

Critical Women

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Coinciding with International Women's Day, the Association of Commonwealth Universities in collaboration with the newly launched Centre for Gender Studies of the University of Kelaniya called on academics and administrators from 24 countries to convene and discuss the various issues related to women in higher education and beyond under the theme 'Critical Women: Women as Agents of Change through Higher Education'. What followed was an elucidation of the successes and conflicts facing women and how institutions of higher education can precipitate change, whether in a science lab, the high seats of government, or the academy itself.

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Photography Indika De Silva

Prof Sarath Amunugama, Vice Chancellor - University of Kelaniya

Professor Sarath Amunugama, Vice Chancellor, University of Kelaniya delivered the welcome speech. Commenting on the conference he said, "it is extremely appropriate that the conference is timed to celebrate the International Women's Day. I see this conference as a highly ambitious project of the fledgling Centre for Gender Studies to launch its extensive programmes of activities."

Many attempts have been taken throughout the years to establish and integrate gender studies into the academia of Sri Lanka and the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Kelaniya is one such endeavour. "The need to account for gender differences and commonalities within the University system has become a very real need," said Prof Amunugama, relaying on the establishment of the much needed Centre for Gender Studies, as his own experience in leadership has presented to him the need to make and initiate certain changes and measures in order to slowly change gender profiles among the University community.

However, in order to showcase the changing face of gender within the National Universities of Sri Lanka, Prof Amunugama presented some statistics pertaining to the evolving nature of entrants to universities.

"The Need To Account For Gender Differences And Commonalities Within The University System Has Become A Very Real Need"

In the year 2000, the entering percentage of male students was 46.92 percent while female students were 53.08 percent. But in 2010 the percentage of male students had gone down to 40.52 percent while the female student population had risen to almost 60 percent.

With the increasing female student population some researchers have begun referring to the 'feminisation of higher education' and Professor Amunugama stressed that due to this reason "we have to assess the significance of this fact with regard to infrastructural facilities, logistics, welfare, security, student leadership, academic disciplines", posing several questions - "how should the University respond to the ground situation? What about the decreasing number of male students? How should policy-makers respond to that?" - in

regard to the rising number of women students, Prof Amunugama stressed that the university is aware of the issues and is taking steps to solve them.

Going further he stated, “of course we have yet to address other substantive concerns relating to the work and family balance of all staff members, the representation of women in University governance, the upward mobility of female academics as well as student ragging, sexual and workplace harassment, amongst other issues.”

Nevertheless, he affirmed that they will try new approaches to find solutions while “keeping in mind the overarching and extensive gender bias and imbalances effecting women in general.”

Concluding his welcome address, Prof Amunugama further added, “I believe that the mandate of the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Kelaniya is to engage with these issues and developments in higher education and to be at the forefront of this process by undertaking quality research by running gender training programmes for staff as well as for students by consciousness-raising amongst the community and eventually by conducting and organising big programmes in gender studies in the years to come.”

Dorothy Garland, Director - Professional Networks (ACU)

In her Conference Introduction, Dorothy Garland applauded the University of Kelaniya’s decision to establish the Centre for Gender Studies, and cited it as a main reason why the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) decided to come to Sri Lanka for the conference. “This provided us with a wonderful opportunity, not to mention an excuse, to hold a major ACU event in Sri Lanka”.

Speaking on behalf of the ACU, she said, “Gender has played a major role in the work of the ACU over the past 25 years. Our programme has great research, advocacy, training, mentoring and networking. Until this conference, however, these strands have not been brought together in a single, highly-visible form.” A key priority of the ACU, according to her, is to “challenge universities” to not only foster gender equality on campuses, but to bring the fight against gender discrimination to societies on the whole.

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One of the strongest features of the conference was the vast array of invitees, from all

corners of the globe, who attended the event – 24 countries in all, spanning the continents. “Wouldn’t it be good if this conference were to be a legacy, of a network of academics of administrators, who are not only knowledgeable about gender and its use in higher education and how they play out into the larger society but who are also committed to cascading their knowledge and enthusiasm within their own spheres of influence back home?”

The conference itself was designed to tackle gender inequality from a number of different angles. “Using as a vehicle, themes of leadership, economic development and research, we shall be examining from a specifically gendered perspective a number of key equity, educational, health and development issues.”

