

Press Attention to Women's Rights, Emancipation and Interests

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Creative arts and mass media, in their depiction of women reflect the socio-economic structure, and at the same time, influence the role of women. It is, thus, a two way process. Dr. Hema Goonatillake, lecturer at the Kelaniya Campus, University of Sri Lanka, in a recent study has described the relationship of women to the creative arts and mass media in three broad aspects. The first deals with the manner in which creative arts and mass media depict women and their role in society; the second with the participation of women in creative arts and mass media as writers, journalists, broadcasters etc; and the third attempts to assess the extent to which women are exposed to these influences as readers, listeners, and their tastes in respect to these arts. The following extract from this study reflects the attention paid by the press to women's rights and interests.

Reporting on Women's Rights and Emancipation

Neither the women's liberation movement in the West nor the position of women in socialist countries gets much coverage in Sri Lanka. The few news reports that appear tend to sensationalise the issues with words such as "bra-burning, slogan-shouting, banner-waving, militant women's libbers" etc., without focussing attention on the deprivation and discriminations which gave way to these protests. The media is chiefly responsible for making the women's liberation movement a matter of ridicule and evoking an unfavourable reaction from the English reading middle class in Sri Lanka, who are tied, on the one hand to a feudal view of women, and on the other to a view of their own social reality as seen through the eyes of the Westerners. However, with the increased legitimisation of the issue of women's rights at international level, the sarcasm has tended to be milder. The examples given below illustrate the pitfalls of reporting on women even at present.

The coverage given in the local English newspapers in June 1978 to the visit of Jane McMichael, Executive Director of the National Women's Political Caucus in the

U.S. was more than usual. The newsreports on her visit and her discussion with media women, are an example of good, as well as bad reporting. Good because her contribution to the women' movement in the U.S. and the issues discussed at the press conference, were adequately and positively covered probably due to the fact that she is American and the media is today extremely pro-western almost in a propagandist sense. Yet within this positive coverage, hidden values which have been internalised by the media emerge, as is shown in the following examples of reporting by women journalists.

The report on McMichael's luncheon discussion given in the 'Ceylon Observer' is typical of the lighter vein reporting of women's activities. The newsreport is captioned "Our newswomen stumped on vital statistics". Little focus was directed to the main issues raised at the discussion and the treatment was very much in the fashion and home style of women's reporting as is indicated by the following:

"The inability of the local representatives of the media to provide the data — was it due to the weather on that day or the extra chill in the fruit drink".....

"The rice and curry lunch complete with pol sambol and pappadam like at home, at Mary Smith's, the U.S. Embassy's cool information officer"

"An argument between a news editor who cut a dashing figure in black velvet pants and a fair Ph.D."

"Mrs. McMichael took both sides with a women's magazine smile in her kittenish grey eyes and while the woman editor and Ph.D. carried on their private wars of liberation, I took mine to the lunch table."

The "Weekend" report entitled "Champion of Women's Lib" begins in a half humorous manner. "Though Mrs. McMichael is more sophisticated elegant and smarter than most, she is violently opposed to people making anything but a sundry remark about a professional woman's looks".

It is seen that the tone of reporting is mildly satirical and is still trapped in the metaphors of the fashion coverage scene, even in discussing women's rights.

Another pitfall of reporting on women is that the details of dress, appearance, marital status, number of children and husband's attitude to her work are considered very important. The best of women journalists seem to have resorted to this kind of reporting unconsciously. To give an example, a very senior journalist begins her interview with the woman Ambassador from Cuba, thus:

"In this, the Year of Woman, glamorous Senora Ana Maria Gonzales Suarez has arrived in Sri Lanka from Cuba as her country's Ambassador.... Dressed in a chic canary two-piece suit with a bouffant hair do and out-size gypsy earrings. Her excellency greeted me warmly. Her appearance contradicts the old (male?) myth that beauty cannot go with brains...."

The article ends with "Madam Ambassador has a doctorate in Law, is married and has two children, a girl and a boy. This is her first diplomatic appointment".

It should be mentioned that, the issue of women's rights as such gets news coverage and is subjected to discussion mainly, if not exclusively in the English media. Sinhala news coverage is limited to a few lines, if the news gets coverage at all.

Editorial Responses to the Women's Movement

Women's emancipation, as an issue came to the attention of Sri Lanka newspapers only due to the International Women's Year. It is interesting to chart the changes of editorial opinion since 1975 to the present day. The English language newspapers are covered, because it is in these, that the largest number of editorials appeared. It is interesting to remember, that the two major newspaper groups sampled here are both government controlled. (The Sun Group of newspapers was closed until March 1977).

The first editorials to appear in the English media scoffed at women's issues, making them appear ridiculous.

The 'Ceylon Daily News' editorial of 6-1-1976 was titled "The Women's year that was". The first and the last paragraphs of the editorial are quoted below:-

"The International Women's Year has ended, but even if male chauvinists' disapprove, the liberation of women has got going. Emancipatory laws have been passed and more liberal attitudes have been fostered to some extent. Someone said that men

compose symphonies while women compose babies. But women in recent years have set out with histrionic fury to change the world for themselves. They have streaked, freaked, gone on strike, thrown bombs, shrilled in loud voices, brandished placards with strident exhortations, donned mens' clothes and booted — they have balled those bras, we must mention, and burned them; they have even joined terrorist gangs and hijacked planes, ambushed buildings, taken hostages and robbed banks; two of them took or tried to take pot shots at the President of the United States and in Britain women crowned it all with characteristic pique by electing Dennis Healey, the Chancellor of the Exchequer the 'male chauvinist pig' of the year. His transgression, refusal to lower the tax on labour saving devices, considered one way of crippling the forward march of Women's Lib".

