Gender equality in Sri Lankan universities: myths and realities

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The Centre for Gender Equality in the University of Kelaniya is conducting this event at a time when the state university system itself has not resolved many of the problems that it continues to face. There are many contradictions with which we as academics are becoming increasingly comfortable. Currently the University Grants Commission (UGC) is focusing on the contributions of universities to peace and reconciliation. Yet on our very doorstep, the daily lives of students and staff are affected by unresolved conflict and even violence. The head of the department of legal studies in the Open University was stabbed by a student (now reportedly under psychiatric treatment) in the foyer of her faculty. There has been little or no articulated response from within the university system or the administration. The vice chancellor of the University of Colombo is reported to have recently used the full force of the University Security System, (now strengthened by an agency supported by the Ministry of Defence) to exclude the media from an event to which they were invited by the umbrella university teacher’s union, FUTA. It is reported that the event was held eventually on the road outside the campus, across a barbed wire fence. This is in a university which I believe, still conducts a course in journalism. The university, as a member of ACU* has undertaken to uphold Commonwealth values on university autonomy, freedom of speech and expression and freedom of association. Representatives of both staff and student unions allege that there is a highly politicized state agenda of
repression against activists. This response of the administration is a violation of both media freedom and university academic’s right to freedom of association. Though FUTA has protested, this incident met with a silent response from academics within and outside that particular university. Violations of the law of the land, constitutional guarantees and even the universities act are increasingly

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legitimized by the silence of the academic community.

There was a time when vice chancellors, senates and faculties considered it their responsibility to engage with the administration and the academic staff in the resolution of such conflicts. The university trade unions rather than academic bodies now voice their views on the causes of these conflicts and their resolution. This is surely a challenging environment in which to build a gender sensitive university culture.

Respect for laws and normative standards on gender equality concerns and commitment to institutionalize and mainstream them within the university system demands leadership and engagement of interest from within the university community.

Gender equality and international norms and standards and the university system

We live today in an environment where international standard setting is perceived as a strategy for imposing alien and in general western values on our government and our people. Politicians and even public officials seem to have forgotten that as a member of the international community, Sri Lanka has through is successive governments signed and agreed to be bound by international treaties like CEDAW, and ILO
INSTRUMENTS AS WELL AS INTERNATIONAL POLICY DOCUMENTS LIKE THE
BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT
GOALS. THERE IS ALSO INCREASING AMNESIA IN REGARD TO THE MANNER
IN WHICH OUR GOVERNMENTS HAVE, WITH CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION,
INTRODUCED LEGISLATION INCORPORATING INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS.
LEGISLATION SUCH AS THE PENAL CODE AMENDMENTS (1995) AND
(2005), AND THE AMENDMENTS ON MATERNITY LEAVE AND CHILD LABOUR
HAVE BROUGHT SOME COMMITMENTS UNDER INTERNATIONAL
INSTRUMENTS LIKE CEDAW AND CRC AND ILO CONVENTIONS INTO THE
DOMESTIC LAWS AND POLICIES OF OUR COUNTRY. THE JURISPRUDENCE
IN OUR COURTS, INCLUDING A CASE BROUGHT IN THE SUPREME COURT BY
SEVERAL ACADEMICS CHALLENGING CONTROVERSIAL AMENDMENTS TO THE
UNIVERSITIES ACT, RECOGNIZED THE LOCAL APPLICATION OF
INTERNATIONAL LAW AND STANDARDS. IN THE LATTER CASE, UDAGAMA
AND OTHERS V ATTORNEY GENERAL SC (SD) NO 6-12 (1999), THE
SUPREME COURT DECIDED THAT THE PROPOSED BILL WAS
UNCONSTITUTIONAL AND INFRINGED ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND AUTONOMY
PROTECTED UNDER ART 10 AND ART 14(1) OF THE CONSTITUTION. THE
COURT CITED AND USED UNESCO PRINCIPLES OF (1997) – ON ACADEMIC
FREEDOM AND THE AUTONOMY AND SELF GOVERNANCE OF INSTITUTIONS
OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

