

Journeys of Gender: Teaching, Learning and Unlearning Gender in Sri Lanka



**Faculty of Graduate Studies
University of Colombo**

**Journeys of Gender:
Teaching, Learning, and Unlearning
Gender in Sri Lanka**

**Published by
Faculty of Graduate Studies
University of Colombo**

Copyright © 2026 Faculty of Graduate Studies,
University of Colombo
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means whatsoever without express written permission from the publisher.

ISBN: 978-624-5518-74-6

Editor: Dr. Pavithra Jayawardena
Copy Editing and Proofreading:
Chathupama Abeywickrama, Thadini Liyanage
Cover Art: Millet Woman by Kamala Vasuki,
December 2025, Oil Pastels on Paper
Published by: Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo
Printed by: University of Colombo Press

This publication is issued by the Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo, to mark International Women's Day 2026. It includes contributions from students and lecturers of the Master of Gender and Women's Studies (MGWS) - 2025/2026.

The views and opinions expressed in the articles in this publication are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the university, the editors, or the publisher.

Contents

Forward..... iv

Section 1

Journeys of Teaching Gender 01

Becoming a Feminist Administrator: Creating Conditions
for Transformation03
BY PAVITHRA JAYAWARDENA

Creating a Feminist Movement from Students of Gender
Equality and Women’s Rights.....15
BY RAMANI JAYASUNDERE

Situated Knowledges and the Political Classroom:
A Reflexive Inquiry21
BY KAUSHALYA ARIYARATHNE

Rethinking the Teacher: Classroom Reflections on
Teaching Gender in Sri Lanka27
BY KAUSHALYA KUMARASINGHE

Why Does a Gender Lens Matter?.....35
BY UNNATHI SAMARAWEERA

Section 2

Journeys of Learning Gender 45

From Grassroots to the Classroom47
BY HAFSAH MUHEED

Ancora Imparo: Yet, I am Learning. Reflections on a Journey of Transformative Gender Education	49
BY LIHINI RATWATTE	
The Things Women Learn to Carry!	57
BY ONATHYA WEWALAARACHCHI	
From Shadows to Voice: A Life Shaped by Gender and Rights.....	63
BY HARINI FERNANDO	
Listening to Her Silence	69
BY AVISHKI PERERA	
Learning Gender: A Personal Journey Towards Change	75
BY MIRANTHI PATHIRAGE	
Education as a Gendered Choice: A Generational Shift to the Access of Education.....	81
BY TAHLIA M. PERERA	
A Mother's Love, A Woman's Inequality	87
BY NIDARSHANA SELLADURAI	
When a Daughter Dreams Beyond Expectations: Between Duty and Desire	95
BY JANANI CHAYA WALISINGHA	
Musings of a Daughter OR Womanhood, The Grief (Grievance) of	103
BY SARASIJA PULUKKUTTIGE	
Author Biographies.....	109

Forward

It is with immense pride that the Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo, presents *Journeys of Gender: Teaching, Learning and Unlearning Gender in Sri Lanka*. This volume marks an important milestone for our newly introduced One-Year Master of Gender and Women's Studies (MGWS) - 2025/2026, an interdisciplinary programme that builds on the legacy of the Postgraduate Diploma leading to Master's in Women's Studies first commenced in 2001 and now revised in alignment with the Sri Lanka Qualifications Framework (SLQF) Level 09.

The MGWS programme was conceptualized in response to a longstanding national need: the demand for rigorous, theoretically grounded, yet practice-oriented scholarship on gender within Sri Lanka. While the curriculum was designed after careful study of comparable programmes in North America, the United Kingdom, Europe, the Asia Pacific, and Australia, it remains firmly rooted in Sri Lankan realities. Our intention was to draw consistently on local histories, policies, cultures, and lived experiences while equipping students with advanced feminist theoretical and methodological tools.

The title of this degree - Gender and Women's Studies - recognizes both the genealogy and the evolution of the field. Feminist scholarship first placed women at the centre of intellectual inquiry, challenging the androcentric bias of traditional knowledge and making women's lives analytically visible. The shift toward

“gender” as a category of analysis expanded this critical project, enabling scholars to interrogate social relations, power, identity, sexuality, nationalism, ethnicity, and class in more complex ways. This book reflects that intellectual inheritance while demonstrating its contemporary relevance.

The structure of this book mirrors the ethos of the programme itself. The first section foregrounds pedagogical reflection. In essays such as *Becoming a Feminist Administrator* by Dr Pavithra Jayawardena, *Creating a Feminist Movement from Students of Gender Equality and Women’s Rights* by Dr. Ramani Jayasundere, *Situated Knowledges and the Political Classroom* by Dr. Kaushalya Ariyaratne, *Rethinking the Teacher* by Dr. Kaushalya Kumarasinghe, and *Why Does a Gender Lens Matter?* by Dr. Unnathi Samaraweera, we see teaching and administration not as a neutral act but as a deeply political and reflexive practice. These contributions illuminate the classroom as a site where knowledge, power, and transformation intersect.

The second section, *Journeys of Learning Gender*, offers powerful reflections from students whose essays trace deeply personal yet socially embedded trajectories. From grassroots activism to academic inquiry, from intergenerational negotiations over education to reflections on motherhood, silence, aspiration, and voice, these writings demonstrate how gender is lived, negotiated, and contested in everyday life. They remind us that the study of gender is not confined to theory; it is embodied, relational, and transformative.

What makes this publication particularly significant is its collaborative nature. It brings lecturers and students into the same intellectual space, disrupting hierarchical notions of

knowledge production. Teaching and learning here are reciprocal processes - anchored in dialogue, reflexivity, and the willingness to unlearn. Such mutual scholarship is especially vital in a field like gender studies, where critical self-examination is integral to intellectual growth.

As a state university, the University of Colombo bears a public responsibility that extends beyond certification and credentialing. We are entrusted with contributing meaningfully to national conversations, informing public policy, and nurturing ethical, empathetic professionals capable of critical engagement. The MGWS programme seeks to produce graduates who are theoretically informed, methodologically rigorous, and committed to infusing new thinking into their workplaces and communities. This collection exemplifies that aspiration.

Gender inequality remains a pressing reality in Sri Lanka, intersecting with class, ethnicity, region, and generation. If meaningful social transformation is to occur, it must be grounded in critical scholarship that speaks to lived realities. *Journeys of Gender* stands as a testament to that commitment. I commend the contributors, the editor and the academic team of the MGWS programme for this important and timely contribution. May this volume inspire continued dialogue, research, and action toward a more just and equitable Sri Lanka.

Senior Professor AA Azeez
Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
University of Colombo

11.03.2026

Section 1

Journeys of Teaching Gender

Becoming a Feminist Administrator: Creating Conditions for Transformation

By Pavithra Jayawardena

In 2021, I returned to Sri Lanka after completing my doctoral studies in migration, carrying with me a clear sense of direction. I imagined a future anchored in research, writing, and policy engagement on migration - work that felt urgent, mobile, and outward-looking. When I was invited to serve as co-coordinator of the Postgraduate Diploma leading to the Master's in Gender and Women's Studies (MGWS) at the Faculty of Graduate Studies, I did not recognise the invitation as transformative. It seemed administrative, even peripheral to the scholarly path I had carefully mapped. I accepted out of curiosity more than conviction. I wanted to understand how postgraduate programmes function within a state university system, how they are structured, evaluated, and sustained. I assumed I would observe, learn, and eventually return to my "real" work. Instead, the programme reshaped me. What began as an administrative responsibility gradually became a site of intellectual, political, and personal reckoning. The questions that emerged were not technical but foundational: Who is a Gender programme for? What kinds of knowledge does it legitimise? How does an institution quietly reproduce exclusion even while speaking the language of empowerment?

Over the course of five Women's Days marked during my tenure, I came to see that coordination is never neutral. It shapes who gains entry, who feels authorised to speak, which epistemologies are affirmed, and how intellectual communities function. Administration, often dismissed as procedural routine, is in fact a terrain of power. To coordinate a Gender programme is to make decisions that reverberate far beyond timetables and course outlines; it is to participate in constructing the very conditions under which feminist thought can thrive. This essay is a reflection on my attempt to practise feminist pedagogy through administration. I frame this reflection through three concepts - *agency*, *dialogue*, and *difference* - borrowed from Shweta Singh (2025). These categories offer not a formula, but a lens through which to examine how institutions might be nudged, questioned, and reimagined from within.

Admission: Widening the Entrance to Gender Studies

From the outset, I sensed that Gender Studies in Sri Lanka carried an aura of exclusivity. Although the MGWS programme had long been respected within certain academic and activist circles, it appeared - both structurally and symbolically - as an elite space. "Gender" often circulates in Sri Lanka as a specialised discourse associated with English-speaking urban centres, international development organisations, and professionalised advocacy. While this association reflects the historical trajectory of feminist institutionalisation in the country, it also risks narrowing access to those who already possess particular forms of linguistic, cultural and social capital.

Admission procedures to the programme revealed how this elitism was quietly reproduced. Beyond standard academic qualifications and the oral interview, applicants were required to demonstrate a high level of English proficiency through a written test - a step no other postgraduate diploma-level programme at FGS followed at the time. In other programmes, English proficiency was assessed during the interview itself. Those who did not perform exceptionally well in the written test were denied entry, based on the assumption that they would struggle to engage with critical feminist texts. While language competency is undeniably important in postgraduate education, the question that unsettled me was whether English fluency had become a proxy for intellectual capability, especially in a society where English is not the native language.

Understanding the broader structural context of Gender Studies in Sri Lanka is important here. To my knowledge, Sri Lanka does not yet offer a dedicated undergraduate degree in Gender Studies. Gender appears intermittently across disciplines - sociology, political science, and more consistently in English literature - but rarely as a sustained field of inquiry. I often reflect on how striking this absence is in a country that has produced influential feminist thinkers such as Kumari Jayawardena, whose scholarship on nationalism and feminism continues to resonate across South Asia and beyond. Why does this broader context matter? It reveals how few undergraduates in state universities are systematically exposed to Gender Studies and highlights the politics shaping that absence.

