



GENDER EQUALITY IN THE TOP TIERS OF THE SRI LANKAN PUBLIC SECTOR: A CASE STUDY OF THE SRI LANKA POLICE

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Sri Lanka is a country where professional rights are legally protected. Accordingly, any person has the opportunity and ability to engage in any profession at any level regardless of gender, race, caste, and religion. This study focuses on the status of female officers in Sri Lanka Police. The purpose of this research is to study the ability of female police officers to reach higher positions in the professional hierarchy of the police force. This research adopted a qualitative methodology with primary data obtained from sources like interviews, while secondary data was obtained through sources like gazettes and the relevant institutional policy documents. The findings of this study demonstrates that female officers are limited in being able to gain the necessary experience to reach higher positions through special leaves that are given as privileges, such as the removal from night duties and provision of the opportunity to work in the same police station for a long time. Furthermore, it was observed that women are restricted to only clerical work in the functional sectors. Moreover, the quota for the recruitment of women officers for higher positions is relatively low compared to that of males. This opportunity for women to reach higher positions in the police profession in Sri Lanka has been restricted due to institutional barriers existing in relation to recruitment, promotions, and transfers within the sector in concern.

Keywords: gender equality, Sri Lanka Police, higher positions, women police officers, institutional criteria

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INTRODUCTION

For a long time, society has created different social conditions for men and women based on the biological differences between them. According to Ronald Scott (1968), based on the biological difference between men and women, different social conditions have been created for each, according to how society sees the two genders, and this social construct is the basis of social relations, and the sociability of men and women. The social relationship that society has formally created for women and men over time is male-female sociality (Liyanage and Valakuluge, 2006). This division is seen in every unit of society through distinct traits, identities, behaviour patterns, roles, and even careers of men and women. Even today, there is a clear gap between women and men in terms of access to jobs with good privileges, status, salary etc. (Epitawatta, 2006). This is also a fundamental focal point in describing or identifying power relations (Liyanage and Valakuluge, 2006). As a result, women are generally established in lower social positions than men. The nature of such discrimination may vary according to time, place, race, human type, religion, and views, but it is common in most social stratum that the woman has been given an inferior status compared to the man. Ortner (1974) argues that women have been marginalized not due to biological reasons, but because of cultural interpretations of biological differences. Rather than emphasizing the social characteristics of every culture, greater value has been placed on disintegration, leading to a devaluation of culture. In 19th century England, women's paid work was considered an act of abandonment (Epitawatta, 2006), and in the 20th century, women were able to gain employment opportunities. However, they did not work in male-dominated jobs and they were not considered to be of equal status.

Men are often believed to be a part of the intelligent and logical group with leadership qualities such as physical and mental strength, and being bold and able to make quick decisions (Epitavattala, 2006), whereas women are portrayed as being lazy, beautiful, kind, emotional and dependent on a man. Social structural discrimination also plays a role as women are primarily seen as caregivers within the family, leading to a scenario where they are assigned multiple responsibilities while being confined to office roles. Additionally, the concentration of women in functional sectors leads to a situation where they are better able to manage paperwork. Social stereotypes about gender roles impact the distribution of work, with women officers often required to handle more administrative tasks limited to clerical work (Jayathilaka, Abeysekara, Vanasundara, & Wijetilaka, 2019).

Sri Lanka is a country where professional rights are legally protected, and it is seen that both men and women can engage in a profession of their choosing. Although there is a greater tendency for women to enter the labour force, and their employment in various sectors is also widely prevalent, female representation has not been equal. It is often seen that there is a clear difference in the jobs of women and men, both vertically and horizontally (Epitawatta, 2006). In many manufacturing jobs, women are assigned tasks that are considered less important. For example, if we take an apparel factory, tasks such as cutting and sewing take more time, but tasks that are considered less important are always assigned to women. Executive occupations such as those in management and decision-making levels in factories are reserved for men. While both these aspects are equally important for the survival of the factory, more economic value is given to the work performed by men (Liyanage, Valakuluge, 2006).

When taking the Sri Lankan Police into consideration, women are often viewed in comparison to men, and traditional social stereotypes are considered the main reason why female officers do not attain



high positions. These stereotypes create incorrect attitudes toward policewomen. Factors such as inexperience in government work, the perception of dangerous crimes, the inability to conduct investigations, and societal expectations contribute to a lack of commitment to service among policewomen, hindering their advancement (Jayathilaka, Abeysekara, Vanasundara, & Wijetilaka, 2019). This segregation into traditional gender roles, combined with the perceptions of senior male officers regarding women's capabilities, results in further discrimination against female officers.

Therefore, it is crucial to examine the status of women in reaching high positions within this profession, especially given that professional rights have been legally established. This study also explores how women are devalued in this context.

