

RIGHTS OF MARRIED WOMEN IN THE HOUSEHOLD: EQUAL OR MARGINALIZED?

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Abstract: Gender stereotyping has been in existence for centuries in the South Asian context. At domestic level in countries such as Sri Lanka specifically, husbands were considered as the bread-winners who had the whole responsibility of earning for the family whereas it was the wives' role to remain at home doing the household chores, attending to children's matters and caring for the husband and his family. However, things have changed drastically by now with the expansion of education and technology. Women contribute equally in domestic, financial matters and are successfully employed. Nevertheless, women are still expected to play the stereotypical female role, set by the society which is considered as the problem of the study. The aim of this study is to find out whether married Sri Lankan women with children have equal rights in the household in the present context when compared to their counterparts. To gather data, an online questionnaire was administered and the responses of 50 married women with children were analyzed quantitatively using excel. Among these 50 samples, 10 random respondents were interviewed and data was qualitatively analyzed using content analysis. The concept of 'Gender Equality' was closely monitored in the study. Findings revealed that majority of the married Sri Lankan mothers are equally educated as the husbands and contribute equally or more in financial, family and domestic matters when compared to the overall contribution of the husbands. Women are mostly unhappy due to lack of recognition and are mentally and physically unsatisfied under the dominance of the husbands. This is mostly due to the conventional stereotypical mindset inculcated into the population since childhood. Despite education and employment success, women seem to be still marginalized in society as incompetent and vulnerable when compared to men.

Keywords: household, gender equality, discrimination, marginalized, unsatisfied

Introduction

Sri Lanka was able to gain recognition in the world back in 1960, with the appointment of the world's first female prime-minister, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranayake. This was interpreted as a mark of equity and equality within the country, with regard to gender roles (Wickramasinghe and Kodikara, 2014). Apart from that, the first female president of Asia, who was the daughter of Prime-minister Sirimavo, Mrs. Chandrika Bandaranayake Kumarathunga was appointed in 1994. Thus, Sri Lanka has been able to remain at a significantly remarkable position when compared to many countries in the world, considering the position offered to women in the Sri Lankan context.

Women are currently being employed in respectable positions in both public and private sector, outnumbering men. Women are also more privileged as they have access to free education and are

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able to reach the peak of the education ladder with respect to all fields of study. Even though, these are signs of women empowerment, women seem to be experiencing discrimination at different circumstances in society at present. As stated in studies, from female professionals possessing adequate education and societal recognition (Dharmawardhane and Nawarathne, 2014) to wage earners in rural areas (Gunawardena, 2006), females still encounter traits of discrimination in Sri Lanka.

This study aims to explore whether Sri Lankan women are deprived at domestic level and whether their rights are marginalized when compared to their male counterparts. According to the literature, it could be witnessed that women are experiencing discrimination at domestic level via controlling behavior, mental and physical abuse and sexual violence caused by their spouse (Jayasuriya, Wijewardena and Axemo, 2011). Whether married Sri Lankan women with children who are employed receive equal rights as their male counterparts is the main research question which is addressed in the study.

Related Work

Despite the educational achievement and employment success of women today, women still experience various forms of discrimination and violence in most parts of the world. According to Birdwell (2009) women in Sub Sahran Africa undergo human rights violations with regard to “sexual discrimination and abuse, intimate violence, political marginalization and economic deprivation” (p.3) which is unparalleled to anywhere else in the world. A part from this, in countries like India and China female infanticide has become accepted as a legal policy where millions of female fetuses are being aborted, murdered or abandoned due to the cultural stigma of having girl children (Wall, 2009). In addition to this, certain religious norms confine women to remain within certain boundaries. Engaging girls in child marriages, restricting rights to initiate divorce, restricting female property inheritance, dowry concerns, child custody, confining women to certain attire and suppressing freedom of movement are some of the harsh realities that women endure due to female deprivation in society (Patoari, 2019; Badawi, 1980).

Discrimination against women is common in most South Asian countries where people are accustomed to think and behave in a conventional manner. Even in the new millennium, women’s rights are marginalized due to religious injunctions, discriminatory laws and feudal conventions (Niaz, 2003; Verma, 2000). India is one of the countries which practices certain conventions where the rights of women are simply ignored. Starting from the point where it is believed that only a ‘son’ will be able to take the family name and inheritance forward the reluctance of accepting a girl child begins to instill in the minds of the traditionally dismantled adults. As Pril (2008) states “Raising a daughter is like watering your neighbors' garden” (p.1). It is believed that despite the financial burden and the care and sacrifice provided to a daughter by her parents, she must be set off in marriage to the husband’s house eventually where she is compelled to take up the husband’s family name and reestablish her roots in a new domain. In addition to this, women face all sorts of discrimination since childhood such as child marriages, dowry deaths, rape, wife battering, and even undergo repercussions of rigid cultural acts such as Sathipooja where the wife should jump in to the burning flames of the dead body of her husband after his demise.