ARTICLE 12(1) AND 12(4) OF OUR CONSTITUTION INCORPORATE THE
RIGHT TO EQUALITY WITHOUT DISCRIMINATION ON THE GROUND OF SEX,
AND THE USE OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION TO REALIZE GENDER EQUALITY.
THE SUPREME COURT INTERPRETED ART 12(4) IN THE LOCAL
GOVERNMENT BILL DETERMINATION IN A MANNER WHICH DID NOT
RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION MEASURES SUCH
AS QUOTAS FOR WOMEN. HOWEVER A RECENT DECISION OF THE SUPREME
COURT HELD THAT HAVING THE SAME HEIGHT REQUIREMENT FOR MEN AND
WOMEN FOR PROMOTION TO A SUPERIOR GRADE IN THE POLICE SERVICE WAS DISCRIMINATORY – THUS INTERPRETING GENDER EQUALITY AS FREEDOM FROM DE JURE AND DE FACTO DISCRIMINATION.

OUR CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS INTERPRETED IN HARMONY WITH BINDING COMMITMENTS UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW THUS REPRESENT THE BENCHMARK FOR LAW REFORM AND POLICY PLANNING ON GENDER EQUALITY IN UNIVERSITIES. I BELIEVE THE PURPOSE OF THIS WORKSHOP IS TO CREATE UNDERSTANDING OF THIS CONCEPT, NOT JUST IN TERMS OF ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP, BUT IN ORDER TO PROMOTE LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY FOR ACTION. IT IS THEREFORE IMPORTANT TO REFLECT ON THE SCOPE AND CONTENT OF INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS ON THE MEANING OF GENDER EQUALITY.

SUBSTANTIVE GENDER EQUALITY

I NOTICE THAT THE CENTRE USES THE PHRASE “GENDER EQUALITY” AND “EQUITY” SYNONYMOUSLY. I AM NOT SURE WHETHER THE TERM “EQUITY” IS BEING USED TO SUGGEST A STANDARD OF GENDER JUSTICE THAT GOES BEYOND GENDER EQUALITY. FEMINISTS AT ONE TIME CRITIQUED THE HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH TO GENDER EQUALITY ON THE ARGUMENT THAT IT WAS BASED ON A MALE STANDARD OF FORMAL LEGAL EQUALITY THAT DID NOT RECOGNIZE OR REFLECT WOMEN’S EXPERIENCE. THIS WAS A VALID CRITICISM IN THAT THE CONCEPT OF WOMEN’S HUMAN RIGHTS ORIGINATED IN A EUROCENTRIC CIVIL LIBERTIES DISCOURSE THAT EXCLUDED A REFERENCE TO SOCIO ECONOMIC NEEDS SUCH AS HEALTH EDUCATION, FOOD SECURITY AND SHELTER. THE CEDAW CONVENTION 1979 BROKE THE MOULD BY INCORPORATING SOCIO ECONOMIC RIGHTS IN RESPECT OF NEEDS SUCH AS HEALTH, EDUCATION, LIVELIHOOD AND ACCESS TO ECONOMIC RESOURCES AS AN INTEGRAL DIMENSION OF EQUAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN. NEVERTHELESS CEDAW IN ADOPTING A MALE COMPARATOR TO DETERMINE THE SCOPE OF EQUALITY DID NOT INCLUDE ANY REFERENCE TO GENDER BASED VIOLENCE OR VAW.
Developments in international human rights norms after the Vienna World Conference of 1993 now recognize that civil liberties and socio economic rights are indivisible and interdependent rights. The CEDAW Committee has through its concluding observations on country reports, its General Recommendation 19 on VAW, as well as its interpretation of affirmative action and state obligations in General Recommendation 25 and 28, developed a norm of substantive gender equality. This new concept addresses the feminist critique and interprets gender equality so as to incorporate the reality of women’s own experience. Equality is not just formal de jure legal equality, but a norm that seeks to achieve de facto and de jure equality by addressing women’s experience of disadvantage, discrimination and marginalization. Substantive equality focuses on achieving gender equality in impact and outcome. The CEDAW Committee has in both its General Recommendations and concluding observations clarified the laws, polices and programmatic interventions that can help to implement the standard of substantive equality. Women’s experience of discrimination and disadvantage must therefore be taken into account and is central to law reform policy planning and programmes to achieve gender equality.