The lack of undergraduate pathways means that postgraduate programmes carry a disproportionate responsibility. They must introduce foundational concepts while simultaneously advancing critical analysis. They must welcome students encountering feminist theory for the first time alongside those already familiar with its debates. In this context, insisting on the highest level of English proficiency, rather than a strong working ability, further restricted access to the programme. I repeatedly asked myself: What is MGWS for, if it cannot be accessed simply because one does not possess near-native English fluency? Were we equating language with critical thought? Were we inadvertently screening out those whose lived experiences and political insights might profoundly enrich feminist conversations, simply because their English did not conform to institutional expectations?

Raising these questions within administrative structures required careful negotiation. Yet a feminist coordinator must also ask what it means to comply uncritically. The work, therefore, lay in sustaining a space of dialogue between institutional requirements and feminist commitments, between formal standards and substantive inclusion. This dialogue was not always easy or comfortable. It required persuading colleagues, senior administrators, and review panels that broadening access was not a lowering of standards, but a rethinking of how standards are defined. It required examining my own internalised assumptions about merit, excellence, and preparedness. Feminist administration, I learned, is not about dismantling institutions from the outside; it is about inhabiting them critically, asking persistent questions, and pushing gently but firmly at their

edges. Thanks to FGS's openness to dialogue, we were able to recalibrate the measurement of English competency to a level more appropriate to our social context, thereby opening the programme to a wider group of applicants. As a result, our gender classrooms are now more diverse, enriched by a broader range of backgrounds and experiences.

Curricular Decisions

If admissions policies shape who enters, curricular decisions shape what is valued. Coordinating MGWS meant making choices about which courses to prioritise, which theoretical traditions to foreground, and which voices to bring into the classroom. These decisions are inherently political. Feminist scholarship has long insisted that knowledge is situated and shaped by power. Yet universities often treat curricula as technical compilations rather than political assemblages. I found myself asking: What does it mean to design a curriculum attentive to *difference*? Not difference as a token category - ethnicity, class, sexuality, disability inserted as discrete units - but difference as an organising principle that recognises that experiences of gender are never homogeneous. Sri Lanka's social landscape is shaped by linguistic plurality, ethnic tensions, caste hierarchies, regional disparities, and post-war realities. A feminist curriculum that fails to engage these layered histories risks becoming abstract and detached.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the previous curriculum was already one of the strongest interdisciplinary

programmes in the country, grounded firmly in Sri Lankan realities. It brought together insights from history, sociology, literature, law, and development studies, and it was shaped by decades of feminist scholarship rooted in local struggles. That foundation did not require dismantling; it required deepening and renewal. The task was not to replace what existed, but to refine it to ensure that interdisciplinarity was not only structural but analytical, and that local grounding continued to speak to emerging global debates.

The introduction of the one-year Master's programme in 2025 emerged from these reflections. We sought to create a multidisciplinary structure that would enable students to approach gender not as an isolated theme but as an analytical lens cutting across history, law, political economy, sexuality, environment, and culture. The aim was not simply expansion, but coherence - a framework through which students could recognise interconnections as well as contradictions. In this sense, coordination became an exercise in weaving intellectual threads while preserving space for contestation, critique, and intellectual growth.

Feminist Teaching: How to Ensure It?

Another dimension of feminist coordination involves defending intellectual plurality. Gender Studies, particularly in conservative or polarised contexts, is often perceived as controversial. Certain scholars and practitioners carry reputations for being outspoken, radical, or disruptive. Decisions about who teaches, therefore,

can attract scrutiny - not only about expertise, but about ideology, positionality, and public voice. In this context, the question of *agency* became central. Whose agency counts in academic spaces? Do we attempt to shield students from discomfort, or do we equip them to engage critically with dissenting and challenging perspectives? Feminist pedagogy, as I understand it, does not promise comfort; it promises reflexivity. It does not avoid tension; it works through it. To coordinate a feminist programme, therefore, is to defend the legitimacy of critical thought even when it unsettles institutional habits or social norms.

Our teaching faculty embodies this commitment to *difference* not only through their areas of expertise, but through their approaches, experiences, and ideological locations. They respond to difference pedagogically through how they design syllabi, facilitate discussion, draw from lived experience, and position themselves in relation to knowledge. Some come from long careers in academia; others from activism, development practice, law, and politics. Their classrooms are shaped not merely by disciplinary training, but by the social and political worlds they inhabit. This plurality does not dilute the programme; it enriches it. It ensures that students encounter gender not as a single doctrine, but as a field of contested ideas, grounded struggles, and evolving debates.

I remain grateful to FGS for its openness in this regard. The willingness to invite teachers from within the university as well as from outside has been crucial. It affirms that feminist teaching

is not confined to institutional walls. Rather, it is sustained through dialogue across locations of knowledge, and through the recognition that expertise itself takes multiple forms.

Writing *Journeys of Gender Together*

In Sri Lanka, Women's Day events often risk becoming token gestures - carefully curated themes, invited speakers, and celebratory panels that symbolically "include" women without unsettling the structures that shape their lives. The process itself can become formulaic, driven more by representation than reflection. At FGS, we wanted to approach this moment differently. Rather than treating Women's Day as a ceremonial obligation, we asked how it might become a meaningful feminist practice. The decision to launch this book as a co-construction between students and teachers emerged from that commitment. For us, writing this volume was not an add-on activity; it was an extension of the classroom. The book embodies a feminist value: knowledge is collectively produced, grounded in *dialogue*, and attentive to *difference*. It reflects not only what we teach, but how we teach and how we learn together.

We initially assumed - perhaps naively - that writing a short reflective essay would feel easier than producing a conventional academic paper. Instead, in the process, I saw many students found the exercise a bit challenging. The first difficulty was emotional. Reflecting on gender is rarely abstract. It requires revisiting childhood expectations, familial hierarchies, silences, losses, and aspirations. For some, the process surfaced grief.

For others, it illuminated tensions between personal choices and structural constraints. Feminist classrooms often direct critical analysis outward, toward institutions and systems; reflective writing turns that analytical lens inward.

The second difficulty was epistemological. Students accustomed to conventional academic writing felt unsettled without citations. They questioned whether personal narrative could carry authority. The absence of references felt like an absence of legitimacy. In that moment, I recognised how deeply academic training disciplines us to distrust experiential knowledge. We have internalised a hierarchy in which theory validates life, rather than life informing theory, haven't we?

It is precisely here that feminist writing becomes political. To write feministically is not merely to describe inequality; it is to question power, including the power that defines what counts as knowledge. If we value *agency*, then we must cultivate students' confidence in their own interpretive capacities. If we respect *difference*, then we must recognise that knowledge emerges from diverse social locations. If we believe in *dialogue*, then we must create spaces where lived experience and theory speak to one another, rather than existing in separate hierarchies.

This book, launched on Women's Day, is therefore not a symbolic offering but a pedagogical statement. It reflects, problematises, and practices what we attempt to sustain in the classroom. It is our collective effort to move beyond tokenism and toward a feminist process - one that is inclusive, self-critical, and

meaningful. We hope it will stand not simply as a publication, but as a contribution to ongoing conversations about gender, knowledge, and transformation.

Becoming a Feminist Administrator

Coordinating a Gender programme is never straightforward. Familiar questions surface during curriculum reviews and public events: Why Gender? Why are most of the students women? What is its practical relevance? Such inquiries reveal how gender continues to sit at the margins of mainstream academic imagination. Yet each Women's Day initiative organised by the programme becomes an opportunity to assert intellectual presence. Conferences, keynote lectures, panel discussions, and creative forums may appear modest, but they inscribe gender firmly within the university's scholarly landscape signalling that it warrants sustained, rigorous engagement.

Over time, I have come to see coordination not as the resolution of tensions, but as the capacity to hold them productively. It involves negotiating between regulation and critique, affirming difference without fracturing solidarity, and fostering student and faculty agency within institutional constraints. If feminist pedagogy seeks transformation, feminist administration creates the conditions that make such transformation possible. Decisions about admissions, curricula, staffing, assessment, and public engagement are not merely procedural; they shape the contours of intellectual life and determine whose knowledge counts.

Serving as MGWS coordinator has also reshaped my own positionality. For years, I felt uncertain of my place within Gender Studies, perceiving it as shaped by particular linguistic and intellectual traditions rooted in urban, English-speaking networks. That sense of partial belonging was not simply personal doubt; it reflected the field's historical development. Acknowledging this has strengthened my resolve to widen access and question inherited norms. Feminist coordination demands reflexivity - an awareness that institutional ease is unevenly distributed. It requires attentiveness to who speaks confidently and who hesitates, whose questions are welcomed and whose silence goes unnoticed. Had I not been invited to coordinate the MGWS by FGS and was not given the space to exercise the agency as it did, chances for me to ever become a feminist administrator within the Sri Lankan university sector would be very marginal. For that, I sincerely thank FGS.

As we mark another Women's Day, this reflection is not a celebration of accomplishment but a recognition of ongoing responsibility. The programme builds on the labour of scholars, activists, and teachers who carved out space for feminist inquiry. We inherit a feminist debt: the obligation to deepen conversations, confront exclusions, and imagine more inclusive futures. To coordinate in this spirit is to remain attentive to language, to power, to silence, to possibility. Administration, often reduced to bureaucratic routine, can instead be practised as a feminist ethic. It is a commitment to ensuring that our classrooms and institutions more fully embody the principles we teach: dialogue, difference, and agency.

Creating a Feminist Movement from Students of Gender Equality and Women's Rights

By Ramani Jayasundere

I vividly remember sitting with a group of academics around 2015 to design the Women's Studies course at the University of Colombo. Having been a practitioner with experience in delivering gender equality awareness programmes and training for diverse audiences, I was excited but also somewhat nervous about being a part of a group of academics. The course, which started as a postgraduate diploma moving to a masters programme, brought together a group of senior feminists, including a committed feminist Course Coordinator, and included, for the first time in a course of this nature, an exciting array of subjects.

From the beginning, I taught Feminist Jurisprudence and Feminist Legal Theory - a journey I deeply cherish. I learned as much as I taught, especially as many others generously contributed their time and expertise to the module, and continue to do so many years later.

The module was designed to expose students to a range of feminist experts in women's legal rights in Sri Lanka and learn from their experiences.

The module combined law and feminist discourse, fostering the development of feminist legal analysis. It was essentially a study of theory and practice, as the issue of feminist law reform cannot be understood from a purely academic standpoint, independent of practice. The examination of legal theory and practice from a feminist lens aimed to provide an understanding of feminist concerns, theory and practice in all areas of the justice process and provides pathways for reshaping practice and, in turn, theory.