In the past, Sri Lanka headed a patriarchal society where male was considered as the bread winner of the family who took the whole responsibility of financial matters at domestic level. It was his responsibility to cater to the financial needs of the household; starting from feeding the family members to providing security and shelter. The male was considered as the 'hero' of the household and thus, the female had to tend to all his desires and needs without resentment. In addition, it was the female's responsibility to take care of the children and manage all household chores such as cooking, cleaning and washing. Thus, the desires and needs of the woman was often neglected by the family members. As De Alwis (2002) states this "changing role of women in Sri Lankan society is a topic that has been debated and fought over for several centuries" (p.675).

Despite any physical or mental hardships, it was expected from the woman to tend to all domestic matters and also to the education of the children. It was the woman's responsibility to teach 'right and wrong' to the children in addition to taking care of them. In certain countries such as India and Bangladesh, girls had to encounter this at a very young age due to child marriages. This has been in existence from the past until present (Ballard, 1982; Banu, 2016). Even though, South Asian women may have found these responsibilities gruesome and tiresome, they often had to abide by the traditional and conventional mindset inculcated in the people. Thus, this gender stereotyping has affected women substantially in career progression, educational success and at domestic level, leaving them depressed and psychologically anxious (Tanbassum and Nayak, 2021).

However, things have changed domestically at present in the financial aspect. With the introduction of free education, women are now educated and employed. They are able to contribute equally at domestic level in financial matters and requirements (Roy et al., 2017). Even though Sri Lankan women contribute vastly to the national economy via garment and labour exports for foreign exchange, this stereo-typical mindset where women are discriminated in society, still exists. Married Sri Lankan women with children migrate to other countries for employment purposes (garment workers, house maids), leaving behind their spouse and children so that they would be financially benefitted by the income generated by the 'woman' of the family. Despite the self-sacrifice, tears, sweat and emotional abandonment in a foreign country, women are taken for granted and neglected in society.

This is explained by Mehrotra (2016) who claims that women are still expected to act the traditional 'female' role within a household. It is still considered a responsibility of the woman to do all household chores, children responsibilities and attend to the desires of the husband despite her earning for the family. Hence, this stereo-typical nature where the woman is always kept at a marginal level, should be changed and steps should be taken to mitigate this at present so that the future generations of South Asian women would be able to live in equality and equity.

Methodology

The primary data for the study was mainly gathered through two means: 1) an online Google questionnaire consisting of both close and open-ended questions administered to married but employed women with children. The data was gathered based on several themes such as socio-demographic information, contribution for domestic work, children's responsibilities, economic contribution and satisfaction. 2) interviews conducted to 10 randomly selected employed and married women with children. Descriptive analysis was performed via a mixed approach. Quantitative data

was analyzed using excel. The qualitative data was recorded and transcribed. Based on the responses by the sample, themes were created and the data was thematically coded. Data cleaning and coding procedures were carried out before the analyzing procedure.

Analysis

The following analysis depicts the responses of 50 married and employed females with children. This is an amalgamation of data received via google forms and interviews. The data is thematically analyzed and presented in subtopics.

Employment Background of the Couple

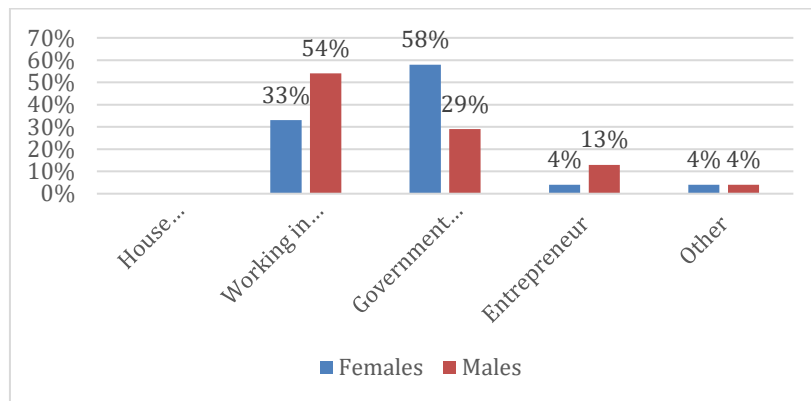


Figure 1: Place of employment (Females and Males)

Accordingly, 96% stated that both men and women were employed and majority claimed that they were engaged in white collar jobs which require a substantial education level. According to the above figures it can be identified that majority (58%) of females are engaged in government sector employment whereas their husbands are mainly occupied in the private sector. The results revealed that 60.9% husbands generate more income than their wives. However, 33.3% have stated that they spend equal amounts on domestic matters despite the fact their husbands earn more.

