

Why Marriage Enforces Conditions only on Women? Persisting Gender Inequalities

"When a boy is born to a family, the parents are elated". This is a conventional saying common to many Asian countries. Having a baby boy is considered as winning a lottery while having a girl is like watering a plant in your neighbor's garden. You water it, give it sunshine and fertilize it. But when it's time for the harvest, your neighbor has better chances in it. It is as if your effort and sacrifice is being taken away by a stranger. Son preference is more conspicuous in Asian countries such as China and India where births of females are even artificially controlled.

Sri Lanka is somewhat exceptional due to educational achievements of its people, especially women. However, there may be families in rural settings who still consider that having a daughter is a burden to the family. It may be due to various factors. Some people are of the opinion that only boys will be the breadwinners of the family. Hence boys should be properly nourished and educated as they are expected to support the family in the future. Also there is a traditional perception that no matter how much you love and care for your daughter and enjoy her beauty and warmth, it is as if your own daughter does not belong to you after all. She will be with you, make you happy and care for you but ultimately will leave you for another family from where she will continue to play her duties as a new daughter, sister and a mother. Above all, parents think that they have to carry the burden of finding dowry for their daughter for her marriage.

In many cases women suffer at marriage particularly due to dowry related problems. "Dowry", plays a major role in the lives of females who are in the marriageable age in Sri Lankan society. Offering dowry to the husband is not a rule. But it is a tradition. If the parents are capable of supporting the daughter with a dowry, at her marriage, she is often well accepted and given due respect by her in-laws. Consequently, it has become a practice that parents struggle to secure money or property as dowry for their daughter.

There are many instances where married women face problems for not possessing dowries at their marriages. This situation is prevalent not only in poor rural families, but also in affluent families. This situation is clearly pointed out in the following case study which presents a young girl whose life became unhappy and miserable due to a dowry related scenario.

Susima being a well educated girl from a wealthy family in an urban setting in Sri Lanka got married following a long time love affair. He, also being a well employed man, was able to maintain a healthy and loving relationship with Susima. Susima's parents provided Susima with a house and property as dowry on the day of her marriage. But the house had been rented out by their parents by the time of their marriage and it was not possible to get the house vacant soon to be occupied by the couple. Although Susima's parents were not able to provide the house at Susima's marriage due to the fact that it was occupied, there was no reason to have doubt about that as Susima's parents are educated and innocent people who did not want to break such a promise. But Susima's mother-in-law was highly worried about this and as the couple was residing at the husband's house by this time, she was able to create chaos within the household and was always grumbling about the property in question while insulting Susima during their stay there. This situation resulted in conflicts at their household and later Susima was made to come back to her parents.

By this time Susima's parents were able to get the proposed house vacant and give it to Susima. However, conflict between Susima's mother-in-law and her never ended. After some time the old lady died, but Susima suddenly got ill. She was mentally depressed and it was considered that the dead woman was troubling Susima, according to Sri Lankan myths. She could not recover from this situation and the tragedy ended with the death of Susima leaving two little kids behind. This whole unfortunate episode is based on a dowry related problem. In traditional Sri Lankan society, there is another social norm attached to marriage.

Testing the virginity of the girl at her marriage is still prevalent in traditional rural families. This is actual gender discrimination. Only the girls are supposed to remain untouched by a man and maintain their virginity. If in any case the girl does not happen to have her virginity guarded till her marriage, she will eternally suffer throughout her married life. It is true that safe sex is always good. Adolescents should be well educated about their sexual behavior.

But testing of virginity of girls cannot be accepted as a good social norm. Even though women have proven to be equally stronger and fit in every way possible as of men, these kinds of delusions are able to keep the woman at the bottom row in her personal life.



In addition to the above mentioned discriminations, there are other discriminatory practices which negatively affect women. When a married woman is unable to produce children, she is often looked down upon in the society and condemned as a "barren woman who is of no worth". In the past, the woman at this stage was neglected by her husband and in-laws, mocked and tormented by society giving her the impression that it is her fault for not being able to carry their generation forward. In countries like India, the husband at this stage was able to marry another woman and remain in the same house enjoying a happy family life with his new wife and children while his previous "barren wife", was caused tremendous pain and suffering and was ignored. This view continues in many religions and castes as well where polygamy and polyandry are practiced.

Today we live in a technologically advanced world where medical science is able to bring solutions to most of our health and physical problems. With this, it is proven in most cases that the woman is not the one to be blamed in most of the situations as mentioned above. The man has an equal role to play when it comes to producing children. Even though this is the case, even today the misunderstandings of the majority of people remain and the finger is directed only at the woman.

After marriage, if the first child is a girl, it could also cause a dramatic situation in the past in the Sri Lankan context. But this has dramatically changed by now. With the educational achievements of females, dowry is also losing favor in society. People are of the view that, if the couple is educated and earn a good income, they will have no trouble of leading their lives comfortably and happily. Pre-marital sex has also become a common phenomenon among the younger generations in urban areas even though it is not accepted by many, due to our cultural norms. However, testing virginity of married women is no more among educated people. Education has changed the present Sri Lankan society in a very positive way.

The status of women in Sri Lanka has been subjected to many great changes over the past century with the gender specific interventions taken by the successive governments in Sri Lanka. As a result, Sri Lankan women are fortunate in enjoying equal status when compared to their counterparts in Asia. But there are instances where deeply rooted cultural norms lead to some discriminatory practices against women, particularly with issues related to marriage.

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