Teaching feminist legal theory seemed a natural fit within the strong women's rights focus of the course that was prepared. The course was taught by strong feminists through multiple teaching techniques. Storytelling and narratives were a strong part of the teaching. I always felt teaching was not done for the sake of creating better educated students but as a means of strengthening a feminist movement.

This year, 2026, the theme of International Women's Day is 'Give to Gain', which seeks to encourage a mindset of generosity and collaboration. In its recognition of the power of reciprocity and support, it recognises the power of, among others, pushing advocacy and giving education, training, mentoring, or time, contributing to women's advancement. 2026 enables me to reflect on what our academic course has done not only in 'giving' but in changing the course of women's rights in Sri Lanka.

Teaching in Changing Contexts

Over the past ten years, political contexts have been the primary driver that shaped women's rights discourse in Sri Lanka. Consecutive governments have played into and *used* norms, practices and expressions of women's rights in society, flitting from progressive agendas to protectionist agendas to restrictive and thereby discriminatory agendas that have shaped the lives of women in their enjoyment and expression of our own rights.

We saw domestic violence trivialized resulting in an outcry among women's organisations that brought back its debilitating impact on women to the rights discourse. We saw women continually being harassed and discriminated against in diverse public spheres and at home. We saw failed attempts and conservative debates on enabling women's rights over their bodies and recognising sex work as work. We also saw progressive legislation enabling more women in politics. We saw a slow yet gradual shift where courts of law became sensitive to the impact of violence against women. We celebrated the adoption of the National Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy and the Women Empowerment Act.

We taught in the background of a dual narrative of progressive legislative and policy adoption and persistent structural and social challenges. Patriarchy remained strong as we taught consecutive groups of students, largely young women with a scattering of older women and even fewer men in the student cohorts.

I continued to be fascinated by the expression of women's rights by young women. I felt they grappled with a far more complex world than I did as a young woman. Patriarchy today is more subtle, constantly evolving and more coercive despite progressive thinking and the strong work of women's rights and even policy makers and implementers over the years.

Balancing Passion and Precision

For me, teaching a gender and women's rights course is a balance of passion and precision. The course covers many aspects, from brass tacks of statistics and thematic and subject details to higher levels of concepts and theoretical approaches. The teaching techniques are an exciting collection of adult learning tools from lectures to discussions to practical activities such as debates, analysis of judgments, commentary on mock trials and writing opinion pieces.

The Power We Hold

When we evaluate our teaching, we often rate ourselves on imparting knowledge, raising consciousness and pushing students out of and beyond their comfort zones. It is a difficult measure often clouded by our own opinions and strong judgments. We become mindful of the power we hold over students.

This power, I feel, impacts student engagement. Many of us come from an education system that tells us to listen and speak less, where questions and opinions, especially non-conforming

ones, are not encouraged and the expression of self is not stimulated.

‘Teaching’ women’s rights where opinions and judgements are rife, heavily influenced by where and how we live, becomes a difficult balance between gentle questioning and almost radical pushing of feminist thinking. I would like to be evaluated on these grounds, but fear I may fail the test.

At the start of the module I teach, I often ask my students if they identify themselves as feminists. Only a few strong hands are raised, a few tentative ones and most of the time, or no hands are raised at all. I do not ask this question at the end of the module, fearing that fewer hands would be raised, and I would have to deal with the fact that I have contributed nothing much to a feminist movement. I let written and oral examinations decide where, and how, the students have arrived.

Feminist Thinking at the Centre of Teaching

Over the years, I have come to understand that teaching women’s rights is fundamentally about fostering a deep understanding of gender equality, human rights, and the historical struggle against discrimination. The goal is to empower students to recognise and challenge discrimination and marginalisation, and advocate for meaningful change.

I often grappled with whether feminist thinking should be the centre of our teaching, or whether we should let feminism emerge

within a discourse on women's rights and gender equality. While I recognise that these perspectives are intrinsically intertwined, I sometimes wonder whether prioritising gender equality - while hoping a feminist perspective will emerge - risks sidelining a strong feminist approach, rather than confronting it directly.

The fundamental reflection for me, therefore, is about strengthening discourse and even activism. Have we pushed the feminist agenda in our teaching or stayed within a safe environment of objectively speaking about women's rights as a precursor to ensure gender equality?

We often frame women's rights within a broader gender equality discourse, presenting them not as special privileges or isolated concerns, but as fundamental human rights. This is an important and necessary first step. However, I sometimes question whether this approach is too cautious or compromising. By grounding women's rights primarily in comparison to men's rights, we risk overlooking the need for a strong, standalone recognition of women's rights as inherent and independent.

Women's rights should be affirmed not because they measure up against existing standards, but because they are essential and exist in their own right. This may not require adopting a radical feminist agenda; it could be liberal, postmodern, or another form. What is needed is a feminist framework that drives transformative change for women, rather than a gender equality framework that relies on comparison and may ultimately settle for incremental gains.

Situated Knowledges and the Political Classroom: A Reflexive Inquiry

By Kaushalya Ariyaratne

Pedagogy is never a static transmission of data; it is a deeply contextual, relational, and epistemological act. As educators, our ‘situatedness’, our location within specific historical, social, and political conditions, determine not only how we teach but what we consider to be valid knowledge. My tenure as a lecturer in the Post Graduate Diploma in Gender and Women’s Studies at the Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS), University of Colombo beginning in 2021, serves as a case study in how external crises and internal professional shifts reconstruct the pedagogical experience.

This reflection traces my journey teaching modules on Health, Sexuality and Gendered Bodies and later, Introduction to Feminism. It moves from the disembodied alienation of the COVID-19 remote classroom to the vibrancy of physical lectures, and finally, to the intersection of academia and state power following my entry into active government politics in late 2024. Through the lens of Feminist Standpoint Theory, specifically drawing on the works of Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway, I argue that teaching is an evolving epistemological

practice. My transition from a purely academic/activist standpoint to one embedded in the machinery of government has fundamentally altered my understanding of social change, transforming theoretical impatience into a pragmatic recognition of institutional pacing, while reaffirming the classroom as a vital space for critical dialogue.

The Disembodied Classroom: Teaching Bodies in a Virtual Void (2021–2023)

I commenced my teaching engagement at the FGS in 2021, a period defined by the global disruption of the COVID 19 pandemic. The irony of teaching a module titled Health, Sexuality and Gendered Bodies through the disembodied medium of Zoom was profound. Feminist pedagogy has historically emphasised the ‘politics of location’ and the importance of the body as a site of knowledge production (Rich, 1986). Yet, the digital divide and the technological mediation of the screen rendered the body invisible.

The engagement during this period was, by necessity, distant. The remote format stripped the classroom of its affective dimension, the non-verbal communications, the collective tension of a difficult debate, and the shared energy that drives critical inquiry. As the pandemic dragged on, an intense ‘Zoom fatigue’ set in; lectures became performative monologues rather than dialogues, leading to boredom and pedagogical alienation for both student and teacher. In this context, knowledge felt abstract, detached from the material realities of the students’ lives. This experience

reinforced bell hooks' (1994) assertion that education must be a practice of freedom that relies on 'engaged pedagogy.' The remote format, while logistically functional, failed to support the holistic well-being and critical intimacy required for analysing complex topics like sexuality and gender.

The Return to the Physical

The eventual return to physical lectures marked a distinct epistemological shift. The classroom transformed from a site of information delivery to a space of 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1970). Discussions evolved into 'full-go' dialogues. The physical presence allowed for the immediate deconstruction of ideas. When teaching the colonial construction of gender, for instance, the ability to read the room, to see discomfort, confusion, or realisation on students' faces allowed for real time adjustments in teaching. These sessions were highly productive not because more content was covered, but because the knowledge was co-created through conversation and questioning. This period reaffirmed that feminist teaching is inherently relational; it thrives on the resistance and heat of face-to-face interactions, which digital platforms struggle to replicate.

The Political Turn: The Outsider Within (2024-Present)

In late 2024, my positionality underwent a radical shift when I entered full-time politics and became a member of the government. This career transition caused an immediate collision between my academic identity and my political reality.

The institutional responses were varied and revealing. In a faculty I used to teach, my political appointment was viewed as a ‘disqualification,’ a sentiment rooted in a traditional positivist and outdated view that academia must remain chemically pure of political power to be objective. However, the FGS adopted a different approach, allowing me to continue teaching, substantiating the premise that gender and sexuality are inherently political constructs. However, to manage the ethical conflict of interest, I voluntarily recused myself from examination matters, limiting my scope strictly to teaching.

This transition placed me in the unique position of the ‘outsider within’, a concept utilised by Patricia Hill Collins (1986) to describe the unique epistemological standpoint of Black women in white academia. While my context differs, the structural dynamic is similar: I became an academic within the government, and a politician within the academy. This dual identity did not dilute my teaching; rather, it enriched it by providing a new vantage point from which to view the mechanics of power.

Epistemology and the Pragmatic Shift: A Feminist Standpoint Analysis

At the heart of my reflection is the realisation that teaching is a way of knowing that constantly evolves. It is not fixed; rather, my approach adapts and sharpens as I gain more experience. Feminist Standpoint Theory posits that knowledge is socially situated and that marginalised groups are placed in a unique position to understand social relations (Harding, 1991). However,

my experience suggests a corollary: that accessing the centres of power also alters one's standpoint in ways that are pedagogically valuable.

Prior to my entry into government, my teaching on feminism and social change was informed largely by activist and academic frameworks. These frameworks often prioritise immediate, radical transformation and theoretical purity. However, becoming a member of the government provided me with a 'successor science' project (Harding, 1986); a truer, albeit more frustrating, understanding of reality.

I realised that the 'activist' demand for immediate change often crashes against the deep-rooted habits of bureaucracy, institutional lethargy, and messy politics. I found that my arguments regarding social change became more pragmatic. This was not a betrayal of feminist ideals, but a maturation of them. For example, when discussing policy interventions, I could no longer speak only of 'what should be' in the abstract. I had to incorporate the grim, heavy reality of 'how it happens', which includes the long process of taking policy decisions, the budget allocations, the resistance of the civil service and mobilising/confronting the public opinion. This is the epistemological shift, which is a form of knowledge that cannot be learned in a library; it is experiential knowledge derived from the struggle within the state apparatus. Bringing this into the classroom meant that I was teaching not just the theory of power, but the practice of it.