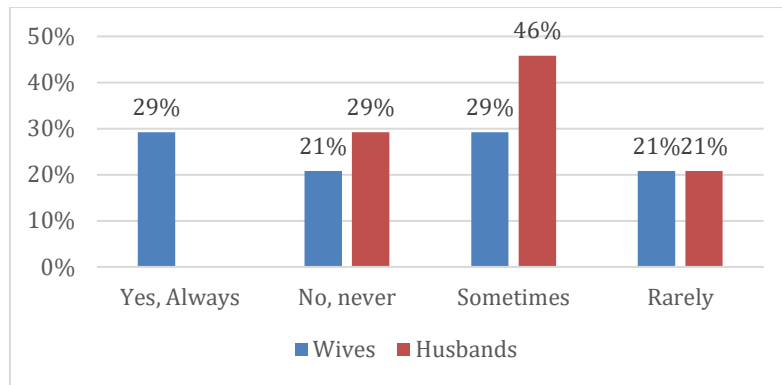


Figure 2: Financial dependency on the partner (Females and Males)

It was found out that 70.8% wives and 86.8% of the husbands either never, rarely or sometimes depended on the partner for financial assistance. The financial dependence of the husbands on their wives was 16% higher than their wives despite the fact that husbands generated more income.

Dedication towards Children's Work

According to the data, it is seen that in comparison to the husbands, the females spent more time with children. This involved teaching them homework, escorting for classes, playing with them, doing any other leisure activity. 45.8% females revealed that they spent more than 5 hours a day with kids every day. The majority 52.2% revealed they spent more than 10 hours per day and a minority of 17.4% revealed they spent less than 10 hours with them. None claimed that they spent less than 5 hours with their children. There were no responses for less than 5 hours with children.

In contrary, 78.2% men spend 1-5 hours with kids. Unlike the mothers, fathers do not spend more than 5 hours with the children. 17.4% agreed that they do not have any time to spend with the kids. It is revealed that 43.5% of the mothers contribute to the children's education. In contrary, only 17.4% fathers only contribute to the children's education.

Apart from this, the results revealed the behavior of the parents immediately after returning home from work.

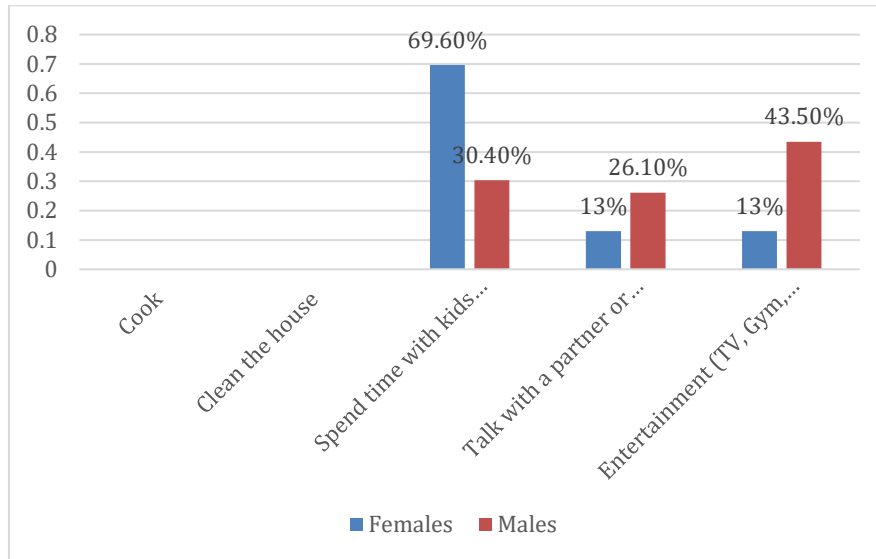


Figure 3: Domestic responsibilities undertaken by mothers and fathers on a daily basis

