

CELEBRATING THE STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE OF WOMEN



EDITORIAL COLUMN

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, American Lawyer and Jurist once said,

“Women belong in all places where decisions are being made... It shouldn't be that women are the exception”

During the past and time and over again, the world has witnessed the struggle of women, seeking to claim their space for equal opportunities, their efforts to obtain individual rights and freedom, increase the participation of women in the economic and political sphere and their demand for inclusion and equality. However, it has not been a smooth path to tread upon- the struggle is real! Despite all obstacles, women play a pivotal role; be it at the social, economic, political or domestic front. Indeed, the future would be better with women at every table where decisions are made.

This International Women's Day the world celebrates “Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world.” It is a call for all women to claim their space in decision making and leadership. Across all sectors and communities' women render great service and play key contributions to say the least. In fact, women are in the front lines of response against the raging crisis of the Covid 19 pandemic that has engulfed the entire world. We observe women and girls as health care workers, innovators, researchers risking their lives to make life better for everyone. Yet, they are under-represented in decision making and leadership positions.

Gender bias, prejudice, discrimination and violence hinder women from achieving great heights in their careers, which systematically restrict the potential for innovation and strength to withstand the growing challenges from the domestic to the ongoing pandemic.

It is high time that both men and women alike advocate, educate, mentor and raise awareness for more women and girls to come forward, and take leadership for better solutions that benefit everyone.

COVID-19 AND WOMEN

“The impacts of crises are not gender neutral, and the Covid 19 pandemic is no exception”



Since December 2019, the people around the world face unprecedented challenges with the outbreak of the deadly virus, which has spared no one. However, women have been heavily battered under the economic and social fall out of Covid 19, exposing them into greater threats.

Women are losing their jobs; the pandemic and the lockdowns have created a disproportionate increase in women's unemployment compared to men. According to the United Nations, 25 percent of self-employed women have lost their jobs compared to 21 percent of men in Europe and central Asia. For countless women, with unpaid jobs, loss of income, domestic work and above all the unseen and ignored sexual harassments led them into further chaos, doubly victimizing them.

Despite the prolonged consequences women continue to encounter in this phase of time, there are women who have shown immense resilience and courage who strive to break from the shackles of poverty, economic deprivation and struggles to start anew. **Even with a record-breaking new high of women CEOs of Fortune 500 companies in 2020, only 7.4 per cent of**

companies on the list are run by women, and women are less likely to be entrepreneurs. (United Nations)

With women endeavoring to move forward amidst the degrading economies, we also observe women athletes who inspire other women and girls to strive for their dreams. **Without women's leadership, the Olympic Games Tokyo 2021 would never become the first gender-equal Olympic Games, with female athlete participation at almost 49 per cent. (United Nations)**

Subsequently, the media plays a crucial role in amplifying the unheard voices and stories of women while drawing attention to developing concerns and issues. **But, women hold only 27 percent of top management jobs in media organizations and in news media. (United Nations).** In global news coverage of COVID-19, only one in five expert sources consulted were women. (United Nations) It is time that the voices of more marginalised women are brought to the core, in order to prioritize and give space for their deeply entrenched problems that are untold to the world.

INSPIRE #CHOOSETOCHALLENGE CAMPAIGN

Problems are part and parcel of every human being regardless of the differences in their sexual orientation or gender identity. Nevertheless, the trials and challenges that women encounter in their everyday lives are far more intense than what men have to deal with and this is simply because of them being women and portrayed as weak, passive, ignorant, marginalised and vulnerable beings. In light of dismantling such stereotypical viewpoints, and encouraging women and girls to take up leadership, while celebrating their achievements, the InSPIRE project launched a 7-day campaign, from 2nd to 8th March parallelly joining the official International Women's Day 2021 campaign set around the theme "[Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world,](#)" and #Choosetochallenge. The campaign which was launched via the [Hashtag Inspire facebook page](#) involved the project team of the Inspire project from HELVETAS and SDJF and young leaders and media and communication students from the universities of Jayewardenepura, Peradeniya, Jaffna and the South Eastern University, who are a part of our network.

The InSPIRE team recognized 4 females from the Inspire network; [Fathima Husniya](#), [Madara Gunawardana](#), [Prarthana Maduwanthi](#) and [Sadunika Rathnayake](#) who have challenged

stereotypical perspectives such as being athletic, taking up a position in media, expressing one's opinions freely and openly and being employed full-time to be no more limited to men. They were featured in the inspire facebook page for their accomplishments and efforts in life. Around 20 students representing all 4 universities pledged to raise their voice against discrimination and harassment to help forge women's equality, while 4 others were vocal about the challenges women encounter in their day to day lives.

Saduni Wanasinghe from the University of Peradeniya mentioned

"The biggest challenge that I recognise that women have to face is: accepting certain rules laid down by the society."

Kunthavi Sivapalan from the university of Jaffna stated

"Ragging within the university and women not prioritised for leadership positions are some I could give thought to."

MEMBERS OF THE INSPIRE NETWORK TAKING THE PLEDGE



MEMBERS OF THE INSPIRE TEAM TAKING THE PLEDGE



In fact, the honest sentiments raised by the female students were captured in a [video](#) produced for the campaign. Further, the project staff of both Sri Lanka Development Journalist Forum (SDJF) and HELVETAS pledged to forge positive visibility of women and maintain a gender equal mindset for a gender equal world.

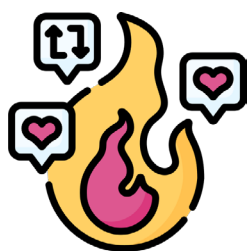
The campaign picked up great momentum and by the end of the 8th day, managed to involve a wider audience which resulted in 25, 305 posts reach, 2844 engagements, 1799 reactions, 232 comments and 45 Shares. Through this initiative, the Inspire project created another opportunity for youth to express themselves freely and to uphold gender sensitive freedom of expression.



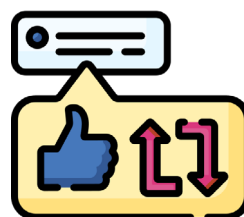
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STRENGTHEN POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT

SDJF in partnership with Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust (NTT) is implementing a pilot project in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka with the women local government members to enhance their media literacy and leadership skills required for better representation in the council sessions. Media play a critical role in portraying women leadership in the public sphere. Lack of awareness on media literacy and necessary skills to face the media make the women local government members more vulnerable. In order to overcome the current challenges, SDJF has identified 20 women local government members from 5 districts such as Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya and provided full 3 days coaching and mentoring on Media literacy and leadership skills. The resource team of SDJF spent 3 days with 4-5 women members in each district. During the coaching & mentoring, the women local government members learned the (i) Media landscape in Sri Lanka (ii) News value (iii) How to prepare for an interview (iv) How to conduct a press conference (v) Public speaking tips and tools (vi) Preparing debate notes for the council sittings.

The trained women members will be taken to the Media institutions in the North (Jaffna) for the practical training and exposure.



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