Consequently the CEDAW Committee has been articulate in critiquing the use of the term “gender equity.” The Committee and scholars argue that the term “equity” lends itself to relativist interpretation that justify discrimination against women on the ground of factors such as culture, ethnicity and religion.

The “equity/equality” debate surfaced as a major issue at the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995, and continues to surface ever so often in scholarship and discussions on the
meaning of gender equality. Islamic states and the holy see have been proponents of the concept of “equity” as the benchmark of equality. However the cedaw committee’s interpretation of substantive equality now binds all ratifying states, and no longer justifies using the terms interchangeably. Substantive equality is also a standard that can be monitored through indicators that discern whether de jure and de facto equality and non-discrimination have been realized in interventions that take account of the experience of women in their families and communities. The cedaw committee has therefore stated very clearly that “equity” is a relativist and subjective standard of fairness that can be used by a state to avoid realizing substantive gender equality in outcome and result. In several concluding observations the committee has stated that the concept of gender equality and “equity” must not be used synonymously. General recommendation 28 para 22 calls upon state parties to “use exclusively the concept of equality of men and women or gender equality and implementing their obligations under the convention.” The vanuatu concluding observations urged an “expansion among public entities civil society and academia in order to understand equality in accordance with the convention.” (co vannatu 2007 para 14-15).

I hope that this meeting and the subsequent work of the centre will create a greater understanding of the concept of substantive gender equality. This is particularly important at a time when cultural relativist approaches are challenging the significance of equality rights of women under our constitution art 12 & 12(4), and international human rights standards. An understanding of gender equality in this sense is also vital in a situation where state policies on university education reflect a role for the private sector. There is some
DOUBT WHETHER OUR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS PROVISIONS IN THE
CONSTITUTION REGULATE THE CONDUCT OF PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS. WE
DO NOT WANT BEST PRACTICES IN REGARD TO WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC
SECTOR UNDERMINED BY A DIFFERENT SET OF NORMS IN THE PRIVATE
SECTOR OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION.

**SUBSTANTIVE EQUALITY, CEDAW AND ILO STANDARDS**

THE CEDAW NORM OF SUBSTANTIVE EQUALITY LINKS TO ILO
STANDARDS THAT HAVE BEEN PROGRESSIVELY DEVELOPED AND IMPACTED
to create norms on women’s work environment long before
women’s rights came to occupy the central place it does in
international law and standards. Ilo standards such as the
convention of 1919 prohibiting night work for women and ilo
instruments on maternity protection, set international labour
standards that impacted on sri lankan law and policy long
before cedaw. The definitions of gender equality and
discrimination in art 1 and 2 of the cedaw convention itself are
based on, and develop further, language used in other
instruments such as ilo convention no 111 (1958) and the
unesco convention against discrimination in education (1960).

