

SRI LANKAN WOMEN'S HDIs: THE HOLY GRAIL OF WOMEN'S WELL-BEING? NOTES FROM A FEMINIST STANDPOINT¹

Kanchana N. Ruwanpura

Human Development Index rankings for Sri Lanka during the post-colonial period has been considered a noteworthy achievement by development economists. Furthermore, the "high" Human Development Indices for women have also been much noted. While the current discourse has focused on the Human Development rankings of women, there is little research done from a feminist perspective. This essay is an attempt to highlight the need for a feminist reading of Sri Lankan women's HDI rankings, so as to broaden the corpus of feminist literature on gender issues in Sri Lanka.

Introduction

Sri Lanka's achievements in obtaining high HDI (Human Development Indices [henceforth HDI]) figures have consistently been hailed as a model for Third World nations. Sri Lanka's socio-economic development has been acclaimed, both by neo-classical economists/organizations (World Bank 1995) and heterodox economists (Sen 1988a). Not only the achievements of HDIs, but also the attainment and of social/human welfare indices for women have been applauded (Sen 1981, Kynch and Sen 1983, World Bank 1995). Sri Lanka's ranking of social and human welfare indices for women has been consistently high (for the post-colonial period: 1948-to-date), not only amongst developing nations but also amongst the developed world. Sri Lanka's HDI figures are comparable to those of many countries in the developed world. For example, life expectancy for women, which was 74.2 years for Sri Lankan women in 1992, is comparable to that of Korea, Hungary, Ireland and Denmark, which is 73.3, 74.1, 77.9 and 78.3 respectively; while maternal mortality rates are 14, 10, 8 and 21 (per 1,000 lives in 1992) in Sri Lanka, Albania, Korea, and Romania, respectively. And women in the labor force is 27.0%, 32.0%, 35.0% and 36.0% (in 1992) in Sri Lanka, Ireland, Italy and Luxembourg, respectively (UNDP 1994).

There has been considerable debate as to the reasons for Sri Lanka's achievement of this relatively high status. Is this an outcome of a high-level social expenditure and equity-based growth strategies, or have the effects of these policies been over-emphasized? (Sen 1988b, Anand and Kanbur 1991, Bhalla 1988). The implication of the high HDI figures have been taken as transparent, and translated by international agencies and state bodies as indicative of progressing towards egalitarian gender relationships. Very usually, these achievements have all too easily been read into an unproblematic indication of achievements of egalitarian gender relationships (World

Bank 1995). In other words, the relative levels of welfare indicators have been assumed to reflect the socio-economic status of women vis-a-vis men, and illustrates the decline in previously prevailing patriarchal attitudes. However, a more critical analysis of statistical data - the employment opportunities available for women, the structure of education patterns, and health-indicators - show that Sri Lankan women² have a long way to proceed in changing patriarchal, structural, and cultural attitudes.

If Amartya Sen's notion of "entitlements" -- the ability of women to realize their full potential in the economic, social, cultural and political spheres -- is to be translated into a demand for the empowerment³ of women, that prevailing patriarchal and cultural structures are transformed so as to widen the choices that women can make, then it is necessary to begin by articulating the extent to which HDI improvements signals the achievements of this objective. This paper provides cursory notes on whether HDI improvements do reflect the empowering of women, and specifically asks how a feminist methodology will help analyze the connection between welfare indices and gender relationships.

HDI Achievements and Feminist Concerns

A feminist reading should not simply be concerned with current HDI achievements for women in any given country. The concomitant efforts to politicize a gender-based capabilities program via public policy should also be analyzed. A narrow definition of a capabilities-based approach (i.e. one that simply focuses on basic needs) may indeed bring the desired results in terms of HDI, without there necessarily being an institutionalization of gender-aware public policy. Indeed given a culturally conducive environment, a HDI-based approach is likely to foster with little (or, no) empowerment of women necessarily taking place.⁴ Furthermore, the failure to institutionalize a gender-conscious public

policy program does not bear well for a sustained welfare program to deliver equality to women and men. The issue is that HDI indices for women can be positive, but women remain trapped in households and community structures on which they depend for any real economic security and autonomy. For example, HDI can be high because of redistributive efforts and government spending, but when there are cuts in government spending women are likely to witness a deterioration in their HDI rankings. The need is for more than a HDI-based redistribution program, but for a public policy that seek to change women's abilities to help themselves. Such programs will not only seek to empower women, but also limits women's dependency on the welfare state - especially since the latter itself is determined by economic conditions and can be attenuated at times of retrenchment. Limiting women's reliance on redistributive welfare measures implies that any policy-program has to broaden the choice-sets available to women. Such programs require awareness that choice-sets faced by women are culturally determined, and widening the scope for women to use her abilities requires addressing the over-determined nature of socio-economic processes.