Though higher education, and Universities in particular, have long been seen as places for self-empowerment, what does it say about those institutions who themselves practice gender discrimination at an administrative and cultural level? Universities should be ground zero for gender equality, as they are in a unique position to influence society. “The objective will be to reach conclusions as to what steps the higher education sector can take in the immediate and long term future to bring about change, through and for women, for the betterment of the society as a whole.”

Hilde Haraldstad, Ambassador of Norway to Sri Lanka and the Maldives

In her Inaugural Speech, Hilda Haraldstad spoke of Norway’s history of gender equality, and the many benefits it has had on that society. “Higher education is a fundamental building block for development, by providing knowledge, professional qualifications, critical thinking and analysis – crucial for public policy formulation and a healthy society.” Education is the best way to create empowered, independent thinkers and therefore, agents of change.

“When I was a student at the University of Oslo in the early 1990s, we had a very lively panel discussion about this topic, realising that even if the number of women entering university was growing fast, the percentage of female professors and women in higher decision making positions didn’t follow and continued to be low.” Though that percentage has increased since the 1990s, still only one out of four professors are women. Remarkably low, considering that 40 percent of Norway’s parliamentarians and half of their ministers are women.

“To get a better gender balance at the top level all universities and institutions of higher

education have been requested by the Government to adopt action plans with concrete steps and follow ups. The experience so far is that action plans make institutions more aware of gender equality and that it has an impact."

"Today, There Is Broad Agreement That The Gradual Active Participation Of Women In Working Life, Politics And The Economy Made A Significant Difference"

'It has an impact' is putting it lightly - "Norway was faced with huge social and economic challenges after the second world war in the middle of last century. Today, there is broad agreement that the gradual active participation of women in working life, politics and the economy made a significant difference, and was crucial for the development, peace and prosperity that we experienced."

According to the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report, advances in gender equality correlate positively with higher GNP. "Gender equality and inclusion of women is not only a matter of doing the right thing from a social or moral perspective. It is important in order to ensure sustainable economic growth and development."

Though it hasn't always been without controversy. In 2006 the government of Norway mandated gender quotas, dictating that private sector corporate boards should be composed of at least 40 percent of either gender. The move was heavily criticised, and countries far from Northern Europe have rejected similar legislation.

Norway now has the highest percentage of women on corporate boards in the world. According to Haraldstad "it was a controversial decision when it was made, but it has turned out to be a success." Though perhaps its too early to say with certainty how beneficial Norway's experiment has been (or how applicable it might be to other countries), Haraldstad stands optimistically by her government's decision.

The Ambassador also applauded UN Security Council Resolution 1325 of the year 2000 and last year's Nobel Peace Prize, and pointed to them as evidence of the changing influence women have in the affairs of nations. Resolution 1325 "recognises the importance of women's equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security in the world. For the first time, in such an important setting, women were recognised as important change agents and actors for peace and security, not only as victims of war and conflict."

Prof Maithree Wickremesinghe, Director - Centre for Gender Studies (University of Kelaniya)

"I consider Prof Fowler to be an exceptional example of an academic who has successfully managed to balance the many facets and roles of a woman's life and to achieve greatness in the process. She's a reputable role model for many young women in higher education the world over," said Prof Maithree Wickremesinghe in her introduction of the keynote speaker, Prof Mary Fowler.

"Let Me State, It Is Not My Intention To Overshadow Or To Contextualise Prof Fowler's Own Outstanding Achievements By Mentioning Those Of Her Family. I Am Well Aware Of The Common Chauvinist Tendency Not To Recognise A Woman On Her Own Terms, Moreover, To Link Her Achievements To Those Of Other Prominent Members Of Her Family - Particularly Men. Indeed, I Do So Merely Because It Happens To Be An Interesting Fact"

Prof Wickremesinghe's introduction featured Prof Fowler's involved academic career, back to where she started as a student at Cambridge in the 1970s, with primary interest in seismology and ocean ridges.

After earning her PhD in Geophysics, from 1978 to 1992, Prof Fowler stayed home with her three young children while writing her book "Solid Earth", an introduction to Geophysics for which she is well known.

"In 1992 Professor Fowler returned to work at Royal College. In the 2000s, as Head of the Earth Sciences, she oversaw a substantial expansion of staff and student numbers, and I believe that her department is now among the leading UK Earth Science departments."