Furthermore, teaching topics such as Performativity, Sexuality, or Coloniality inevitably invites the spectre of bias. I recognise my own predilections; for example, a distinct bias toward Marxist analysis when teaching gendered labour, and a reliance on decolonial theory when deconstructing the gender binary in the Global South. However, Feminist Standpoint Theory offers a different route: ‘Strong Objectivity.’ Harding (1993) argues that neutral objectivity is weak because it fails to interrogate the subject’s own social location. Strong objectivity requires the researcher (or teacher) to self-reflexively analyse their own biases and present them as part of the inquiry.

Conclusion: The Classroom as Sanctuary

Ultimately, this journey from the Zoom screen to the parliament has reinforced a singular truth; the classroom remains my preferred domain. While party politics is characterised by antagonism, strategy, and often conflict, the classroom is a space not only of generative critique, but also of feminist solidarity and joy. The academic space allows for the exploration of ideas without the immediate demand for political expediency. It is the space where I can synthesise the pragmatism learned in government with the idealism preserved in theory. It is, as I have argued, a contextual and reflective practice that does not just transfer knowledge, but tracks how I am evolving in relation to the world, and helps my students do the same.

Rethinking the Teacher: Classroom Reflections on Teaching Gender in Sri Lanka

By Kaushalya Kumarasinghe

I want to begin with a small classroom moment: an anecdote that, for me, opens a way into this essay. The first half of what follows lingers in that moment and reads it closely. The second half moves outward from it, asking a more unsettling question: what does it mean to teach, especially to teach Gender and Women's Studies, at a time when advanced artificial intelligence can perform so many of the tasks we once thought were uniquely ours?

As an icebreaker in a class on masculinity, I asked what seemed like a simple question: write down five qualities of a successful man, according to you. One answer appeared almost immediately. A young woman wrote as her first point, "Not being a mama's boy". The phrase landed decisively. Within seconds, the entire class, composed of female students, agreed. Heads nodded. Some laughed. And then the stories began. Several students shared what they described, quite firmly, as their encounters with "mama's boys".

Behind that blunt, seemingly Western phrase lay something

deeply local. What sounded casual at first slowly unfolded into a conversation about kinship, dependency, emotional autonomy, and the quiet authority of mothers within patriarchal families. The term “mama’s boy” may circulate globally, but in that room it carried a distinctly Sri Lankan resonance. It exposed anxieties about masculinity that are woven into intergenerational hierarchies and familial intimacy.

As the discussion gathered energy, I gently shifted the conversation. I asked: what psychological or cultural fears are embedded in this rejection of the “mama’s boy”? From there, we moved, almost organically, toward psychoanalysis. The Western idea of the Oedipus complex surfaced as one possible framework: the notion that masculine maturity requires separation from the mother, a symbolic rupture that secures entry into adulthood.

But almost immediately, another question emerged: can we simply transpose that narrative onto South Asian families? The classical psychoanalytic model assumes a nuclear family and a particular configuration of paternal authority. How does it work in extended kinship systems like those in Sri Lanka or India? Students began to notice that what counts as “excessive” maternal attachment in one cultural setting may be entirely ordinary, even valued, in another.

To make this more tangible, I turned to cinema. In many Bollywood films, the hero is openly devoted to his mother. He is affectionate, expressive, guided by her blessing. Maternal reverence strengthens his masculinity; it does not undermine it.

By contrast, in many Hollywood narratives, the “mama’s boy” appears as a warning sign; the man who fails to individuate, who remains emotionally stunted, sometimes even rendered pathological. The unresolved attachment to the mother is psychologised, occasionally to the point of producing the figure of the serial killer.

These narrative contrasts opened a productive line of inquiry. If Western psychoanalysis constructs masculinity through rupture from the maternal, what happens in contexts where maternal centrality is not symbolically displaced in the same way? Could we speak of Sri Lankan or Indian Oedipal formations, not as deviations from a norm, but as culturally specific articulations of kinship, authority, and masculine subjectivity?

What began as an icebreaker became something else entirely. We found ourselves moving across comparative cultural psychology, structural anthropology, and representation. The students were not simply absorbing theory; they were testing its claims to universality. In that unfolding conversation, psychoanalytic concepts were localised; placed under pressure by lived experience.

For me, this was illuminating. It reminded me that theory must travel, but it must also be re-situated. Rather than applying the Oedipus complex as a ready-made explanatory tool, we examined its limits together. A casual phrase, “mama’s boy”, had opened into a layered reflection on how masculinity is historically and culturally shaped.

Moments like this reaffirm my conviction that teaching Gender and Women's Studies in Sri Lanka is not about importing theory wholesale. It is about placing theory in dialogue with local textures of life. It is in that friction, in that tension between concept and context, that students begin to see both the power and the particularity of theory.

And it is precisely here that teaching reveals itself as anything but neutral. In Sri Lanka, gender is never merely an academic topic. It is entangled with nationalism, religion, family structures, and moral anxieties. My work in the Postgraduate Diploma and MA programmes has consistently shown me that gender enters the classroom not as abstraction, but as lived contradiction. Students bring their biographies. So do we. Institutions do too.

This essay grows out of those experiences. I do not offer a model or a method to be replicated. Teaching gender, for me, is always marked by negotiation, ethical responsibility, and attentiveness to the fragile space between theory and lived reality.

It is also from within this space that I begin to think about artificial intelligence. The classroom episode above is not just a story; it is a vantage point from which to ask what remains distinctive about teaching when AI can summarise dense theory, generate conceptual maps, compare psychoanalytic models, and anticipate likely student questions, often with remarkable efficiency.

If teaching were simply about explaining difficult texts clearly, we might already be displaced. AI can clarify Judith Butler. It can outline feminist debates. It can apply theory to case studies. It can do so quickly, patiently, and without fatigue.

So what, then, remains?

The “mama’s boy” discussion suggests that what remains is not the transmission of theory, but the cultivation of a space in which theory becomes entangled with emotion, memory, and cultural nuance. In that classroom, theory did not function as information. It became a mediating structure through which students negotiated frustration, humour, discomfort, recognition. The discussion moved unpredictably, shaped by tone, hesitation, laughter, and sudden seriousness. These textures exceed explanation.

AI can simulate dialogue. But it does not inhabit a room of historically situated bodies. It does not share generational anxieties or cultural inheritances. It does not carry institutional responsibility for holding disagreement without humiliation, or for allowing vulnerability without exploitation.

This does not mean we defend the teacher nostalgically. Rather, we may need to rearticulate the role. Perhaps the teacher is no longer primarily the explainer of theory, but the curator of deliberation. Less a transmitter of knowledge, more a mediator of intellectual and affective encounters.

Feminist pedagogy has long insisted on the epistemic value of experience and the politics of emotion. Consciousness-raising, reflexivity, and the interrogation of power cannot simply be outsourced to an algorithm. They depend on relational dynamics: on listening, on sensing when silence is heavy, on knowing when to push and when to pause.

AI works through patterns; through what is statistically probable, already articulated. Yet transformative classroom moments often arise from the unexpected: a phrase like “mama’s boy” that unsettles conceptual boundaries. The teacher’s labour lies in recognising such moments and dwelling within them long enough for their implications to unfold.

None of this denies AI’s usefulness. It can widen access, sharpen preparation, democratise entry into difficult theory. But if AI increasingly manages explanation, then perhaps our task shifts toward cultivating ethical reflexivity, contextual sensitivity, and dialogic depth.

In Sri Lanka, where debates on gender intersect with nationalism, religion, and postcolonial histories, this relational dimension becomes even more urgent. Teaching gender is not simply clarifying concepts. It is navigating terrains where identities feel at stake. The classroom becomes a small public sphere, where theory meets biography, and disagreement carries affective weight.

The age of AI does not make the teacher obsolete. It forces us to rethink authority. Perhaps our relevance lies not in speed or precision, but in responsibility; in holding complexity without rushing to closure, in guiding conversations through the entanglements of theory, culture, and emotion.

If Gender and Women's Studies has taught me anything, it is that knowledge is never disembodied. It is situated, contested, lived. And perhaps, in an increasingly algorithmic world, the classroom remains one of the few spaces where knowledge is still negotiated face to face, where learning unfolds through shared vulnerability and critical attentiveness.

What began as a simple remark about a "mama's boy" thus becomes, in retrospect, an invitation to rethink the vocation of teaching itself. In the time of AI, the question is not how to compete with machines, but how to deepen what remains irreducibly human: ethical engagement, contextual judgement, emotional intelligence, and the willingness to dwell with complexity.

Why Does a Gender Lens Matter?

By **Unnathi Samaraweera**

Sometime back, during my PhD in New Zealand, I sat in an audience at a postgraduate seminar. A candidate was presenting preliminary findings on earthquakes in Chile. During the Q&A, a student from a non-social sciences background asked a question that has stayed with me: “Why is it important to bring gender into Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)?” For a moment, the room was silent. It was a stark reminder that the path I took as foundational within critical disaster studies was not universally understood. This moment marked a dual mission: not only is addressing gender in DRR critical due to global demographic and socio-cultural realities, but there is also a profound need to articulate its significance beyond our academic circles.

This reflection constitutes an attempt to address that question. I draw upon my fieldwork experiences from the 2016 and 2017 floods, integrating them with my academic reading of the recent cyclone *Ditwah*. By weaving together established data patterns with projected impacts, I demonstrate why a gender lens is not merely an add-on but a core analytical tool for ethical and effective disaster management. In the latter part of this article, I argue why such a gender lens is essential for understanding society in Sri Lanka and beyond.

To begin with, Cyclone *Ditwah* hit Sri Lanka's east coast in the early morning of 28 November 2025, causing widespread floods and deadly landslides across the country. According to UNICEF (2025), nearly 1.5 million people have been affected, including an estimated 275,000 children. The report cites 233,015 people displaced into 1,441 government-run safety centres, with many more reported to be staying with host families. UNFPA (2025) indicates that approximately 22,572 pregnant women and 520,549 women of reproductive age have been affected by the cyclone. With numerous hospitals and health clinics damaged, many women are left without reliable access to life-saving sexual and reproductive health services. Separate analysis indicates that an estimated 2.3 million people—more than half of them women—were living in areas flooded by Cyclone *Ditwah*. This exposed population includes approximately 1.2 million women, 522,000 children, and 263,000 older persons (UN analysis of *Ditwah* in SL, 10 Dec 2025). The Disaster Management Centre (DMC) reports that, according to a joint needs assessment, the total population exposed to flood risk is 1,843,105, comprising 891,425 men and 951,680 women (DMC 2025).