Feminist Readings - a la Sen

The analysis of Sri Lankan HDI evidence is related to the gender and co-operative conflicts model of Amartya Sen (Sen 1990). The co-operative conflict model focuses on the cultural base of household bargaining relations.⁵ It looks at how bargaining relations between men and women are not merely based on the economic contributions which they make to the household unit, but rather that bargaining relations are determined by perceptions of the contributions made by each partner towards the household. Sen argues that these perceptions are based on the interests, legitimacy, and agency of men and women. Specifically, the interests of individuals is concerned with how they perceive their own personal well-being vis-a-vis the well-being of the household and their respective partners; while the idea of legitimacy focuses on the culturally-determined legitimate roles of men and women within the household. Therefore, the interests and (perceived) legitimate roles of individuals determines their agency - i.e. the capacity and willingness of people to realize their own potential abilities as individuals.

Hence, there is an informational base that has an impact on the well-being of men and women. Cooperation and conflict in intra-household bargaining relations is closely linked to this informational base. The informational base has to be transformed and shaped if a better basis for women's well-being is to be achieved (Sen, 134-136 and 149). Hence this model suggests that the central import of a gender-aware capabilities approach is the need to positively influence the agency and perception of women's value within the households and so enhance their bargaining power: i.e. if we accept that bargaining is conditional on the perception of women's value and ability to be autonomous, then it is this (i.e. the perception of value and ability to act autonomously) which public policy should attempt to shape.

In the gender and co-operative conflict model since bargaining relations are culturally determined, the point for household relations

to fall apart is also culturally based. Culture, however, is not an abstract concept. However culture is defined, it is also concrete and real. Therefore, cultural norms can be influenced and shaped through politicization and awareness building (Sen, 126). Shaping cultural norms also belongs to the domain of public policy and state intervention. Public policy, therefore, affects women at two levels. At one level the impact on women is direct and obvious. This is the level at which government spending and redistribution schemes leads to positive changes in HDI ranking for women. The other level at which public policy affects women is by empowering women within the family: i.e. by influencing cultural determinants. The break-down point of a co-operative conflict model for women may indeed be improved through a HDI-based approach. Does this necessarily transform women's and girls perceived legitimacy in intra-household power dynamics and gender relationships without a feminist-embedded welfare policy? The answer is not clear. Devoid of an engendered social policy formulation process, the HDI achievements of Sri Lankan women only go so far towards their empowerment within household structures. Hence, the need for a feminist interpretation of Sri Lankan women's impressive HDI rankings.

A Feminist Analysis of HDI Rankings for Sri Lankan Women

An analysis of HDI figures for Sri Lankan women for the post-colonial period together with case studies of educational, nutritional and health-issues (UNICEF 1987 and 1991), reveal the limitations of reading the HDI index as necessarily enlarging the choice sets available for women. High HDI figures for women need not necessarily translate into a process of empowerment: an empowerment that positively contributes to enhancing women's perceived legitimacy and autonomy - within the household, the community and the public sphere.

The lack of institutionalized gender-sensitive social welfare program in Sri Lanka has several ramifications. First, it implies the limits to women's empowerment. Women's vulnerability outside of traditional household structures remains. This precarious status is most obvious in the case of female-headed households. Female-headship has been increasing in the North-East of Sri Lanka. A trend that has become alarming, given the heightened ethnic conflict of the last twenty years. Re-distributive social welfare policies which do not empower women are unlikely to broaden socio-economic opportunities available to women. Hence, women's well-being remain inextricably related to the benevolence of individual patriarchs and male-dominated household and community structures.

Second, in the absence of a gender-sensitive public policy, which broadens women's cultural endowments⁶ and so allows them to engage on an egalitarian basis in "co-operative conflicts", women become marginalized not only in households. I argue that co-operative conflicts occur not only within the household, but also in communities and public spaces. The same informational base which hurts women's abilities to bargain in families also hinders the egalitarian participation at these levels. This is particularly impor-

tant for women who are more dependent upon kinship and network structures which will provide a platform for them to seek economic opportunities of participating in the labor force, informal sector, etc. Participation may help survival but may be associated with persistent vulnerability and economic insecurity. Further, without sufficient endowment and entitlement levels, women's exchange entitlement relations are likely to be hampered and economic survival becomes mainly dependent upon community support systems.

Conclusion - Sri Lankan Women's HDI Achievements: The Holy Grail?

This theoretical exposition provides an additional dimension to the study of women's well-being in Sri Lanka. It utilizes Sen's work on gender and co-operative conflicts as an entry-point to focus on the significance of family forms and community structures for women's well-being. The aim is to uncover the limitations of merely relying on HDI ratings as a reliable measure of women's well-being - even in the case of a country, Sri Lanka, which has been hailed as a model for the Third World in basic needs provisioning. From a feminist perspective, building on capabilities of women requires more than a mere analysis of limited indices of relevant well-being. It requires a deeper analysis of the inter-links between cultural, economic, social and political factors that pervade women's lives, and which either hamper or encourage transition to economic security and personal authority.