METHODOLOGY

A study method limited to objectivity alone is not sufficient for the study of dogma, which is key here. Positivist methodologies view the world as an objective reality, which is independent and external to us. However, a post-positivist view of research methodologies and concepts were used here as a method of study to transcend the understanding that objectivity is needed for the study of realism. Accordingly, for the purpose of data collection for this study, qualitative methods were utilized along with secondary literature sources. Women Police Constables and Male Police Constables were interviewed in the Rathnapura Police Head Quarters for the purpose of this study along with documents and questionnaires which were used to understand the complexities that emerged through the qualitative methods used here, such as interviews, participatory research etc.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the collected data demonstrated the following: the existence of the perceptions of unsuitable careers for women based on traditional gender stereotypes in the introduction to the police profession; the presence of a patriarchal society within the police profession; the occurrence of sexual harassment of women in police institutions, which are often perceived as male-dominated; and the limitation of women's roles to clerical work in allied sectors. Based on these findings, the analysis indicates that women are consistently marginalized and confined to the domestic sphere. Women officers are frequently assigned tasks within the police station, which are often viewed as analogous to domestic responsibilities, including activities in related departments such as functional divisions.

Stereotypical constructions of gender lead to the assumption that women are better suited to handle administrative tasks related to documentation, which involves tasks such as 'writing reports, going to court on the appointed day, and, to attend investigations if it is related to a woman (Jayathilaka, Abeysekara, Vanasundara, & Wijetilaka, 2011, p. 15). A male senior police officer stated that women officers are often limited to paperwork, suggesting that they are more inclined to accept administrative roles within departments. This depicts a form of structural discrimination that confines women to clerical work and office settings. Women are expected to multitask, balancing their official duties with their roles as caregivers and household managers. However, in contrast, female officers state that they work long hours just like their male counterparts. Therefore, they feel that restricting their roles to clerical positions in related departments is an injustice.

The statements made by senior male officers about female officers further demonstrated institutionalized discrimination in the Sri Lanka Police. It can be recognized that senior male police officers hold negative attitudes toward female officers: viewing them as the weaker gender, as a group that arrives late to work, leaves early, and is unwilling to work at night and who prioritize household responsibilities. As a result, they either insult them or treat female officers with contempt. Additionally, the division of social duties based on traditional gender stereotypes contributes to a lack of understanding among senior male officers regarding women's capabilities, further exacerbating discrimination against female officers. Many police officers believe that women engage in



administrative work not only due to a preference for paperwork but also because they are perceived as incapable of performing front-line police duties. However, the female officers have a completely different opinion regarding this. They say that it is wrong to underestimate the paperwork in the sector in which they are engaged. They feel that the capabilities of women should not be underestimated as they direct the internal management process of every police agency in the entire police professional field through documents.

When directing the focus on the perspectives of female police officers gained through interviews, we can identify that they feel underappreciated and marginalized and subjected to stigma based upon their gender. It appears that there is no clear policy regarding the assignment of female officers to night duty. While women officers are willing to work night shifts if approved, they believe that the institution does not provide sufficient support for them, and that it has to do with the lack of facilities rather than a lack of interest. Similarly, it was stated that women officers are often assigned to handle cases involving children and women, and typically excluded from serious law enforcement activities and are limited to resolving family disputes or advocating for children's rights. Most of their responsibilities involve providing advice, which is based on the stereotypical view of female officers. Because women are perceived as sensitive and non-confrontational, they are often entrusted with listening to others' problems and offering guidance. Women police officers, whose work is often restricted to paperwork in joint divisions, are unable to demonstrate their military skills or gain new experiences. As a result, they have been unable to meet the qualifications required for promotion to higher positions.

In terms of special privileges, the Sri Lanka Police has provided special conditions for women officers, including police and non-police officers. Under that, several main privileges can be pointed out.

Sunday holidays are a special privilege here. Married female officers with children below 18 years of age are not assigned to work on Sundays. But in the field research, a female officer commented that this leave is given if only the higher police officers allow it. Accordingly, it can be emphasized that the patriarchal power continues to operate and can influence even legally gazetted situations. Also, married police officers with children have the opportunity to work with children in the same division or district for a longer period of time than male officers. This is not a status reserved for male officers. Male officers can remain in the same post for only four years without being transferred. Likewise, female officers can retire early from their careers. Both female officers and male officers can retire after 22 years of service. Here too, women have a special privilege. That is, after the retirement of women officers after 22 years, the government will give them 85% of their pension. But this privilege is not available to male officers. Male officers are eligible for pension after retirement at 55 years.

Apart from this, the government has brought a latest circular. Through this, both men and women in the police profession will be given paid leave to seek treatment for infertility. Through this Act, a maximum period of four months is given to a male officer to receive treatment for infertility. But a woman officer is given one year. This is also a special privilege. Furthermore, women police officers are granted special privileges such as extended leave, exemption from night shifts, and the opportunity to remain at the same police station for long periods in order to help them advance to higher positions by giving them experience. But there is a doubt on whether these privileges are genuinely supportive or if they function as a patriarchal strategy to prevent women from advancing to higher ranks. These specialized benefits can act as a double-edged sword (Jayathilaka, Abeysekara, Vanasundara, & Wijetilaka, 2011, pp. 11-15).