The fact that various sources report varying numbers highlights the ongoing lack of accurate, gender-disaggregated data on disaster-affected people in Sri Lanka—a recurring issue observed during the 2016 floods, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other disasters. As highlighted in the president's speech on 30 November 2025, following Cyclone *Ditwah*, Sri Lanka consistently struggles to maintain updated data on affected communities. This problem is further compounded when authorities lack gender-disaggregated

data across the board. However, in this context, the limited available data shows the immediate, gendered suffering, which is the first and most visceral answer to the “why gender matters?” Without gender-disaggregated data—knowing not just how many, but who—we are blind to differential impacts. For instance, a joint needs assessment might show that women constitute a slight majority of the exposed population in flooded areas, highlighting who bears the greatest environmental risk. Without this data, planning is guesswork, and recovery risks reinforcing pre-existing socio-cultural-religious-political inequalities.

Further, this data gap is not a technical oversight but a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991), where the state’s bureaucratic practices fail to recognise and record women’s specific realities, thereby naturalising their marginalisation in policy planning. When authorities know only how many people are affected, but not who they are in terms of gender, age, ethnicity or disability, recovery programs risk being blind to differential needs. This institutional blindness perpetuates inequality. For example, post-disaster livelihood support that assumes a male “head of household” or requires formal land tenure can systematically exclude women, particularly those from Sri Lanka’s estimated 1.4 million female-headed households, who may lack formal titles despite working the land (Ruwanpura, 2006). Thus, using a gender lens, we can interrogate how seemingly neutral bureaucratic tools and institutional protocols can actively sustain gendered hierarchies.

During fieldwork conducted immediately after the 2016 flooding in the Colombo district, a female respondent shared an experience in which her daughter was unable to obtain sanitary napkins at a temporary shelter. The respondent had requested aid distributors to provide these essentials for young girls; however, this resulted in piles of sanitary napkin packets being stored at the shelter with little utility for anyone. This narrative highlights critical concerns regarding the insufficiency of supplies for women in safety shelters and underscores a broader issue: the lack of coordination between aid distribution and the actual needs of affected communities.

Furthermore, as reflected in the narratives of flood-affected people in 2016 and 2017, women in temporary shelters faced significantly more challenges than men due to inadequate lavatory facilities, security, sanitation, and health and safety provisions. With all displaced persons required to sleep in open, congested halls, the security and safety of young children became a serious concern for parents. These accounts demonstrate that women and men experience distinct risks and ‘vulnerabilities’ during disasters, affirming that relief assistance must address the gender-based needs of affected populations (Byrne & Baden, 1995). Furthermore, in temporary shelters, the lack of adequate facilities and specific provisions for menstrual hygiene, as reported by affected women, transformed a public emergency into a deeply gendered crisis of health and safety. These experiences illustrate how cultural capital - the embodied norms and dispositions that guide behaviour (Bourdieu, 1986) - is gendered, shaping how individuals are affected by crises. A

deep analysis devoid of gender would miss how disaster impact is mediated by these pre-existing, everyday social roles.

Further, this data gap points to deeper, structural reasons. The disproportionate mortality and injury women often face are not accidental but are consistent with long-term patterns where women's mobility, societal roles, and caregiving responsibilities increase their 'vulnerability' during sudden-onset disasters (Ariyabandu & Wickramasinghe, 2005). Their societal roles, often as primary caregivers, can trap them in hazardous situations, waiting for family members or trying to save household assets.

Furthermore, the economic aftermath is deeply gendered. Women are overrepresented in the informal and climate-sensitive sectors, such as agriculture, which are devastated by such an event (UN Women, N/A). A disaster like *Ditwah* would directly impact Sri Lanka's estimated 1.4 million female-headed households, pushing them deeper into poverty and debt, and undermining long-term recovery. Economically, a gender lens dismantles the myth of the gender-neutral market. Sri Lanka's economy exhibits significant gendered segmentation. Women are overrepresented in the informal sector, in low-paid plantation work, and in precarious export-oriented industries like garment manufacturing. A deep gender analysis foregrounds how economic shocks, such as a cyclone devastating agriculture or a pandemic disrupting global supply chains, have asymmetrical impacts. These crises do not affect a homogenous "workforce"; they disproportionately devastate the sectors where women are concentrated, pushing them deeper into poverty while also

increasing their unpaid care burdens as health and education systems falter. This process exemplifies the feminisation of poverty, describing how women are disproportionately represented among the world's poor due to structural inequalities in resource access, employment, and social protection (Pearce, 1978). Without a gender lens, economic recovery policies may focus on aggregate GDP growth or reviving formal sectors, thereby failing to address the specific livelihoods and unpaid labour that sustain women and their families, thus cementing long-term inequality.

Based on fieldwork conducted in 2020 within two flood-prone communities, I observed that leadership roles in community-based organisations (CBOs) were distinctly divided by gender, with men consistently dominating the primary decision-making positions. Women held specific roles only in contexts where male participation was absent, such as in *Samurdhi* Societies and Women's Societies. Nevertheless, women largely represented their households as general members within these CBOs. Paradoxically, despite serving as frontline community responders and bearing a disproportionate share of disaster-related burdens, women remained significantly underrepresented in formal disaster management decision-making bodies. Their absence from planning tables results in early warning systems that they may not hear, relief distributions that ignore their needs, and recovery programs that fail to restore their livelihoods. This exclusion is perhaps the most fundamental reason why gender must be centred: because those with lived experience of the risks are not designing the solutions.

Reflecting on that seminar question years later, with the ambiguous data of Cyclone *Ditwah* before me, the answer is clear. Integrating a gender lens is essential because disasters are not gender-neutral. They exploit and exacerbate societal fault lines. Failing to address this perpetuates inequality and violates the core humanitarian principle of leaving no one behind. The Sri Lankan context - from flood shelters to economic reports - demonstrates that ignoring gender means misunderstanding how 'vulnerability' is produced, how institutions operate, how economies function, and how communities resist. A deep analysis without gender is a discipline that mistakes a partial view for the whole, risking complicity in the very structures of inequality it seeks to understand. To truly comprehend and transform social life, we must consistently ask: where is gender in this picture, and how is it shaping the outcomes we see?

Now moving to my second point, that is why a gender lens is essential for addressing societal needs in Sri Lanka and beyond, I would like to state that adopting a gender lens is not merely about adding a variable to an analysis; it is a fundamental epistemological shift that reveals how societies are organised, how power is distributed, and how inequality is reproduced. Gender, understood as a socially constructed system of norms, identities, and relations intertwined with other axes of stratification like class, ethnicity, and caste, is a primary organising principle of social life (Connell, 2009). To analyse and address any social phenomenon - from disaster management to economic policy - without this lens is to render invisible the foundational structures that shape human experience. Based

on examples provided earlier, this essay argues that a gender lens is indispensable for a practical inquiry as it exposes the mechanisms of power, highlights differential ‘vulnerabilities’, and challenges the neutrality of institutions and data.

At its core, sociology examines patterns of social relations and structures of power. A gender lens deconstructs the apparent naturalness of these patterns. In Sri Lanka, as in many societies, patriarchal norms deeply influence the gendered division of labour, allocating primary responsibility for unpaid care work - child-rearing, elderly care, and household management - to women. This is not a biological given but a social arrangement with profound consequences. For instance, during disasters like the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, this division created distinct ‘vulnerabilities’. Women’s socially prescribed role as caregivers often delayed their evacuation as they waited for family members or tried to secure household assets, directly increasing their physical risk (Ariyabandu & Wickramasinghe, 2005).

Finally, applying a gender lens is essential for understanding agency, resistance, and the potential for social change. Sociology is not only about structures of constraint but also about human action. In Sri Lanka, women have historically been active agents in community management, informal savings groups (like seettu), and grassroots mobilisation. In post-disaster contexts, women’s community networks often become critical, if unrecognised, infrastructures for survival and mutual aid. Ignoring this dimension presents a passive picture of women as merely “vulnerable”. A critical approach, informed by feminist

standpoint theory, seeks out these subjugated knowledges - the perspectives arising from the lived experiences of marginalised groups (Harding, 2004). It asks how women's unique positioning, born of their gendered roles, might also generate insights and strategies for resilience that top-down, masculinised planning overlooks. The failure to incorporate women in disaster planning committees, therefore, represents not just an equity deficit but a critical knowledge deficit for effective societal response.

Section 2

Journeys of Learning Gender

From Grassroots to the Classroom

By Hafsah Muheed

From the schoolyard where silence was a heavy, hidden load
The rights of the girl and women being a map without a road
At twenty-one, community of women working together for
rights

A single word feminism felt like coming home.

Naming the fire that burned in the seeds she had already sown

Now, a visible weave of hope and truths

Refusing to be standardised under a single static sky

She unlearns the limits to amplify the impact of the shared

Bridging the gap between the lived truth and the world
reimagined.

- *This poem stems from my personal experience of my journey to feminism and my attempt to formalise this experience through the learning experience through this course.*

**Ancora Imparo: Yet, I am Learning.
Reflections on a Journey of Transformative
Gender Education**

By Lihini Ratwatte

From paddy fields to concrete jungles,
From oil lamps to neon lights, Old rules learned how to survive
each change.

Power moved quietly, from father to son, From temple steps to
courtrooms, From custom into law.

I am a daughter carrying the weight, Of my mother,
my grandmother, and the women before her.
Women who learned sufferance before choice, Silence before
speech.

I learned too young how to fold myself smaller.
To swallow harm and call it normal.

I inherited my mother's silence, My grandmother's endurance.
I learned to look away, Until I learned to see.

I grew up in a small village in Kandy, Sri Lanka.
I was surrounded by love, tradition, and unspoken rules.

I learned early what it meant to be a *good girl* - respectful, accommodating, resilient. Strength, I was taught, was quiet. Discomfort was private. Injustice, especially when it happened to women, was simply *how things were*; something to be endured with dignity rather than confronted openly.

I did not grow up knowing the word *gender*. I grew up knowing rules. Rules about how loudly I could speak, how much space I could occupy, and how carefully I had to move through the world. I knew when to be silent, when to endure, and when to look away.