End Notes

1. This essay is a shorter version of a M.Phil thesis on "Serendipity of HDI Achievements: The Case of Sri Lankan Women" submitted to the Development Studies Program (1996-1997) at the University of Cambridge.

2. When using the term "women", I do not mean to use the concept in a biologically deterministic manner, but rather as social and cultural construct; hence while I perceive the distinctions that exist among Sri Lankan women according to class and ethnic groups, I shall limit my analysis to that of a more generalized category of women - due to the limitations of space.

3. The notion of empowerment/empowering in this essay is interested in looking at the broadening of the social, economic, political and cultural bases so that women's capabilities can be realized. This space so created becomes the basis for real/concrete egalitarian relations to develop between men and women. It should be noted, however, that my reading of empowering women is not to say that I perceive women (especially those in the less developed countries) as passive victims in unequal/oppressive relations "in need of empowerment". Rather, my standpoint is that while women are unfairly positioned in gender relationships, they do actively and creatively fulfill their own personal interests - where-ever possible. But the latter occurs in a constraining space of politics, economics, society and culture. For this reason the essential basis of empowering women should be a concern with widening the structural constraints that women do face - whether at the level of the household, the community, or the public domain.

4. For example, maternal mortality (a HDI component) may be on the decline because of related declines in fertility rates, without any explicit policy changes towards improving women's status being initiated by policy-makers, or indeed without any improvements in death/births.

5. Sen's model, while utilizing a game theoretic approach, is a much more sophisticated analysis of intra-household relations than a simple game theory model. There is an explicit incorporation of the cultural bases which determines household dynamics. He is interested in looking at ways in which these cultural attributes can be progressively shaped so as to improve the well-being of women in cooperative conflict situations within the household.

6. The concept of endowment levels and entitlement relations are formulated by Sen (1982, 1995). Endowments are defined as the initial level of assets/wealth and/or the ownership bundle that an individual begins with, while entitlement relations refer to the relationships that specify the set of exchange relations for each ownership bundle. While Sen's primary motivation for developing these concepts was an attempt to understand boom-related famine situations, his later work on family economics has used these concepts to understand inequities within the family. However, Sen's usage of these terms even in intra-household bargaining relations has mainly been concerned with the economic dimensions of these concepts. I argue that Sen's own work on gender and co-operative conflicts allows the concepts of endowments and entitlement relations to incorporate the cultural dimensions of socio-economic processes.

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Kanchana N. Ruwanpura is a Ph.D. student in Development Economics at Newnham College, University of Cambridge.

STATEMENT FROM THE WOMEN'S COALITION FOR PEACE

The Women's Coalition for Peace strongly condemns the cold-blooded murder of Samia Sarwar—a woman who had been physically abused and tortured for many years by her husband and was seeking a divorce—and the issuing of a fatwa calling for the death of two women lawyers who were providing legal aid to Ms Sarwar, in Pakistan.

On April 6th 1999, twenty nine-year old Samia Sarwar was deliberately murdered with the connivance of her parents and paternal uncle in the office of her counsel, Hina Jilani of AGHS, a well-known legal aid and human rights group in Lahore run by Hina Jilani and her sister, Asma Jahangir, Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and UN Special Rapporteur on Extra-Judicial Killings. Though the murder was reported to the police no arrests have been made so far despite members of the Peshawar Chamber of Commerce, of which the Ms Sarwar's father is chairman, publicly stating that this 'honour killing' was in accordance with religious and tribal traditions. Meanwhile, the Sarwar family with the support of religious dignitaries is orchestrating a campaign to threaten the lives of Ms Sarwar's lawyers and other supporters of women's rights by declaring them 'kafirs' (non-believers). At present, local ulema have issued a fatwa calling on all believers to kill Hina Jilani and Asma Jahangir.

This gruesome murder illustrates the degree of brutalisation within society where parents can plan and execute the murder of their daughter for daring to exercise her rights as sanctioned by both law and religion. What is even more shocking is the way in which 'honour' is used as a justification for crimes of extreme violence against women; it compels us to question the values we uphold in the name of tradition and to scrutinise the oppressive and inhumane social norms that transform homes into places of violence and danger.

By taking no effective action against those responsible for the so-called honour killing of a young woman seeking her legal rights as well as by remaining silent in the face of blatant incitements to murder her legal counsel, the government of Pakistan has displayed a shocking indifference to the fundamental rights of women. As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the government of Pakistan cannot hide behind the lame excuse of cultural norms and traditional practices which violate women's rights.

The Women's Coalition for Peace calls upon the government of Pakistan to send a clear signal that such gross violations of human rights and women's rights will no longer be tolerated. As a first step, the government of Pakistan must ensure that the perpetrators of Ms Sarwar's murder are arrested and brought to justice as well as guarantee the safety of all those involved in supporting and protecting women's rights. The government of Pakistan must also bring criminal charges against all those who issue threats as well as encourage others to harass, attack or kill human rights and women's rights activists. A review of the laws which make honour killings virtually punishment-free must also be undertaken as soon as possible.