The Constitution of Sri Lanka promises that no citizen shall be discriminated against based on race, religion, language caste, gender, political opinion, place of birth or any such basis. But the police force has not made provision for women to go to higher positions only based on sex: All trainees receive the same training regardless of gender and receives the same salary. But later a separate cadre is created using the suffix "W". Accordingly, since then, women can only advance within the limits of



“W”. The Women's Research Centre conducted a study on gender equality in Sri Lanka and found that out of 8,878 female officers, 91.2 percent were non-gazetted officers holding the ranks of police constables and sergeants. There are many problems related to the promotion of women police officers. Here, the main hurdle for gazetted women officers to reach higher posts is the prevention of promotion circulars by male officers.

Officers complain that women are discouraged by male counterparts in applying for promotion circulars. They say that these circulars are only for male officers, and a circular will be sent to women separately (Achieving Gender Equality in the Sri Lanka Police: An Analysis of Women Officers, 2019, 49). Accordingly, it can be understood that there is a reluctance of male police officers regarding female police officers reaching high positions. In this field research, one female police officer stated that male officers were reluctant to work under female officers.

The next reason why female officers are unable to get promoted is that they do not have the necessary qualifications to reach higher positions. Often female officers fail to meet this criterion due to lack of professional experience. Likewise, women fail to meet these qualifications based on reasons such as not working in the front line, not holding a station commander's position, not doing night duty. Similarly, "approved police posts" have also become a cause of concern for senior women officers. If only one position is open for the post of Senior Superintendent of Police and only one of the ten Superintendents of Police is eligible for that post. Because of that, women police officers are discouraged from applying for higher positions in the police service.

As per the interviews conducted, it has become apparent that the male police officers' attitude towards female officers is at a relatively low level. They do have an awareness of the documentation aspect that the female police officers handle, but it seems they are not acknowledging it serves a vital part in the organizations processes.

Furthermore, they possess a condescending attitude regarding the issue of why women go to higher positions and state that women officers seek promotions just to improve their status in their families and the society around them.

The female police officers display a different ideology in this regard. As per one respondent, she has stated that it is different for a man and a woman to apply for promotions as there are certain limitations around gaining experience for women that takes time to be fulfilled, and the age limit will pass for the necessary promotions.

Furthermore, there are instances where there are no male officers for the vacant higher posts, but no female officer will be appointed even though she meets the required qualifications. Furthermore, there were instances where verbal discouragements and harassments could also be identified with regards to female police officers and their rise in the position in work. As such, we can observe that the gender discrimination is prevalent quite strongly in this field of work and gender stereotyping and gender based recruitment further reinforces the inequality.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

There are some short-term and long-term proposals that we can adopt to solve this issue of gender inequality within the workplace.

The criteria that may hinder the recruitment of women into the police service should be made aware and accordingly, attention can be drawn towards to the recruitment of Muslim and Dravidian women into the police service as well. It is possible to plan publicity programs to encourage women from all sections of the population to join the police service.

A specific quota of 15 should be reserved for women in all positions in order to address the gender imbalance in the police service in promotions. Moreover, women should be encouraged to apply for



promotions by creating a transparent and fair promotion process. In examining the criteria for promotion, women's social contribution, namely the family caregiving role, should be acknowledged.

Additionally, the following steps could be undertaken to improve the existing conditions.

- Establishment of hostel facilities to support women police officers
- Taking into account the care work of these officers while considering Sunday holidays
- Introducing a shift list to allow women to work at night and weekends
- Equal distribution of duties and responsibilities between men and women
- To give women officers an opportunity to serve in all official posts and in all sectors in all districts.

Accordingly, it is possible to deploy male and female officers in mixed groups for roles that have traditionally been considered suitable only for the male party. For example, women may also be involved in night shifts, demonstrations, riot control, drug raids, which will eventually provide the necessary field experience they require for the promotions.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although professional rights have been legally established in Sri Lanka as a result of the knowledge gained during my four-year university career, the experimental and independent thesis on the status of female officers compared to male officers in high positions in the police professional field has been carried out for a long time. In this way, I would like to offer my respectful gratitude to all those who have encouraged me by creating the necessary background in which a new aspect can be interpreted to the research.



To my teacher, Professor Manisha Ruwanpathirana, Department of Political Science and Public Policy Studies, University of Colombo, who gave me all the necessary advice to carry out an experimental thesis, from choosing the research problem for this independent thesis, and for supporting me in many ways in this independent thesis. I would like to express my thanks to all the other teaching staff of the Department of Political Science and Public Policy Studies at the University of Colombo.

Also, I would like to express my thanks to the gentlemen who provided library guides at the University of Colombo, who provided support for consulting academic documents in carrying out this independent thesis, and to the officers and women officers of Ratnapura Police Headquarters and to the personnel who provided support in printing this thesis.

I would like to express my gratitude to my mother, brother and sister who gave me strength and encouragement for a long time, and to all those who gave me the necessary support to complete this thesis.