The norm of substantive equality developed by cedaw in
some ways goes beyond the “protection of women” and “social
protection” concepts embedded in ilo standards on a “decent”
work environment. Ilo standards cover rights at work,
protection for reproductive health and family responsibilities
that impinge on the work environment, and protection from
occupational hazards and violence such as sexual harassment
that creates a hostile work environment. Social protection
such as a right to social security and social dialogue are also
embedded in ilo standards. Consequently the core ilo
CONVENTIONS AND INTERNATIONAL LABOUR STANDARDS ON EQUAL REMUNERATION (NO 100 OF 1951), DISCRIMINATION EMPLOYMENT AND OCCUPATION (NO 111 OF 1958) AND THE MATERNITY PROTECTION CONVENTION (NO 183 OF 2000, WHICH REVISED CONVENTION NO 103 OF 1952) THAT HAVE SOMETIMES GUIDED SRI LANKA LAW REFORM AND POLICY REINFORCE THE CEDAW NORM OF SUBSTANTIVE EQUALITY. ARTICLE 11 OF THAT CONVENTION DEALS WITH SIMILAR AREAS WHICH IMPACT ON THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT FOR WOMEN. NATIONAL LAWS IN RELATION TO MATERNITY LEAVE AND CHILD CARE AND POLICIES AND WORK LIFE BALANCE CAN BE DEVELOPED FURTHER IN TERMS OF THE ILO CONVENTION NO 156 OF 1981) OF THAT NAME, AND CEDAW ARTICLE 11(1) AND ESPECIALLY ART 11(2) ON PREVENTING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN ON GROUNDS OF MARRIAGE OR MATERNITY. INDEED THIS CEDAW PROVISION INFLUENCED THE ILO CONVENTION NO 156 OF 1981 AIMED AT PROMOTING EMPLOYER COMMITMENTS TO PREVENT CONFLICT BETWEEN WORK AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES. PAID MATERNITY LEAVE REPRESENTS AN IMPORTANT AREA OF STANDARD SETTING IN INTERNATIONAL LAW. ILO STANDARDS ARE PROGRESSIVE IN ACCOMMODATING THE CONCEPT OF A MINIMUM OF 14 WEEKS PAID LEAVE, AND A FURTHER OPTIONAL PERIOD THAT CAN BE SHARED WITH THE MALE PARENT. IN ORDER TO PROTECT WOMEN IN THE LABOUR MARKET, A CONCEPT THAT WILL HAVE SPECIAL RELEVANCE IF GOVERNMENT POLICY RECOGNIZES “FOR PROFIT” PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES, ILO CONVENTION 103 AND 183 ON MATERNITY LEAVE CALLS FOR COMPULSORY SOCIAL INSURANCE OR SOCIAL BENEFITS FROM PUBLIC FUNDS. AN EMPLOYER IS NOT LIABLE TO PROVIDE THIS LEAVE AS AN INDIVIDUAL, UNLESS WITH HIS/HER AGREEMENT. THIS PARTICULAR CONCEPT IN ILO STANDARDS ON PAID MATERNITY LEAVE WILL BE CONTROVERSIAL IN SRI LANKA WHERE LABOUR LAWS IMPOSE LEGAL DUTIES IN THIS REGARD ON THE STATE AND PRIVATE EMPLOYERS. ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE HOWEVER SUGGESTS THAT
These policies have tended “to legislate” women out of employment in the private sector today.

The core issues of relevance to gender mainstreaming in universities so as to ensure substantive equality are thus covered by both CEDAW and the ILO conventions. Non-discrimination in educational opportunities and career advancement, equal remuneration for work of equal value, decent work standards to prevent a hostile work environment through sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence in the workplace, an effective social security system in the face of retirement benefits and health insurance, are inbuilt into these norms and standards.

The regulatory framework for university governance, the universities act and UGC and university council circulars, are invariably gender blind, and also non-discriminatory. Women have benefitted from this neutrality, in areas such as appointments, promotions, retirement benefits and leave. The remedies available for any acts of de facto discrimination, an action for violation of fundamental rights in the supreme court or an appeal to the university services appeal board are also available to both men and women. The areas of maternity leave and sexual harassment however incorporate specific standards that are relevant for women’s work environment. They are dealt with in both the general law of the land and UGC and university council circulars.

For instance the UGC has adopted the 1988 amendments on mandatory maternity leave (influenced by ILO standards) incorporated in the government establishments code. It is not clear whether they have adopted the expanded definition of maternity leave which accommodate women’s choice in
Amendments to the government establishments code of 2005. Sexual harassment in the workplace is a crime according to s.345 of the penal code and the ragging in universities act (1998). The university of colombo council adopted a sexual harassment code that addressed the issue more comprehensively, but no one seems to know what happened to it! Sexual harassment through misuse of the internet is an area that is relevant to prevent a hostile work environment for women. There is a gap in standards in this area. Ilo and cedaw norms linked to the constitution should therefore guide gender mainstreaming in universities in responding to sexual harassment and the need for work / family life balance, and realize a norm of substantive gender equality.

