

# FEATURES

## IMPROVEMENT IN EDUCATION AMONG WOMEN IN SRI LANKA OVER THE 1971-81 DECADE

Sepalika Fernando

*In this paper Sepalika Fernando of the People's Bank Research Department analyses trends in educational attainment in Sri Lanka and shows from the data gathered in the Census of Population, 1981 that more women are being educated since free universal education was made available and in the important age group of 15-19 years more females than males were attending school and also the women in this age group had a higher level of educational attainment.*

The literacy rate among the women of Sri Lanka, has been showing a gradually increasing trend and attained its highest growth rate since 1946 during the 1971-1981 decade. This figure which was as low as 21.2 percent of the female population in the year 1921, increased to 43.8 percent in 1946. Since then with the introduction of the free-education system in Sri Lanka this percentage has increased gradually, and the high growth rate of this figure shown during the decade of 1971-1981 is of special importance. The significance of this trend is more clear when one considers the fact that, the growth of the literacy rate among the male population had not shown a corresponding rate of increase within the same period. During the year 1971 this figure was 70.9 percent among the women, and a 85.6 percent among the men. During 1981 these figures had changed to 82.4 percent and 90.5 percent respectively. This shows that during the 1971-1981 decade, the rate of literacy among the women has increased by 11.5 percent, whereas this rate among the men, has increased only by 4.9 percent. It is clear therefore that the female population of Sri Lanka has achieved a marked improvement in their educational standards. Here too the improvement is more marked in the rural sector than in the urban sector.

The rate of literacy of women in the rural sector which was 67.9 percent in 1971, had increased by

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12.0 percent to 79.9 percent in 1981. The corresponding figure of increases for men, during the same period is 4.9 percent. It is clear therefore that rural women have achieved a growth rate more than twice that of men, during this period.

**Table 1** Percentage of the population 10 years and over found to be literate

	1971			1981		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
All areas	78.5	85.6	70.9	86.5	90.5	82.4
Urban	86.2	90.3	81.5	93.3	95.3	91.0
Rural	76.2	84.1	67.9	84.5	89.0	79.9

Source: Census of Population and Housing 1981  
Dept. of Census and Statistics

In the urban sector, while men, show an increase of only 5 percent in their growth rate of literacy during the 1971-1981 period women have achieved a comparatively high increase of 9.5 percent from 81.5 percent in 1971 to a 91.0 percent in 1981.

Men have achieved a slightly higher growth rate in literacy in the urban sector (0.1%) than in the rural sector while among women, the increase is greater in the rural sector.

District wise - Gampaha district shows the highest literacy figures

(94.2%) and the rates of literacy here among women and men are as high as 92.2 percent and 96.1 percent respectively. The lowest rate for a district is indicated in the Batticaloa district, (66.1%), where the literacy for women is 59.4 percent and that for the men is 72.7 percent.

The widest difference in respect of the rates of literacy among the women and men is found in the Nuwara Eliya district. The gap here is 17.7 percent, the rates for women and men being 69.7 percent and

87.4 percent respectively. The Jaffna district shows the least difference in this regard, where the literacy among the women is 91.7 percent and the men 94.1 percent; the difference being 2.4 percent.

The reasons for this situation, could be the greater availability of facilities for studies, enjoyed by the populations of the Gampaha and Jaffna districts.

It was found that the literacy rate of the male population has always attained a higher percentage,

at every census that has been conducted in the country, but that since 1946 the females have always shown a higher increase in their rate of literacy — than males. Therefore, it is clear that since the introduction of the free-education system, which gave the majority of people access to higher education a wide dissemination of knowledge and literacy has taken place among the masses which was hitherto restricted only to the more affluent classes. Also it is noticeable that the rate of literacy which was low among the women, has always grown at a greater pace since then. The main reasons for this change could be explained by the emergence, of the attitude that women should be employed and the urge of parents to educate their children to the highest possible levels. Before 1946, parents did not feel the necessity in general to admit their daughters even to village schools. Since that year, the establishment of schools on an island wide basis has gradually widened access to education, and this has also acted as an incentive to parents to educate their children.

Of the total school going population between 5 and 29 years of age, the percentage 'not attending' is almost the same for women and men, 43.2 percent for females and 52.6 percent for males. It differs, however, among the various age groupings.

The age at which children are generally admitted to school is 6 years. The Census of Population of 1981 has revealed that the percentage of non-school going male children of 7 years is 9.0 percent and the corresponding figure for the female children is 9.2 percent. Here the difference in percentage is a mere 0.2 percent for the females.

It has been shown that in urban areas among the non school going the percentage for male children 7.5 percent and for the female children 7.6

percent the difference being 0.1 percent in favour of males. In the rural sector this difference of percentage is a 0.2 percent, which is higher than in the urban areas, the respective percentages of non-school goers for the males and the females being 9.4 percent and 9.6 percent. This shows that the percentage of non-school going children in the rural areas, is higher than in the urban areas, but in general the percentage of non-school going females is not more than that of males in Sri Lanka. A classification of percentages of non-school going children according to the age groups is given in the table below.

leaving of male children by the age of 15. This trend is clearly shown in the 17–19 years age group of the urban areas. The reason for this situation may be due to a variety of reasons. These children get employed as a measure of economic support for their families while the female children of this age group of both the urban and rural areas are mainly engaged in their educational activities. Thus in considering the levels of education attained, females are a higher percentage than the males of this same age group.