These lessons were never announced; they were absorbed, through glances, warnings, and silences that filled our homes as much as our conversations.

In my childhood, gender inequality was not discussed as a *'system.'* It lived as an *'expectation.'* I watched women carry households, emotional labour, and sacrifice with remarkable grace, while public authority remained firmly male. I saw how daughters were protected and restricted in the same breath. How fear disguised itself as care. How harassment was minimised as misunderstandings. How violence, when it occurred within families or communities, was softened by language until it barely sounded like harm at all. I did not yet have the language to question it, let alone resist it.

When I left Sri Lanka to pursue my Bachelor's degree in International Relations at Monash University, my focus was

outward-looking. I was drawn to diplomacy, conflict, power between states - the visible architecture of the world. Gender Studies was not part of some grand plan. I selected it as an elective, almost casually, filling a space in my course structure. I could not have known then that this single choice would quietly unravel everything that I understood about myself, my past, and the women who came before me.

I was 22 when I sat in my first Gender Studies lecture. What struck me was not outrage or revelation, but recognition. Concept after concept mirrored experiences I had tucked away, rationalised, or dismissed. Gendered power. Patriarchy. Structural inequality. Gender-based violence. Sexual harassment. These were not distant theories or statistics from unfamiliar contexts - they were frameworks that named moments from my own life. Incidents I had minimised. Moments I had brushed aside. Stories I had never told. Silences I had inherited. For the first time, the things I had been taught to endure were named as ‘injustice.’

I understood that what I had endured was not individual weakness or bad luck. It was systemic. The everyday indignities I had learned to normalise were part of a larger pattern - one designed, sustained, and excused by social structures that privileged some lives over others.

Suddenly, the everyday experiences of Sri Lankan women - harassment on streets and in public transport, restrictions on movement, early marriage pressures, unequal inheritance, and unpaid care work - were no longer isolated cultural issues. They

were part of a global pattern of gendered inequality, shaped by history, religion, colonial legacies, and economic structures. I understood then that what I had once seen as personal discomfort was, in fact, political.

Learning this was painful, but it was also liberating.

There is power in naming.

There is relief in realising that the harm was never your fault.

With that understanding, I began looking backwards as much as forwards. I thought about my mother - her choices, her compromises, her quiet strength. I thought about my grandmother, whose life unfolded under even stricter expectations, fewer options, and heavier burdens, whose sacrifices were framed as duty rather than loss. I realised that the resilience I admired in them was also a response to constraint. Their endurance was not romantic; it was necessary. And in their silence, I recognised an inheritance - not just of strength, but of trauma passed down through generations of women taught to survive rather than to question.

Women who carried generations in their bodies, Who bent without breaking, Who learned survival as inheritance.

I began to understand inherited trauma - how silence travels through bloodlines, how fear is passed down disguised as wisdom. My mother and grandmother did not teach me to be silent because they believed in silence; they taught me because life had taught them. Their realities were shaped by a society

that asked women to adjust, adapt, and absorb.

Gender Studies gave me the tools to understand this inherited trauma. It showed me how history lives in bodies, how law and culture shape intimate lives, how inequality reproduces itself quietly, persistently, across time. I began to see how my own instinct to look away had been learned - a protective mechanism passed from mother to daughter, not because they lacked courage, but because resistance once carried unbearable costs.

Gender Studies did not estrange me from my culture - it brought me closer to it. It allowed me to love my community while questioning it. To honour my elders while refusing to romanticise their suffering. It gave me the language to say that tradition and justice must coexist, and that culture is not static - it is shaped by those brave enough to interrogate it.

That Gender Studies elective soon became my intellectual and moral centre. It reframed my understanding of international relations itself. I could no longer analyse conflict, development, or policy without centering gender, without asking fundamental questions: *Where are the women? Whose voices are missing? Who bears the cost of these decisions?*

With this new way of 'seeing', I realised how development policies looked incomplete without women's voices. Peace processes felt fragile without women at the table. National progress seemed hollow when half the population was expected to wait patiently at closed doors.

**Women waiting at closed doors, Carrying homes, carrying hope,
Denied land, denied law, denied a voice - Yet still they rise.**

By the time I graduated, Gender Studies was no longer an academic interest. It was a commitment. I chose to work actively in the field of gender equality and women's empowerment, driven by the conviction that knowledge must translate into action.

My work in advocacy, policy work, and community engagement became spaces where theory met lived realities - especially those of Sri Lankan women navigating intersecting challenges of class, ethnicity, post-war trauma, and economic insecurity. Each story I encountered echoed something familiar, reinforcing the truth that my lived experience was never isolated.

**However, my passion for learning gender did not end there.
If anything, it deepened.**

Today, I continue my studies through a Master's degree in Gender and Women's Studies at the Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo. Returning to the classroom feels both humbling and necessary, and learning gender studies within my own cultural and social context has allowed me to connect global feminist theory with local realities. The classroom has become a space of collective reflection - where history, resistance, and possibilities meet.

I learn how the questions have grown more complex, the

54

histories more layered, the intersections sharper. Gender does not exist in isolation - it intertwines with class, race, ethnicity, colonial legacies, and global inequalities. Each layer demands deeper listening and greater accountability.

I continue to learn how conflicts intensify women's vulnerabilities while also expanding their roles. How laws meant to protect women often fail them in practice. And how, despite everything, Sri Lankan women continue to organise, resist, and lead - often invisibly, often without recognition.

Change is slow, but I see hope. I see it in classrooms, in movements, in conversations once unthinkable. I see it in women who refuse to inherit silence.

What has remained constant is the realisation that change is slow. Progress is rarely linear. Structures resist transformation, and backlash often follows visibility. But I have learned that change listens when we speak - persistently, collectively, and with clarity. I have learned that naming injustice is itself an act of resistance, and that education is not merely personal enlightenment, but a political act.

Change is slow. It stumbles. It resists. It listens late. But it listens when we speak.

Today, I no longer look away as I once did. I recognise injustice when I see it - not only in overt violence, but in silence enforced, opportunities denied, and labour rendered invisible. I see how land, law, and voice have been historically withheld from women

- and how, despite this, women continue to rise, organise, and speak.

I hold space for anger, grief, and hope - all at once.

Most importantly, I extend gentleness and compassion backwards - to my younger self who did not yet have the words, and to the women before me who survived without them. Their lives were shaped by different possibilities, narrower paths, heavier consequences. Acknowledging that does not diminish their strength; it honours it.

**From paddy fields to classrooms,
From silence to speech,
I carry their stories forward.**

**Change is slow, but still I learn,
Still question, still resist, still turn.**

**Ancora Imparo - this I know.
Yet, I am learning how to grow.**

Ancora Imparo - I am still learning. Still questioning. still resisting, still turning toward the truth even when it is uncomfortable, still unlearning what I was taught to accept.

And in that learning, I know this: my story is not singular. It is woven from many women's lives, past and present. This learning continues - as long as we refuse to look away.

And with this learning, I carry forward not only my own story, but the stories of the women who made it possible for me to speak at all.

The Things Women Learn to Carry!

By Onathya Wewalaarachchi

Violence against women is not an isolated or exceptional phenomenon. It is embedded in everyday life, normalised through silence, and often dismissed as inevitable. In Sri Lanka, women encounter sexual harassment and violence across public and private spaces, from catcalling on streets and buses to abuse within homes, schools, and workplaces. These experiences cut across class, age, and geography. The frequency of such violence is not always reflected in official statistics, largely because much of it remains unreported. Yet its existence is evident in the lived realities of women themselves.

To help Kisagothami understand the universality of death, the Buddha asked her to bring a handful of mustard seeds from a household that had not been affected by death. She returned empty-handed, realising that suffering was not hers alone. A similar question may be posed to understand violence against women: could one bring a handful of mustard seeds from a house where a woman has never experienced gender-based harassment, fear, or violence? If such a task were attempted, it too would likely end in failure. This analogy is not meant to trivialise suffering but to illustrate its widespread and structural

nature. Violence against women is not an isolated occurrence; it is a reality many women share, though in different ways and degrees. Yet despite how widespread it is, indifference, particularly from men, continues to shape how society responds to women's pain.

This essay explores what led me to pursue a Master's degree in Gender and Women's Studies, drawing from my personal experiences, professional engagement with law, and academic development. It argues that studying gender is not merely an intellectual exercise but a necessary intervention against indifference, one that must extend beyond women to include men if meaningful change is to occur.

This Master's program is my first formal engagement with gender studies. Learning feminist theory alongside lived experiences has been transformative. Classroom discussions have allowed me to place personal pain within broader structures of patriarchy, power, and social conditioning. However, one troubling aspect of this program is that the classroom consists entirely of women. While these spaces are invaluable, they also expose a significant gap. If only women are studying gender, reflecting on oppression, and strategising change, the burden of transformation remains unfairly placed on those already affected.

The question posed during our first lecture, '*Why did you choose to pursue a Master's in Gender and Women's Studies?*', initially seemed simple. However, my answer is layered and deeply personal. I was nine years old when I was first molested. At the

time, I did not possess the language or awareness to name what had happened to me. It was only years later, around the age of fourteen, that I realised the nature of that experience. Writing this is not easy, nor is it something I do lightly. However, silence has long been one of the most effective tools sustaining violence against women, and breaking that silence even in academic spaces is itself an act of resistance.

From childhood, I have witnessed women being subjected to various forms of sexual harassment, including catcalling in broad daylight. I have experienced it myself, on roads and in public transport. I cannot think of a single woman who has not encountered this at least once in her life. At the time, what troubled me most was not only the act itself but the accompanying sense of helplessness. I hated these incidents, yet I felt powerless to respond. It was this frustration that initially drew me to law. I believed the law could be a tool to eradicate violence against women.

However, my professional experience as a lawyer dismantled this belief. Law does not always prevent harm, nor does it consistently deliver justice. My first exposure to a sexual violence case involved a six-year-and-eleven-month-old child who had been abused by her grandfather. From that point onward, the cases only grew more disturbing. Girls of all ages, perpetrators of all ages and most strikingly, perpetrators who were not strangers, but fathers, brothers, grandfathers, uncles, and boyfriends. This reality directly contradicts the dominant narrative that violence primarily comes from unknown outsiders.