CEDAW does not incorporate specific standards on women’s rights to freedom of thought, opinion and expression, or freedom of association. These are addressed indirectly as dimensions of human rights in some articles of the cedaw convention. However these rights are provided for specifically in ILO conventions on freedom of association (1948) and collective bargaining (no 98). These ILO conventions have contributed to strengthening labour movements in Sri Lanka and legitimized initiatives by trade unions in the work place to protect and negotiate with management to realize the ILO standards on “decent work.” ILO standards that legitimise trade union action are particularly important in developing women’s capacity within the university to network and work in solidarity with unions to achieve substantive equality in the university system. The late prime minister SWRD Bandaranaike referred to the importance of “not countenancing the new graft that has arisen in this country, political graft where appointments, promotions and transfers .... Go according to political views or
allegedly political views.” (House of Representatives, 5 January 1954.) Many academics present in this room have benefited from salary and promotion schemes in the university system based on merit rather than a political agenda in university administration. When it is political connections that ensure career advancement women in the universities must cope with a new dimension of disempowerment. Cedaw and ILO standards on work can be used by all academics and university administrators to prevent a “new graft” of politicization within universities that can erode the very gains that university women have made in regard to obtaining equal access to appointments, promotions, remuneration and benefits.

Cedaw standards on representation and participation in decision making in article 7 and its provisions on affirmative action (art 4) are particularly relevant at this time when there are increasingly few women at the “top table” willing and able to promote gender equality. In this environment the ILO values on gender mainstreaming reiterated in ILO Asia Regional Meetings of 2001 and 2006, and the ILO gender mainstreaming strategy (GEMS) tool kit becomes a practical measure to integrate Cedaw and ILO standards into the university system. I hope this toolkit will be supplemented by the UNIFEM Handbook on Cedaw based legal review – 2010 and the Cedaw commentary (Oxford University Press) 2012. The latter is an expensive publication but a rich resource both for research, teaching and university administration.

Understanding gender equality norms and standards and strategies for their implementation is important to achieve the objectives at this workshop and the efforts of the Centre in promoting gender equality in universities. However it is also important to take stock of current realities and examine
Whether we have a conducive environment for promoting these norms and standards.

Is there a backlash on gender equality concerns?

When I entered the University of Ceylon a half century ago, we came from a diversity of ethnicity, religion and social and economic backgrounds. We were all amazingly confident that our country and our families had given us the opportunity of a state subsidized free education because we were citizens entitled to the same privileges as our male colleagues. The “in hall” rules of residence that prescribed 7 p.m. For women students and 10 p.m. For men, were accepted as a ‘protective’ measure that in no way confined our instinct for romance, our intellect or our spirits as university students. We knew we performed equally well and sometimes better in class rooms, sports and the diverse and vibrant range of extracurricular activities. There were very few women staff – but each a unique personality and role model for us all in their grace, dignity, and sometimes, eccentricities. When some of us, as the first large batch of women university teachers joined the staff in the 1960s, we entered the faculty board and senate room, or that male bastion – the senior common room with a sense that these were lecturer privileges we shared equally with our male colleagues. We were so confident about women’s equal access and opportunities to higher education that all women academics in the university system protested against and successfully prevented the implementation of a proposal to establish of a Sri Lankan university exclusively for women.

The Sri Lanka university women’s federation headed by respected public figures like our friend and colleague late Dr. Wimala de Silva, projected itself as an umbrella organization.
That was also recognized as a professional group equal to that of any other in the country. Decades later some gender sensitive vice chancellors, and chairmen UGC supported integration of early childhood development courses into faculties of education, and helped to establish university preschools which gave staff an opportunity to access good child care during working hours. These measures also strengthened the professional base for such care. When I was a member of the UGC in the 1990s, the commission accepted a proposal to maintain a gender balance of appointed members in councils. The UGC obtained from the national committee on women – headed at the time by Dr. Wimala de Silva, a list of qualified women professionals who would be a pool of resources for council membership. The university of Colombo had on its governing body (councils) in the 1990s and early 2000s, a 50% membership of highly qualified women. They were deans of faculties, and women members appointed by the UGC. The leadership given by women like Professor Lalitha Mendis, Mrs. Rohini Nanayakkara and others in the council contributed to strengthening both academic programmes and administration.

