of the Decade on the legal status of women. We also carry excerpts from other studies.

The Decade was marked by a worldwide spurt of activities, which helped increase the 'visibility' of

women. At an official level, special government machinery in the form of a Women's Bureau and a Ministry of Women's Affairs were established to serve as official focal points for the formulation and implementation of policies for the advancement of women. The Constitution of 1978 articulated gender equality as a fundamental right and removed disabilities on access of women to public sector employment, a process of "creeping" formal equality that had begun earlier. Two significant pieces of legislation were introduced—one a controversial and debated one "permitting" night work for women (by removing some ILO restrictions) and the other granting three months paid maternity leave for working women.

The Decade also witnessed the emergence and strengthening of non-governmental women's organisations and feminist groups. Some NGOs moved away from a social service approach to an issue raising conscientisation one whilst the others tread the familiar path of training and skills providing employment opportunities to women (often in the process strengthening the traditional roles of women as domestic appendage in for instance, the form of seamstress training).

The Decade coincided partly with the introduction of an "open economic policy" in Sri Lanka. These economic programmes had several implications. Some increased employment opportunities as in the FTZ and in tourism, but often as research on FTZ's throughout Asia and in Sri Lanka has indicated, with much to be desired working conditions. A phenomenon of this period was the exodus of women to West Asia, mainly as housemaids, again a double-edged benefit.

Yet, despite the interest, publicity and increased consciousness raising on women's issues, and increased opportunity in some spheres,

the position of women continued to be cause for concern. Because of the conscious and unconscious 'invisibility' of women, the development programmes have not had the positive impact it should have. For example, in the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Scheme, a significant part of agricultural activities are performed by women, their problems have not been sufficiently highlighted. As Boserup showed several years ago agricultural "modernisation" has meant marginalisation. Although the FTZ employs almost exclusively women, they are relatively low paid, lack security of employment and health conditions are a cause for concern. Problems of migrant female workers in West Asia, whose remittances form a substantial portion of foreign exchange earnings, have similarly not reached the levels of concern and resulted remedial action that they should.

Overall, over 1971-1981, the unemployment rate for females has doubled, with the proportion of unemployed women who have the O-Level, A-Level and University degrees being more than males. No significant changes have occurred in the pattern of female employment, with about 70% of women being employed as semi-skilled or unskilled labour. They are still confined to traditional areas of female employment such as teaching, medical and health services, domestic services and as stenographers and typists; although women have gained entry into new areas of employment the number of women in professions such as engineering, architecture and technical occupations remains low. The number of women, although high by other Asian or for that matter Western standards, in decision making positions is also low.

The Decade has sensitised women's issues. In the years that follow it will be necessary to follow through by changing existing conditions, attitudes, norms and procedures.