

Voice of Women

Title: Women in Post-Independence Sri Lanka
Editor: Swarna Jayaweera
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VOICES now heard

"On the 22nd of October 1995 the LTTE attacked our village and massacred nineteen people, one of whom was my son....."

"Women in employment...well, for most jobs there is less gender bias in employment now than fifty years ago. It is educational achievements and qualifications, which matter; political influence is also useful sometimes. I am a teacher, my daughter too and my daughter -in law a lawyer."

In the course of recounting their life experiences, these women have also commented on changes they had noted in their own community and in society at large.

The Center for Women's Research (CENWOR) offers this book as an 'encapsulation' of the interface between macro-level changes and the micro-level experiences of the women in Sri Lanka, as an overview of the past, and perhaps as a source of lessons for the future.

This publication focuses on the post independence era in Sri Lanka, between 1948 and 1998, attempting to present the mixed record of progress of the Sri Lankan women, from significant improvements to frustrating setbacks. A series of papers written by a range of experts, activists and academics provides a thoughtful review of the historical social transformation over the decades.

The editor of his volume has put the reader in perspective by setting the ground for the gender nuances and issues that have been a part of the historical processes that are reflected in the contemporary scene: This acts as a preface to the six chapters on special themes and the sixteen interviews of women in diverse circumstances.

The book edited by Swarna Jayaweera contains primarily two sections, one dealing with the substantive analysis of the issues and the other giving voice to the women of Sri Lanka themselves. The first part brings

women including law and human rights; the impact of the continuing ethnic conflict and violence; education and unemployment; health and population; changes in social and intrafamilial structures; and the emergence of women's organizations.

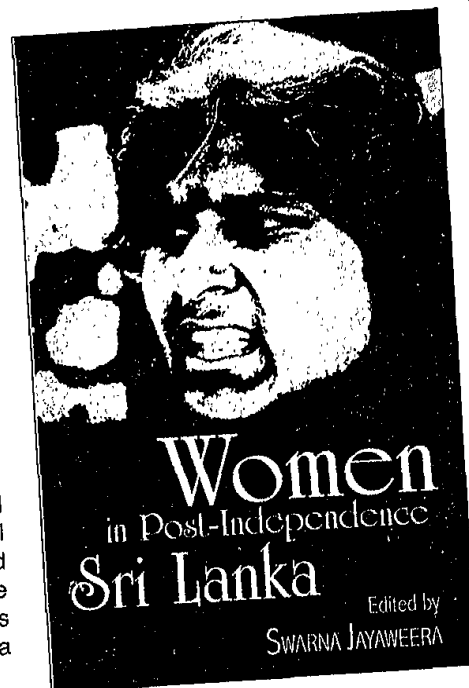
The second part of the book presents rather well articulated interviews of experiences of sixteen women selected to represent the diverse socio-economic and ethnic population groups in Sri Lanka. They were all born before or around the year of independence making them witnesses to the vicissitudes of their country's recent past.

All through the description, social policies took a front seat in the political independence in 1948, and received relatively consistent support over the years; such that economic policies swung from market orientation to a

'....for if the women of a country are slaves the men can never be free'

controlled economy and to market liberalization in a not so conducive economic environment; and that political violence increasingly engulfed a multi-ethnic society in a constitutional democracy. The class dimensions of socio-economic change are reflected in the experiences of the groups of women who vividly recount their past.

Nevertheless, it has also been acknowledged that women have visibly progressed in many areas in the fifty years



since independence. Their physical quality of life (as seen from the development indices) is virtually the best in the South Asian region, and compares favourably with other more developed parts of the world. The struggle for women's liberation is being carried forth into the new millennium and the inspiration for the women's movement of the future will come from the experiences of the past.

This review of fifty years of independence of Sri Lanka from a gender perspective depicts the societal changes and their effects on women and how they have moved ahead in an environment of constraints.

In its thought provoking mode, insightful descriptions and realistic experiences on a variety of gender specific issues, this volume will make great reading for activists and academicians in the fields of social work, gender studies, development studies and sociology.

Reviewed by Ambika Sharma