"But some discouraging facts have to be faced. Which women would care to pay alimony and who would like to be conscripted? And would you not mind coming home at dead of night after a night shift with some 'male chauvinist pigs' who think of you only as 34-24-38? And babies will always arrive, even test tube ones. Offspring, whether animals or human look for warmth, attention and security. So woman with her innate artfulness will have to strike a compromise between biological responsibilities and the fulfilment of emotional and intellectual needs".

The 'Daily Mirror' mirrorscope of 14-6-1976 entitled "Women lovely women" openly ridiculed the women's emancipation movement as the following paragraphs amply illustrate.

"What concerns us, however, is why the women of Sri Lanka — or more accurately Colombo 7 — should keep harping about emancipation". 1975 was International Women's Year. It began not with one bang but ten, when ten men were executed in Somalia for denouncing a decree by the Revolutionary Council abolishing discrimination between the sexes. No such legal discrimination exists here...."

"Colombo seven cuties who think that women constitute a clear-cut and identifiable group (and we are not thinking in terms of contours) forget that any differences that exist are due to class and cultural factors. In a recent issue of 'Logos', a woman 'liberationist' showed how the women of China had achieved liberation without any 'battle of the sexes'...."

"We suggest as their motto the stirring call — 'Woman of Sri

Lanka unite-you have nothing to lose but your husbands".

However, in the intervening years, change seems to have come about in the editorial perception about women's problems with the result that a more realistic and sympathetic portrayal of these issues were carried in the editorials in 1977. The change was very probably due to the importance of the International Women's Year itself and recognition that the women's issue had gained respectability; a perspective valid in a context of the Sri Lanka press, where eternal legitimisation carried a great weight.

The 'Ceylon Daily News' editorial of 7-6-1977 entitled "Equal rights", though still slightly flip-pant on the subject, treats it with greater seriousness.

"Now the number of women administrators has climbed to respectable proportions and takes up 25 per cent of the administrative appointments. The figure for the clerical service has been truly a triumph for the libbers. However, the feminists are not to be fobbed off with this kind of victory. Admittedly there are many problems that the women of today are faced with, but whether men should be made to share the burden of bringing up children, as some feminists are insisting, is not one that has universal agreement still. It is not that the men do not share in the bringing up of children, it is that the washing and brushing and nappy washing somehow remains inadequately done by the men."

Similarly, the mirrorscope of the 'Daily Mirror' of 9-3-1977 entitled "Wake up Women" reflects a changing attitude, though there is still the tendency to mildly ridicule the women's issue.

'1975 was Women's International Year' and the Minister of Finance in his budget speech made an appropriate gesture by doing away with the aggregation for tax purposes of wife's employment income with that of a husband up to certain limits. Of course, it's the husbands (who pay the taxes) who will benefit but the relief also undoubtedly benefits the wives...."

It is interesting to note that the editorials that appeared in 1978 were strong exponents of the women's cause.

The 'Ceylon Daily News' editorial of 31-3-1978 with the title "Equal rights for women" says,

"The old fictions about fragility etc. which have clothed women in myth and a so-called mystery can be explained in banal, unromantic terms;

domestic chores and economic demands made on the man as the traditional breadwinner, has led this country, as many others towards prejudices about the inferiority of women. The eventual result is a sex based, sex biased division of labour, which has militated against appointments and promotions at all levels and remuneration at lower levels. Despite our enlightened attitude towards the education of women and the opportunities generally available to them the labour market has been sex-typed with the majority of jobs preserved for men. The perpetuated inequality works right from the bottom with a few exceptions to the highest managerial, executive and decision making levels".

"But at a much lower and crucial level there is legalised discrimination against women. A man-made world has perpetuated the fiction that women are 'home makers' while it has compelled the women of a section of society which cannot even afford to hire servants to look after its children, to work in plantations, mills, industrial units, and in vital sectors of large companies which are dependent on their labour. They are paid less than men. This discrimination is legalised by the publication of rates in the Labour Gazette, and their governance under the Wages Boards".

Similarly, the 'Sunday Times' editorial "Women and their rights" of 3-3-1978, states,

"In the fundamental right to work, however, women in Sri Lanka are in many ways no better off than women in Victorian Britain. In many layers of society in Sri Lanka, and especially among employers, Victorian cultural values have become stratified and fossilised".

"Our news columns today focus on the plight of a woman in a mercantile firm which is over a century old who had to get herself sterilized after being dismissed for absence due to domestic chores".

"The Ministry of Labour announced last week, that its package deal for labour is to include the removal of discrimination on grounds of sex and age in 15 wages boards. The Government would also be well advised to consider the precedent of Britain where a statutory Equal Opportunities Commission was established in 1975 to give teeth to the Sex Discrimination Act and the Equal Pay Act".

The Sinhala as well as the Tamil newspapers have not taken a hysterical stand against the women's issue like the initial response of the English newspapers. However, editorial comment in the Sinhala and

Tamil newspapers has been surprisingly matter of fact and sympathetic even at the time of the first airing of the women's issue during the International Women's Year.

One gets the impression that the national language newspapers have taken their material directly from U.N. and similar publications. There seems to be a lack of dynamic and independent editorial policy which continues to display inferiority vis-a-vis the English language counterparts, even after 30 years of Independence. This has led in this case, to at least one good result in that the Sinhala and Tamil media have reproduced U.N. resolutions accurately.