Accordingly, it is revealed that 68.6% mothers tend to their children's needs immediately after returning from work whereas it is 30.4% by the fathers. Majority of 43.5% fathers prefer engaging in an entertainment related activity such as watching TV, going to the gym, listening to music or playing video games whereas it is a minority of 13% mothers who take time to wind-down and relax after work. Based on the interview data it was revealed that all mothers who have school-going children, do not have any time to relax until children are gone to bed at night. If the children are small and are being taken care of by family members or maids, the mothers are expected to tend to them immediately after returning home from work. It was revealed that they are not able to sit down and wind-down, change their cloths, take a wash or relax with a cup of tea as they are obliged to attend to the needs of the children; feed them, wash them or follow up with studies immediately after coming home as the caretakers need to be released after the arrival of the mothers. Others, whose children are engaged in higher education, employed or are living away from home, have the freedom to relax after work.

Attending to Domestic Chores

It was revealed that in majority of the houses, the parents do not have any helper to assist them with domestic chores. Mostly, it is the mothers who engage in cooking, washing and ironing cloths and grocery shopping whereas the husbands seem to be contributing for cleaning and grocery shopping occasionally.

It is also revealed that minority of Sri Lankan married men occasionally engage in cooking and majority do not know how to cook nor make a cup of tea.

The interview data revealed that, the service rendered by the wife is often disregarded by the husbands. It was also found out that the children occasionally take their mothers for granted as they believe it is the responsibility of the mothers to attend to all domestic chores.

Marital Satisfaction

It was revealed that 87.5% women were happy and satisfied with their relationship at present due to the only reason being that the husbands love and care for the children and work for the wellbeing of their family. 43% also revealed that the husbands are understanding and care for their needs.

i) Less domestic contribution and appreciation by the husbands- The reasons for dissatisfaction were mostly due to the fact that the contribution of the husbands at domestic level was significantly low and as the wives were not given due recognition for their efforts made to uplift the well-being of the family. 40% have not revealed the reason for their dissatisfaction.

ii) Sexual fulfillment- 65.2% revealed that they were sexually fulfilled by their partners. However, the others revealed that they were dissatisfied as their sexual needs were not fulfilled, 25% each revealed that the couple does not maintain sexual relations and that their partner has other extra-marital involvements. It was revealed that the main reason why they were together is the fact that the wives were concerned about the mental well-being of their children.

iii) Dominance by husbands- Considering male dominance, 54.2% revealed that they were dominated by their husbands and that they experience mental torture. 78.3% revealed that they have not been physically abused by their husbands. The ones who were physically abused, did not want to reveal the real reason and mentioned that it was a mere one-time accident. It was also revealed that they managed to overcome this abuse by talking to a friend or keeping it hidden. Majority 28.6% revealed that they went for counselling and 14.3% stated that they discussed with spouse to overcome the problem. 14.3% stated that they went to the police and retaliated. 69% revealed that they wanted to dissolve the relationship or prefer finding a new partner who would be more concerned towards their emotional well-being but restrain themselves due to the conventional background of the country and the mental agony of the children in case of a divorce. It was stated that "it is the woman who would be blamed if she decides to end the relationship in countries like ours. Even though your spouse commits adultery or is unfaithful to us, still it is expected for the woman to tolerate all this for the sake of the children".

Several ladies who were interviewed, expressed their feelings towards male dominance in the house hold which was claimed to have begun from a very young age. It was revealed how women have to obey the fathers and siblings when they are small, respect, obey and honour our husbands when they get married and

depend and on and obey the sons' as they get older. It was expressed how mothers would even give the better share of the meals to the male siblings despite the fact that all growing children need equal nutrition. Several women expressed how this "cycle continues" without a stop. Thus, the mental torture and depression that women encounter from a very young age is clear.

iv) Controlling behavior of husbands- It was also revealed through interview data that most husbands who serve in high paid jobs, force their wives to quit their jobs and serve as homemakers. This dominance and conventional thinking patters have led to unnecessary marital conflicts and mental anxiety in the employed women who have had a substantial educational background and independent income. By trying to minimize the independence and freedom of the wives, the

husbands expect them to serve as ‘housewives’ and tend to all domestic responsibilities irrespective of the fact that this is the 21st century where women should be independent income generators.

However, with regard to working couples, it was also revealed that both spouses earn more than they used to and the women trust their husbands financially. However, it was stated that even though there is trust, they would still think twice before lending a large amount of money to the husbands as they believed that independent income is necessary for a woman. In addition, it was identified that majority of the couples spend for domestic finances via their personal accounts where as a minority of 34.8% use joint accounts.