According to table 3 females have a higher percentage of educa-

**Table 2**  
Percentage of non-school going population between the ages 6–22 according to sex, urban and rural

Age	Sri Lanka			Urban			Rural		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Yrs.									
6	13.2	13.3	13.2	11.6	11.4	11.5	13.6	13.7	13.6
7	9.0	9.2	9.1	7.5	7.6	7.5	9.4	9.6	9.5
8	8.4	8.8	8.6	6.6	7.1	6.8	8.8	9.2	9.0
9	8.0	8.9	8.4	6.5	6.3	6.4	8.4	9.5	8.9
10	8.9	10.8	9.8	7.2	8.8	8.0	9.3	11.3	10.3
11	10.8	11.9	11.3	8.8	9.9	9.3	11.3	12.4	11.8
12	17.3	18.2	17.7	13.7	16.1	14.8	18.3	18.7	18.5
13	21.0	22.3	21.6	17.3	19.1	18.1	22.0	23.1	22.5
14	28.7	29.2	28.9	23.5	24.8	24.1	30.1	30.4	30.3
15	37.6	36.4	37.1	32.2	31.6	31.9	39.2	37.8	38.5
16	48.3	46.7	47.5	42.5	41.0	41.8	60.0	48.4	49.2
17	60.1	58.3	59.2	54.5	51.7	53.1	61.8	60.2	61.0
18	71.1	68.3	69.7	68.0	63.1	65.7	72.1	69.7	70.9
19	77.6	75.7	76.3	75.2	71.5	73.4	77.5	76.9	77.2
20	84.9	85.0	84.9	84.8	83.9	84.4	84.9	85.3	85.1
21	89.9	89.4	89.6	89.3	88.1	88.7	90.1	89.7	89.9
22	92.8	92.1	92.5	91.9	91.0	91.5	93.1	92.4	92.8

Source: Census of Population and Housing 1981  
Dept. of Census and Statistics.

The table shows an increasing trend in percentages, according to increase in age group. In all groups between 6–14 years the percentage of non-school going females is higher than for males. But between the ages of 15–19 years, the percentage for females is lower than that for males. What should be noted is the comparatively high level of school

attainment in the age group between 15 – 19 years: mainly because of the higher level of success at the G.C.E. (O/L) and G.C.E. (A/L) examinations. Here the percentage for the A/L is higher than that for the O/Ls. This shows an improvement in the level of participation by the females as they progress further up the educational ladder. This trend

**Table 3**  
**The percentages and the number of students belonging**  
**to various educational levels between 15-19 years**  
 (Grouped according to sex)

Educational Attainment	Male		Female		Total	
	No.**	%	No.	%	No.	%
* All attainment	815.2	50.7	792.3	49.3	1607.5	100.0
G.C.O. (O/L) 6 or more subjects	39.4	44.7	48.8	55.3	88.2	100.0
G.C.E.(A/L) less than three subjects	15.3	43.0	20.3	57.0	35.6	100.0
G.C.E. (A/L) more than three subjects or equivalent	4.8	41.4	6.8	58.6	11.6	100.0
Post graduate degree or equivalent	.009	47.4	.01	52.6	.019	100.0

What is shown in the table is an extraction of a specified section which shows an improvement in women's participation.

Note: \* In this column the above numbers are the aggregates of the number of students from the non-school goers to the highest educated of the same age.

\*\* In thousands.

Source: Compiled from Census of Population and Housing 1981, Dept. of Census and Statistics;

Further details are given in table 6.

The number of students who have passed the G.C.E. (O/L) with a minimum of 6 subjects shows an increase in respect of both the male and female categories but here too the percentage of increase in respect of the females is higher. This trend in increase is also seen from G.C.E. (A/L) to the University level, and in all instances the females have achieved a better percentage of increase than the males. Also, according to the 1981 Census among the age group 10-29 years, which is the population engaged in studies, the highest degree of participation and achievement in respect of the female category was found to belong to the G.C.E. (O/L) and G.C.E. (A/L) levels. This is clear from table 5.

As depicted here the females who have passed the G.C.E. (O/L) in 6 subjects or more exceed the number of males by 8 percent; those who have passed in less than 3 subjects, at G.C.E.(a/l) by 6.66 percent; and those who have passed in more than 3 subjects, by 8.16 percent.

It is more important therefore to note that of the school going population, the percentage of women who have received more than 8th grade education is 50.06 percent.

is even more clear when compared with the Census data of 1971.

In general, we observe a decline in percentages of non-school goers from 1971 to 1981, the decrease of percentage for the females being 12% from 29.5% in 1971 to 17.5% in 1981. In respect of the males the percentage has decreased from 16.0% in 1971 to a 8.7% in 1981 by 7.3%. The population who have completed a primary education has also increased the percentage of females in this category being 42.4% in 1971 and 62.3% in 1981. Here it has increased by 19.9%. In the male category it has increased by 17.5% from a 50.7% in 1971 to a 68.2% in 1981.