"In 1996 Prof Fowler was awarded the Geological Society's prestigious Prestwich Medal for contributions to Earth Science. She was also honoured as Royal Society New Zealand Museum Distinguished Speaker in 2008."

"Professor Mary Fowler comes from a very distinguished family which includes her husband and daughter, but possibly the best known is her grandfather Ernest Rutherford, who was a Nobel Prize winner in 1908 and the father of Geophysics. Let me state, it is not my intention to overshadow or to contextualise Prof Fowler's own outstanding achievements by mentioning those of her family. I am well aware of the common chauvinist tendency not to recognise a woman on her own terms, moreover, to link her achievements to those of other prominent members of her family - particularly men. Indeed, I do so merely because it happens to be an interesting fact."

Prof Mary Fowler, Professor of Geophysics and Dean of Science - Royal Holloway (University of London)

“Women have a great deal to contribute to higher education, to businesses, economies and societies”, began Prof Mary Fowler, referencing snippets of different histories from societies around the world in initiating higher education for women. Accordingly, one of the oldest universities in the world enrolled women, and was established in Morocco by a woman. “The answers to modern universities was founded in the Arab world in 859,” she states.

Moving on to South Africa, Prof Fowler explained the priority given to higher education there, particularly Fort Hare University. “In 1905, the decision was made to fund the University and the money had to be collected. It took some years. It was 1916 when the first students were enrolled. They came from far and near,” she stated adding that there were two women amongst the first enrollment of students. Prof Fowler moves on to highlight the significance of Fort Hare giving the names of leaders such as Nelson Mandela who had been amongst its graduates. “Africa has a very fine record of women in leadership positions. Today there are many leaders in government, in civil service and in civil society, including the ministers of home affairs and international relations, defense, the leader of the opposition and the Mayor of Cape Town” she adds.

Though women in the UK pursuing higher education is on the rise, the numbers are still dismally low in the sciences, where Prof Fowler’s heart is. “We start off with over 40 percent of girls doing science A-levels, then 33 percent go into science, engineering and technology at university. By the time we get to researcher or postdoctoral candidate, that number has dropped to 30 percent, lecturers are 26 percent, senior lecturers are 18 percent, and we end up with only nine percent professors.” These numbers prove that a lack of women in the sciences isn’t due to a lack of interest. “At every stage of the career pipeline women drop out and leave more than men do. So it’s a leaky pipeline, leaking women at every stage, and that’s effectively wasted talent.” In terms of a possible solution to this problem, Prof Fowler is quick to mention the Athena SWAN Charter, which was a programme launched in the UK in 2005 that distributes awards to universities that recognise and alleviate gender bias, which she believes is becoming more and more effective as it starts to develop into something of a standard for institutions of higher education. “What the universities are finding as they are advancing is that the benefits to them are not just to the individuals within the university but to the departments and the institutions as a whole.”

The charter program recognises the diversity of institutions of higher education: “These are not a series of exams to be passed. Universities have to identify their own strengths, their own weaknesses, their own challenges, they have to chart their own progress, set their own

action plans and acquire their own data.”

Moreover, the benefits of higher education reach far beyond the individual or the institution. “When a woman’s full potential is unleashed, the social and economic benefits to their communities, their societies and their countries are profound. And it’s my strong view that there’s no discipline that women should be excluded from, whether its politics, business, medicine, law, science, engineering, all of these. And of course, as women enter these professions, they change them.”

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Schools that have self-examined in response to the Athena Swan Charter have seen more women in the sciences as well as in higher strata of academia in key decision-making positions. The increasing prevalence of the charter, as well as its effectiveness in reshaping campus culture, sets an important standard for changing institutions of higher education from the inside-out, a victory in itself with implications far beyond the reach of academia.

The conference on ‘Critical Women: Women as Agents of Change through Higher Education’ serves as an initiative to propel institutional change – the manifest issues facing women are so deeply ingrained into the culture and personality of establishments, in interactions and conflicts beyond the reach of legislation. Over two days, women young and old, from worlds apart, held discussions ranging from gender stereotypes and biases to exclusion from decision-making, whether it be at the university, community or national level. The conference on the whole, by pooling together the wealth of knowledge and experiences from all involved, acted as a field guide for institutional change.



