

HOME ECONOMICS

Food riots have sent shock waves around the Arab world in a ripple effect. In Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Algeria people have taken to the streets protesting against their governments and the cost of living. When ordinary people are unable to make ends meet and feed their families, food security becomes an emotive issue that has the potential to unite people across religious and ethnic divides. Ultimately even the class divide gets chipped away as more and more middle-class people become anxious about the high cost of living. The backlash is almost always against those in power.

The rising cost of living has been a recurring cause of concern for women. Often it is women who have to manage the family budget and take responsibility for providing food for their families. The current market price for essential items such as coconuts is around Rs. 60-70. As we go to press, there is a shortage of Bombay onions. Vegetables such as green beans, beetroot etc. are being sold for Rs. 100 per 500g. Already such vegetables have been placed beyond the reach of ordinary citizens.

To add to this situation, Sri Lanka faces a shortage of eggs. Importing millions of eggs from India and selling each at Rs. 19 hardly addresses the problem of affordable nutrition for families, particularly the young and the elderly. The nutritional and health cost of these serious price hikes – as well as the increasing stress and worry on women who have to make ends meet in this unfavourable economic climate, is certainly not lost on women.

Food Security

We know that there is a global food crisis (or crises). Floods and droughts caused by climate change and their impact on food crops pose serious problems that require long term strategic responses, not only from the developing world, but also the developed countries. However, ensuring food production and supply within a country such as Sri Lanka which is rich in diversity whether in terms of climate, peoples,

soils and agricultural products should surely have been possible with clear long-term economic policies. This has not been

the case. Acres of coconut lands were allowed to be sold off to housing development companies. Subsidies to farmers were removed, re-introduced and removed again by consecutive governments or even by the same government in power. Precious forest cover is allowed to be cut down by those who have one or another politician's backing.

Given this track record it does not come as a surprise that Sri Lanka is on the threshold of a serious food crisis. Those who hold the reigns of power may do well to re-educate themselves on basic economics. The importance of food security as an integral part of economic planning. This should have been recognized earlier by planners.

Conspicuous Consumption

These problems have been compounded by the conspicuous

consumption of those who have both political and economic power. Come elections, massive banquets were held on a daily basis for thousands of people strategically targeting the media, the corporate sector, professionals, academics etc. We were told that the cost of the food and drink (including alcohol) were borne through donations. This may have taken care of who paid the immediate bills. But we wonder whether the shortage of food items such as chicken and eggs had something to do with this undue surge in demand.

Over the last couple of years, such practices have become legitimized and today feeding potential voters has become an integral part of election campaigns. Not only is this an utter wastage given the sheer numbers involved and the fact that most invitees are those who can well afford a meal. These practices have also driven the cost of successive elections higher, and had a direct impact on women running for political office. Many women who are interested in entering politics