Yet today, the academic community of both women and men teachers has accepted the legitimacy of nominees to councils and even vice chancellors in the university system appointed by the president, being exclusively political appointees with strong affiliation to the government. The “comfort zone” which legitimizes that which is a complete erosion of the concept of university autonomy in our regulatory legislation – the Universities Act (1978) has grown to unimaginable proportions. Academia is no longer unanimous that a vice chancellor should not be able to publicly state “I am a political appointee with my loyalties to the government.” When
A COUNCIL MEMBER ASKS AN INTERVIEWEE FOR A SENIOR LEGAL
ACADEMIC POST WHO HAS A PHD – “IF YOU ARE A LAWYER, WHY DID YOU
STUDY FOR A DEGREE IN PHILOSOPHY,” THIS PROVOKES NOT ANGER, BUT
ONLY AMUSEMENT. WHEN A PROVINCIAL COUNCILOR STORMS INTO A
CLASSROOM AND MAKES A SCHOOL TEACHER KNEEL IN FRONT OF HIS
DAUGHTER AND HER CLASS, TEACHERS UNIONS PROTEST BUT NOT THE
SLFUW OR WOMEN WHO ARE MEMBERS OF UNIVERSITY ACADEMIA.

PRE 2009, WOMEN UNIVERSITY ACADEMICS AND THEIR RESEARCH
FACILITATED GOVERNMENT POLICY. POLICIES NEGATIVE TO WOMEN WERE
RESISTED BECAUSE OF WOMEN’S ACTIVISM AND NETWORKING BETWEEN
WOMEN’S GROUPS, ACADEMICS AND PROFESSIONALS. POSITIVE
MEASURES SUCH AS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LEGISLATION AND PENAL CODE
REFORMS WERE BASED ON ACADEMIC RESEARCH INTO THESE AREAS THAT
ALSO STRENGTHENED THE ACTIVISM OF WOMEN’S GROUPS AND THE WORK
OF STATE AGENCIES RESPONSIBLE FOR THE WOMEN’S AFFAIRS AND
JUSTICE. PROPOSALS ON LOWERING THE AGE OF STATUTORY RAPE ON
THE GROUND THAT PROMISCUOUS YOUNG GIRLS WERE CONSENTING TO
SEX, SOMETIME IN 2005 – 2006, RAISED AN AVALANCHE OF PROTESTS
FROM UNIVERSITY ACADEMICS AND WOMEN’S GROUPS. THE PROPOSAL
WAS DROPPED BY THE GOVERNMENT ALMOST IMMEDIATELY.

WE NOW HAVE PROPOSALS THAT SEEK TO LIMIT WOMEN’S OVERSEAS
MIGRATION UNLESS WOMEN CAN PROVE THEY HAVE MADE ADEQUATE
ARRANGEMENTS FOR THEIR CHILDREN. ACADEMICS WHO HAVE DONE
GOOD RESEARCH ON GENDER BASED EXPLOITATION AND MIGRATION HAVE
YET TO GIVE LEADERSHIP TO PREVENT THIS TYPE OF GENDER BASED
POLICY MAKING IN A COUNTRY THAT PLACES THE LEGAL RESPONSIBILITY
OF CHILD CARE AND SUPPORT ON BOTH PARENTS. WHAT HAS HAPPENED
TO THE PROFESSIONAL VOICE AND LEADERSHIP OF ACADEMICS IN POLICY
FORMULATION AND REFORM? I BELIEVE THAT THE TRANSFORMATION AND
DECLINE IN THE SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND
MAINSTREAMING WITHIN UNIVERSITIES, THE NEED FOR A LEADERSHIP
ROLE AND NETWORKING BETWEEN ACADEMICS COMMITTED TO THESE VALUES MUST BE THE BACKGROUND TO YOUR DISCUSSION AT THIS WORKSHOP ON CREATING AND MAINSTREAMING GENDER EQUALITY INTO THE INSTITUTIONAL FABRIC AND ETHOS OF OUR UNIVERSITIES.

ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF UNIVERSITY ACADEMICS AND ADMINISTRATORS

It is time to recognize that progress on gender mainstreaming and support for that endeavour cannot be achieved in universities unless those working towards this goal also engage with concerns in the community. Universities represent a microcosm of the world outside the university campus. Women academics have contributed to a rich information base on gaps in national indicators on political and labour force participation, and failure to meet “decent work” standards in areas resistant to change. What can be done to ensure that university research impacts on law and policy reform and institutional change? Can academics give leadership within civil society and women’s groups so as to be an articulate voice for change? University academics can contribute to challenging the myth that such endeavours are unpatriotic and anti-government.

This may require building networks within and outside the university system. Some negative trends must be challenged now, and not later. Families and communities are responding to the growing incidence of violence in the community and sexual harassment and violence against women in particular, by imposing restrictions on women that were hitherto unknown. Anecdotal evidence suggests that men do not want their spouses and daughters to work outside the home because of “the risk factor” of violence and or sexual harassment by males in the
workplace, and or the difficulty of finding accessible child carers. What has been described by some as a “toxic masculinity” perpetrated through the internet and commercialized media is giving messages on “femininity” and masculinity that reinforce stereotypical prejudices and undermine progressive ideas on women’s right to equality and equal life chances.

An even more disturbing current trend is the attitude to women articulated by people in positions of authority. At a very recent event both the speaker and the minister of women’s empowerment referred to women’s incapacity to carry out their professional responsibilities, their bickering and incapacity to work in harmony with other women or men, within their institutions, or in the community. We may well ask whether this is why only one of fifteen vice chancellors of universities is a woman! It is also important to recognize that more and more statements by politicians and public figures are creating an environment conducive to VAW. Impunity for violence against women and suspended sentences for crimes gives a powerful message of legitimacy for violence.

Some time ago the president himself publicly stated that domestic violence procedures are breaking the time honoured social norms on harmony within families. Policy makers and politicians are in denial of the reality that domestic violence is one of the best manifestations of a dysfunctional and broken family. This public rhetoric is combined with a new focus on women in an exclusive maternal role. And so politicians and public figures deify their mothers, and tell us how important women are in the country. At a recent family function, the simple kandyan poruwa ceremony that many of us of an older generation witnessed many times was transformed by a
professional “event planner” to one that focused mostly on mother’s milk and the marriage sacrament! Yet in Kandyan Sinhala law in the Buddhist tradition, marriage is not a sacrament but a contract that can be dissolved by mutual consent or on the basis of an irretrievable breakdown of a very personal relationship.

This workshop must therefore ensure that rigorous and intellectually vibrant discussions take place within the context of these changing trends. Gender advocates and those who aspire to become gender activists must not lend themselves to the criticism that these initiatives are merely academic ivory tower exercises, at a challenging time for the university system. Individual commitments alone are not enough to transform our society or the institutional culture in universities. Gender training must focus not only on theoretical understanding of gender equality and individual capacity for gender mainstreaming, but also creating a leadership that will act and use their professional status as teachers and administrators to make a difference to university governance in general and gender mainstreaming in particular. It is university governance that respects core values of university autonomy and intellectual freedom that can create the environment for gender sensitive teaching and learning within universities. This is critical for gender analysis, independence of thought, and integrity and excellence in research.

Such commitments and leadership can be nurtured in strong networks of academics and administrators within the university system. Women members of faculty boards and senates have a special role to play in becoming gender champions for their women colleagues who suffer injustice in
universities. Similarly women themselves are required to resist accepting posts for which they are not qualified. Surely gender mainstreaming cannot take place unless women can give leadership within their institutions to respond to injustice, question injustice and champion gender equality within institutions by their own actions. We need now, more than ever before to translate the rhetoric and ideology on gender equality into actions that can both transform and impact on the university system.