Discussion and Findings

According to the findings, the majority of women are employed in the government sector which is the very reason for them have substantial time to spend with the children and attend to household chores. The majority of husbands are employed in the private sector which in contrary requires more time and energy. Therefore, the males do not have the patience and time to take care of kids nor do any household chores after work. Instead, they prefer to have a relaxed time after work and prefer to have ‘personal space’ after arriving home. Similar to Mehrotra (2016) findings, it was found out that most Sri Lankan married women do not have freedom and are mostly psychologically and physically drained due to the domestic-work pressure they have to undergo at a routine level in addition to their work pressure (Kodagoda, 2018). Accordingly, irrespective of the fact that majority of the women are now employed and financially contribute to the well-being of the family similar to their husbands, the women are still expected to attend to all children’s’ and household needs. It was revealed that husband tend to financially depend on the wives at certain occasions.

Similar to Agnihotri (2024) and Kodagoda (2018), findings reveal that women are also mentally agonized at times due to the amalgamated work pressure and domestic pressure. Husbands do not take-up any household obligations at a regular basis (cooking, washing, cleaning) and try to distance themselves away from these household responsibilities as much as possible. Majority of the husbands do not know how to cook nor make a cup of tea and would rather depend on their spouses. This imbalance often leads to Work Family Conflict (WFC) which results in Marital Conflict (MC) (Cerrato and Cifro, 2018). In addition, it also revealed that traditional family roles still affected the way men and women handle work and family obligations

Moreover, Cerrato and Cifro (2018) state that the main reason for the conflict is the ignorance and negligence of the wives’ emotional and physical satisfaction by the family members. The higher the profession of a married woman, the greater is her stress levels resulting in WFC which leads to MC later on. The fatigue and tiredness of the working woman at domestic level is merely ignored despite the fact that they are also tired and drained by the time they get home. Still, they are expected to cook and make food available on time, attend to all household chores such as cleaning etc, take care of the children and their homework and be prepared to sexually satisfy their partners if required. As Harryson, Strandh and Hammarström (2012) explain “domestic work is a highly gendered activity as women tend to have a greater and men a smaller responsibility” (p.1). Similarly, the findings reveal

that even when there are other family members to support at home in taking care of toddlers and babies, the working-mothers are expected to tend to them immediately after returning home.

Findings reveal that even though majority of women suffer due to emotional neglect, lack of appreciation and lack of empathy by their partners, they still try to prevent themselves from causing harm to the relationships mainly due to the emotional involvement with their children. Women do not express their real concerns with regard to marriage and they are uncomfortable revealing personal details about their real feelings towards the husbands. Women prefer not to disrespect their husbands at any cost as they try to be discreet in their personal issues.

Conclusion

According to the above information, it can be concluded that the rights of married women at domestic level are not equal but marginalized. Despite that fact that women contribute in equal terms for the benefit of the family, her conventional workload expected to be fulfilled towards the children, the husband and home front, remains constant. The Sri Lankan husbands in the 21st century have not deviated from the conventional thinking patterns which were inculcated into their minds for decades. Instead of contributing for domestic and children's needs, they tend to depend on their working wives for all domestic needs as well.

As we live in a technologically advanced world, people must begin to think in modern ways and break the conventional norms and thinking patterns which are focused on stereotypical identities of gender. In the present day, gender does not only refer to males and females but also the Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) community. All are human beings and thus, all should be treated equally.

Limitations and Recommendations

The study solely focuses on married women and their rights at domestic level and the data was gathered by married women. By gathering data from married men, the study could have been converted to a comparative one and thus, there could have been a fair comparison of rights of married men and women and the responsibilities.

Apart from that, data was gathered mainly from females with access to internet as data was collected from Google forms. Data has not been gathered from married wage-earning women from rural areas. Their contribution at domestic level has been disregarded due to time and location constraints.

It can be recommended that enjoying equal rights should start from school levels. Measures should be followed to educate children about gender equality and equity. This can be introduced as a part of ethics in the school syllabuses.

Steps can be taken at domestic levels by the parents to educate the children to respect the opposite sex and appreciate the service rendered to them by their mothers, grandmothers and sisters.

Governments should take actions to mitigate wage-discrimination and appreciate the sole foreign exchange earners for their sacrifice made while paddling machines in the garment sector or working day and night; mopping floors, cooking and doing domestic chores as house maids.

Finally, strict rules should be implemented against those who violate women's rights at domestic level, work places or in the community.

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