Engagement with the legal system further revealed its limitations. Although victims have the legal right to request examination by a female Judicial Medical Officer, the shortage of female JMOs renders this protection largely unsuccessful. In court, victims are required to relive their trauma in the presence of the very individuals who violated them. I once prosecuted a case where the victim was abused at the age of twelve, but was examined in court at thirty-three. The accused was her father. What kind of justice is possible when cases are delayed for decades? This observation is not intended as an attack on Sri Lanka's legal system but as a reflection of its structural constraints, limited resources, overburdened courts, and deep-rooted social attitudes.

It was through these experiences that I began to realise that law alone is insufficient. Violence against women is not merely a legal issue; it is a cultural, social, and ideological one. This understanding pushed me towards Gender and Women's Studies, not as a departure from law, but as a necessary complement to it.

Having transitioned from legal practice into academia, I have found new and meaningful ways to engage with the issues that first shaped my professional and personal journey. Among the modules I teach are Family Law and Jurisprudence, both of which create valuable spaces to engage law students in discussions that extend beyond textbooks. Within these classrooms, we often share knowledge as well as personal reflections on matters such as the suffering of women and the various forms of violence they face. What makes these discussions particularly significant is that they include both female and male students, who come together

to listen, question, and reflect. I see these shared learning spaces as crucial spaces where future legal professionals are shaped not only by legal principles but also by empathy, awareness, and a deeper sensitivity to gendered realities.

Although gender cannot and should not be reduced to a simple binary, this essay adopts the framework of men and women to examine male indifference towards women's suffering. This indifference is not always malicious; often, it is subtle, unintentional, and deeply ingrained.

The first time I encountered this indifference directly was when I disclosed my childhood experience to a former boyfriend. What prompted the disclosure was a dream I had that day, where fragments of various incidents of sexual harassment merged into one overwhelming episode. I woke up crying, drenched in sweat despite being in an air-conditioned room. His response to my vulnerability remains vivid in my memory, not because it was cruel, but because it was inadequate. In contrast, when I spoke to a female friend, she immediately knew how to respond. This raised uncomfortable questions. Are women more empathetic because we share similar experiences? Or does repeated exposure to gendered violence create a deeper emotional literacy among women?

A similar realisation occurred during a conflict with my father in 2023. In an outpouring of anger and exhaustion, I spoke about the violence I had experienced at the hands of men. With a changed expression, he asked me *'that has happened to you?'*

Despite being a loving father, he had never fully considered that his own daughter could be a victim of such violence.

These experiences underscore why Gender and Women's Studies must not be confined to women alone. If empathy does not arise organically, education becomes essential. Studying gender equips individuals with conceptual tools to recognise injustice, challenge normative assumptions, and actively contribute to social change. To achieve meaningful gender equality, education must begin early, embedding values of equality and respect from childhood, while also addressing adults who were never exposed to such frameworks.

Ultimately, my pursuit of Gender and Women's Studies is rooted in both personal survival and professional responsibility. It is an attempt to bridge the gap between lived experience and structural change, between law and social consciousness. Violence against women will not be eradicated through legal reform alone. It requires dismantling indifference through education, empathy, and sustained engagement. The mustard seed story reminds us that death spares no household. Violence against women, however, is not an unavoidable fate; it is something society has the power to prevent.

From Shadows to Voice: A Life Shaped by Gender and Rights

By Harini Fernando

My journey into the field of gender and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) did not begin in a classroom or through theory. It began much earlier, as a schoolgirl navigating public spaces that were not designed to be safe for girls.

Growing up, I regularly travelled by public bus after school and to tuition classes. During these journeys, I encountered repeated sexual harassment, from unwanted physical contact in crowded buses to men exposing themselves in public spaces. At that age, I did not have the language, awareness, or education to understand what was happening. What I did have were questions: Why was it unsafe for me to travel alone? Why was I expected to tolerate catcalling on the roads? Why did responsibility for safety seem to fall on me rather than on those causing harm? These experiences left a lasting imprint and quietly shaped my understanding of gendered power and vulnerability long before I had words for them.

As I progressed through school, studying English Literature for my Advanced Level examinations became a turning point. My literature teacher approached texts through feminist perspectives,

encouraging us to question whose voices were centered, whose suffering was normalised, and how patriarchal systems shaped women's lives. Through literature, I slowly began to understand that the harassment I experienced was not personal or isolated, it was systemic. I started to see how discrimination against women was embedded in social structures, cultural norms, and everyday practices.

Around the same time, I became increasingly aware of gendered labour within my own home. My mother was a working professional who carried a disproportionate share of unpaid care work; teaching at school, picking up my sister and me after school, taking us to tuition classes, and managing the household. This observation is not meant to erase my father's role. He was a very present parent; taking us to school, helping with household chores and being emotionally available to us as more of a friend than a distant figure of authority. And yet, despite this relatively equitable dynamic, the invisible burden still rested heavily on my mother. Witnessing this made me question how deeply ingrained gender roles are, even within progressive households.

My questions about gender also extended to my own body. I reached menarche at the age of eleven, and with it came discomfort, confusion, and silence. I questioned why menstruation: something so biological and universal, was treated with secrecy and shame. I questioned why I had to miss school for a week and remain confined to home, and why my first period was marked by awkward ceremonial celebrations rather than open, honest conversations about health, hygiene and how

my body operates. These early experiences laid the foundation for my later interest in sexual and reproductive health and rights.

When I entered university, I pursued an Honours degree in International Relations, with minors in Sociology and Media Studies. While my major gave me a strong grounding in global politics and power structures, it was my Sociology modules; particularly the two courses on gender studies, that provided my first formal theoretical framework for understanding gender inequality. These courses helped me connect my lived experiences to broader feminist theories and social constructs. My engagement with Media Studies further sharpened my interest in representation: how women's bodies, voices, and agency are portrayed, distorted, or erased in media narratives.

After completing my undergraduate studies, I entered the development sector, though not immediately in gender-focused roles. However, each position I held gradually pulled me closer to the work I felt deeply connected to. At Transparency International Sri Lanka, I worked on issues related to sexual bribery, which exposed me to the intersection of corruption, power, and gender-based exploitation. At the Sri Lanka Press Institute, I worked on women journalists and media, gaining insight into the gendered challenges faced by women in newsrooms and public discourse.

My formal entry into SRHR work began through my involvement with the Youth Advocacy Network Sri Lanka, where I worked on a project examining the impact of COVID-19 on marginalised and vulnerable groups. Concurrently, I received

structured training from the Asia Safe Abortion Partnership, both locally and internationally, which significantly deepened my understanding of abortion rights, bodily autonomy, and evidence-based advocacy. This marked a critical shift in my career, as I began developing myself as a trainer on gender and SRHR.

I later worked with the International Research Exchanges Board (IREX) as a Gender Consultant, collaborating closely with media professionals and journalists. In this role, I focused on building capacity for gender-sensitive reporting, supporting the creation of ethical and inclusive media content, and engaging in research that examined media discourses through a gender lens. My work with the Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka as Senior Manager - Advocacy further strengthened my advocacy skills by allowing me to engage directly with government authorities on SRHR-related policy and programming.

My experience with the United Nations World Food Programme, where I worked on Gender and Protection, expanded my scope even further. There, I engaged with issues related to the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), understanding how gender and power dynamics operate within humanitarian and development contexts.

To date, I have trained over 1,000 individuals, including youth, government stakeholders, media professionals, and women at various levels on gender equality, SRHR, and rights-based approaches. Through this work, I have grown into a professional

who is attentive to the smallest yet most significant details: organisational policies, the use of correct and inclusive terminology, and the often-overlooked ways institutions can either reinforce or challenge inequality.

Currently, I am pursuing a Master's degree in Gender and Women's Studies to further strengthen my theoretical grounding and to equip myself with the academic credentials that are often demanded of those working in this field. While I have temporarily stepped back into the private sector for personal and professional reasons, I continue to work as a freelancer in the development sector and remain deeply committed to returning to full-time work in gender and SRHR.

For me, this field is not just a career; it is a continuum of lived experience, learning, and action. What began as questions rooted in discomfort and injustice has evolved into a lifelong commitment to advancing gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights, grounded in both lived realities and rigorous scholarship.

Listening to Her Silence

By Avishki Perera

Women's Day often invites us to celebrate strength. We see images of resilience, empowerment, and achievement. We hear stories of women who have broken barriers and shattered ceilings. These narratives are necessary and powerful. Yet, for many women, strength is not something displayed publicly or performed loudly. It is something endured, negotiated, and quietly cultivated within spaces of silence.

Silence is rarely empty. It is filled with negotiations, compromises, withheld words, and unspoken resistance. It carries histories. It absorbs interruptions. It remembers the moments when speaking felt unsafe, inconvenient, or futile. Over time, I began to understand that listening to women requires more than hearing what is said; it requires attention to what has been shaped by silence.

My academic journey has deeply shaped this understanding. I am currently pursuing a Master's degree in Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Colombo. However, my engagement with gender began years earlier, in lecture halls and tutorial rooms at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, where I completed my Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in English.

Literature was my first lens into the world. Through Shakespearean tragedies, modern novels, postcolonial narratives, and feminist poetry, I learned how stories construct realities. I learned that representation matters, not only who is present in a story, but how they are positioned within it. I noticed how female characters often carried emotional weight yet lacked narrative authority. They were central to the plot but marginal in voice. They suffered, sacrificed, inspired, and symbolised, but rarely spoke freely.

At first, these observations were purely literary. I analysed character arcs, symbolism, and narrative voice. I wrote essays on themes of confinement, agency, and silence in fiction. But gradually, the boundary between text and reality blurred. The patterns I identified in novels were not confined to fiction. They echoed in everyday life.

I began to recognise how women's voices are frequently dismissed, interrupted, or reframed within social, cultural, and institutional spaces. In classroom discussions, I noticed how often women hesitated before speaking, how their ideas were rephrased by others and credited elsewhere. In broader social contexts, I observed how women were encouraged to be articulate but not assertive, confident but not confrontational, ambitious but not "too ambitious". The negotiation was constant.

Through my formal education, I encountered feminist literary criticism, gender theory, and critical frameworks that gave language to these observations. What once felt intuitive became

intellectually grounded. I learned that silence is not merely the absence of speech. It is often produced through structures of power that determine whose words are valued and whose are ignored. Silence can be imposed, internalised, or strategically chosen. It can function as both oppression and resistance.