**Table 4**  
**Population aged 10 years and over by level of**  
**educational attainments by sex 1971 to 1981**

Educational Attainment	Sex	1971		1981		Difference(%)
		No.	%	No.	%	
Passed G.C.E.(O/L) in at least 6 subjects	Male	223,128	4.6	409,796	7.1	+ 2.5
	Female	192,392	4.3	390,513	7.0	+ 2.7
Passed G.C.E.(A/L) in at least 3 subjects	Male	56,509	1.2	81,648	1.4	+ 0.2
	Female	41,974	0.9	76,822	1.4	+ 0.5
Degree or higher	Male	29,081	0.6	49,543	0.9	+ 0.3
	Female	12,358	0.1	26,847	0.5	+ 0.4

Source: Compiled from Census of Population and Housing 1981, Department of Census and Statistics

This figure indicates a slightly higher percentage (0.12%) for females over the percentage of males (49.94%).

Since the implementation of Free Education the rate of literacy among the women in Sri Lanka has been improving gradually, and it is significant that they have achieved a level which is very close to that of males (all attainments). The emergence of this situation could be defined as a very beneficial impact of the expansion of accessibility to education, which was confined to a limited population earlier. Also, another feature that emerges from the increased number of women who

seek higher education, is that more women now carry greater hopes and aspirations for a prosperous future. This change in trends may be explained as a situation brought about by the prevalence of stiff competition for the limited number of job opportunities available, which in turn necessitated the acquisition of the highest possible educational qualifications, by all. Another factor which accounts for this situation is a change in the attitudes of women, to lead a more self-sufficient and independent life, which in turn requires a sound economic base. These reasons for high levels of education among women could be for better prospects of

employment, marriage etc. but it also appears that some women delay their opportunities of employment and marriage, in pursuance of a higher education.

A general trend that could be noticed by a comparison of Census data of 1981 with that of 1971 is the increasing age of marriage for women. It is revealed that the number of women between 15-19 years who do not get married has increased by .3 percent between 1971 and 1981. This increase for the 20-24 age group is 2.1 percent and an increase of 5.5 percent is seen in the 25-29 age group. Thus it can be assumed that this trend of the increasing percentage of women seeking higher education has in an indirect manner resulted in the increase of the percentage of un-married women, of the marriagable age group in Sri Lanka.

Note: In this paper tables 3 and 5 are compiled from table 16 of the Census of Population and Housing 1981- Department of Census and Statistics (Population tables).

**Table 5** Population aged 10-29 years by level of educational attainment by sex in thousands

Educational Attainment	Male	%	Female	%	Total	Improvement as a % (Female over Male)
Passed grade 8,9 or G.C.E. (O/L) less than 6 subjects only	988.0	50.79	957.2	49.21	1,945.2	(100.0)
G.C.E.(O/L) 6 or more subjects	133.4	46.0	156.6	54.0	290.0	+ 8.0 (100.0)
G.C.E.(A/L) less than 3 subjects	62.4	46.67	71.3	53.55	133.7	+ 6.66 (100.0)
G.C.E.(A/L) or more subjects or equivalent	29.8	45.92	35.1	54.08	64.9	+ 8.16 (100.0)
Below degree but above G.C.E.(A/L)	5.4	60.0	3.6	40.0	9.0	(100.0)
Degree or equivalent	9.4	54.65	7.8	45.35	17.2	(100.0)
Post graduate degree or equivalent	.7	70.0	.3	30.0	1.0	(100.0)
All attainments	3,069.9	50.49	3,010.9	49.5	6,080.8	(100.0)
Passed grade 8 and above	1,229.1	49.94	1,231.9	50.06	2,461.0	+ 0.12 (100.0)

Source: Compiled from Census of Population and Housing 1981. Dept. of Census and Statistics.

(Table 16 in Census Tables)

SRI LANKA	TOTAL
SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT	
ALL SECTORS	
TOTAL	601 0953
ALL ATTAINMENTS	435209
NO SCHOOLING	210315
PASSED GRADE 1 OR 2 ONLY	542920
PASSED GRADE 3 OR 4 ONLY	2389061
PASSED GR. 5,6 OR 7 ONLY	1321640
PASSED GRADE 8 OR 9 ONLY	623556
G.C.E.(O/L) LESS THAN 6 SUBJECTS	289966
G.C.E.(O/L) 6 OR MORE SUBJECTS OR EQUIVALENT	133725
G.C.E.(A/L) LESS THAN 3 SUBJECTS	64978
G.C.E.(A/L) 3 OR MORE SUBJECTS OR EQUIVALENT	8953
BELOW DEGREE BUT ABOVE G.C.E. A-LEVEL	17269
DEGREE OR EQUIVALENT	1010
POST GRADUATE DEGREE OR EQUIVALENT	42352
UNSPECIFIED	