This shift from observation to theoretical engagement was transformative. Gender, which had once appeared as a recurring theme in literature, became a structural lens through which I began to interpret society itself. I understood that gender is not simply an identity category but a system that organises power, mobility, safety, and opportunity.

Alongside questions of voice, my interest deepened toward understanding restriction, how women's lives are shaped by expectations presented as natural, protective, or moral. These expectations often appear benign. They are framed as care, tradition, or culture. Yet they subtly regulate movement, choice, and imagination.

Restrictions are not always dramatic or visible. They operate through everyday language: "it's not safe for you", "what will people say?", "be careful", "be modest", "don't be too outspoken." Over time, these phrases become internal boundaries. Women begin to monitor themselves. They calculate how much space they occupy, how loudly they laugh, how directly they disagree.

Through Gender and Women's Studies, I came to see that such regulation is not accidental. It is systemic. It is embedded in

institutions, media, family structures, and even well-intentioned advice. Women's bodies, choices, and identities often become symbols of respectability and morality. When a woman steps outside expected norms, her behaviour is rarely read as individual. It is read as representative. She carries the burden of community honour, cultural authenticity, or national identity.

When women are reduced to symbols, their individuality is overshadowed. Their complexity is flattened into expectations. Their humanity becomes conditional.

Studying Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Colombo has deepened this awareness in profound ways. It has taught me that lived experience is not secondary to theory; it is central to it. Feminist scholarship insists that knowledge is not neutral. It asks who produces knowledge, whose experiences are prioritised, and whose realities are dismissed as anecdotal.

In many ways, my academic path feels like a gradual unfolding. English literature taught me to read between the lines. Gender Studies taught me to read the world itself. What began as curiosity became commitment. What began as literary analysis evolved into social critique. And what began as noticing silence became a desire to listen differently.

For me, feminist scholarship is not only an act of critique, but also an ethic of listening. It requires humility. It requires acknowledging that some experiences are difficult to articulate because language itself has not always been shaped to hold

them. It asks us to consider how many women have been spoken for rather than listened to.

Listening, in this sense, is political. It challenges hierarchies of authority. It validates experiences that have long been dismissed as private, emotional, or insignificant. It recognises that what happens within homes, classrooms, and workplaces is not separate from broader structures of power.

I have also learned that agency does not always look dramatic. It is not always rebellion or revolution. Sometimes, it is negotiation. Sometimes, it is survival. Sometimes, it is choosing to continue despite exhaustion. Women rise in ways that are not always visible.

They rise despite being silenced. They rise despite being told to shrink. They rise even when their strength is questioned or misunderstood.

In Sri Lanka and beyond, women continue to navigate layered expectations; cultural, economic, familial, and professional. They balance aspiration with responsibility. They challenge norms while remaining within them. Their resilience is often quiet, and therefore underestimated.

This is why I return to silence.

Silence is not emptiness. It is often the residue of unequal power. But it can also hold potential. When women find spaces where they are genuinely heard, silence begins to transform. It becomes

testimony. It becomes narrative. It becomes knowledge.

My passion for Gender and Women's Studies emerged not from a single moment, but from sustained engagement with education. Formal learning gave me tools to question what once seemed inevitable. It gave me vocabulary for experiences that many women intuitively understand but rarely see theorised. It gave me the confidence to believe that examining gender is not divisive; it is necessary.

Education, for me, has been an act of awakening. It has taught me that celebrating women should not mean romanticising their endurance. It should mean questioning why endurance is required in the first place.

This Women's Day, perhaps the most meaningful act is not celebration alone, but attention. Attention to voices long ignored, to lives long regulated, and to women who continue to rise even within constraint. Celebration without reflection risks becoming symbolic. Listening, however, invites transformation.

When women are truly heard, in classrooms, in homes, in institutions, in policy spaces, silence no longer holds power. It becomes something we recognise, question, and ultimately dismantle. And perhaps that is where strength truly resides; not only in rising despite silence, but in creating a world where women no longer have to negotiate their right to be heard.

Learning Gender: A Personal Journey Toward Change

By Miranthy Pathirage

International Women's Day invites us not only to celebrate women, but also to pause and reflect. For me, learning Gender and Women's Studies has not simply been an academic decision. It has been a deeply personal and transformative journey, rooted in lived experience, strengthened through fifteen years of professional practice, and now sharpened through formal study.

My journey into gender studies began long before I ever entered a classroom. I was raised by a single mother who had to navigate domestic violence, separation, and the responsibility of raising three children on her own. I witnessed how difficult life was for her, not only emotionally, but economically and socially. In our community, when a woman separates from her husband, she is not just changing her life; she is challenging deeply rooted norms. A woman was expected to depend on her husband, work quietly in cultivation, or go to an apparel factory for low wages. Opportunities for independent, dignified work were limited. Respect was limited. Support was limited.

I saw my mother struggle to raise my two brothers and me. I saw the exhaustion in her body and the strength in her spirit. I also

saw how society judged her more harshly than the circumstances she endured. Watching her shaped how I understood inequality. It taught me about gender norms before I ever learned the word “patriarchy”. It showed me how a stereotypical society can restrict a woman’s choices and silence her potential.

From a young age, I made a promise to myself: I would never live the life my mother was forced to live. I wanted to be empowered, educationally and financially. But more than that, I wanted to create change for women in rural Sri Lanka who find themselves in similar situations. Women who are capable and resilient, yet trapped in cycles of dependency because they lack access to opportunities, resources, and support systems.

Throughout my life and professional work, I have met many such women. Women who want to work but are discouraged by their husbands. Women who carry the full burden of unpaid care work. Women who endure violence silently because they have nowhere to go. I have also experienced being told that I could not succeed in the development sector simply because I am a woman, that I lack the capability, the stamina, or the leadership qualities required. Instead of discouraging me, these comments pushed me further. They made me realise how important it is for women not only to participate in development work but to lead it.

Over the past fifteen years, my professional work has focused on women and youth empowerment in Sri Lanka. My real classroom was not a university lecture hall; it was the rural village and the

plantation sector. Through my work, I have seen how deeply gender norms shape women's choices and opportunities.

In rural communities, many married women are discouraged from working outside the home, even during financial hardship. Once married, their primary identity becomes wife and mother. Soon after marriage comes pregnancy, and from that point forward, their lives revolve around caregiving. Their economic potential is sidelined, not because they lack skills, but because society limits their mobility and decision-making power.

At the same time, in plantation communities, I have witnessed another reality. Women must work, regardless of marriage or motherhood, often under harsh conditions and for very low wages. They carry a double burden: long hours of physical labour followed by unpaid household responsibilities. These two realities may look different, but both are rooted in the same structural inequality. These experiences showed me that gender inequality in Sri Lanka is complex. It is social, cultural, economic, and deeply embedded in everyday life.

My experience of learning gender has happened both informally and formally. Informally, I learned through conversations with women, through counselling sessions, through community meetings, and through observing how power operates in daily life. I learned how silence can be a survival strategy. I learned how stigma controls women's behavior. I learned how economic dependency keeps women in harmful situations.

Even before I had the academic vocabulary, I was practicing gender work. I was facilitating women's entrepreneurship programmes, supporting youth in vulnerable communities, and working to create safe income opportunities. I had the practice long before I had the theory.

I was fortunate to gain some global exposure through fellowships and programmes. One significant experience took me to the San Francisco Bay Area, where I worked with women small business owners. I expected their challenges to be completely different from those faced by women in Sri Lanka. Yet I found many similarities, access to capital, balancing work and family responsibilities, and being underestimated as female leaders. The economic contexts were different, but the structural barriers had common roots. I returned to Sri Lanka with new insights and applied those lessons while supporting small and medium-level women-led businesses in the Central Province. Looking back, I now realise that I was applying gender theories in practice, even though I had not formally studied them.

When I finally entered a Master's programme in Gender and Women's Studies, everything began to connect. The lessons I had learned in villages and plantations suddenly had names: structural inequality, intersectionality, gendered division of labour. Formal study gave me language and frameworks to understand what I had witnessed for years. It helped me realise that the struggles of my mother, the women I worked with, and even the professional barriers I faced were not individual weaknesses. They were systemic outcomes of a larger patriarchal structure.

The gender class I am part of today has been one of the most fruitful learning experiences of my life. It is truly a powerhouse, a space filled with inspiring, courageous, and thoughtful women who bring their lived experiences into the classroom. Each discussion is rich. Each shared story deepens my understanding. I am deeply inspired by my classmates. Learning in this collective space has shown me that knowledge is not something we compete for; it is something we build together. The classroom has become a safe and empowering space where theory meets lived reality.

One of the most meaningful moments in this journey has been being able to sit with my mother and talk about what I am learning. Explaining the laws and frameworks around the issues we went through, connecting our personal experiences to broader systems, it feels like healing. It feels like closing a circle. It also motivates me to go deeper, to continue learning, and to strengthen my ability to advocate for systemic change.

As an individual, learning gender has sharpened my critical thinking and strengthened my confidence. It has moved me from being only a practitioner to becoming an advocate who understands policy, law, and structural reform. Looking ahead, my goal is to contribute to long-term systemic change by influencing policies and practices that remove barriers for women and youth, especially in rural and underserved communities.

For society, gender education is not a luxury. It is an investment in justice and sustainable development. When women are

economically and socially empowered, families are stronger. Communities are safer. Children have better opportunities. I have seen this transformation in my own life. I believe it is possible for every woman.

On this International Women's Day, my reflection is simple but powerful:

When women are empowered with knowledge and economic opportunity, they do not just change their own lives; they transform society.

And I am committed to being part of that transformation.

Education as a Gendered Choice: A Generational Shift to the Access of Education

By Tahlia M. Perera

The meaning of education differs from person to person. In the hands of a man, education can appear as an obligation or a rite of passage. In the hands of a woman, however, it becomes something else entirely: an opportunity, or even a means of escaping the responsibilities assigned to her from birth. As Simone de Beauvoir famously argued, “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman”. For women in particular, education is not merely a rite of passage but a site of struggle, sacrifice, and generational transformation.

Looking at my own family history, I realise that the opportunities bestowed upon me are not the same as those afforded to my mother and her mother. My grandmother was once a journalist at a renowned newspaper agency. However, she eventually had to leave her job because of family commitments and the expectation that she would take responsibility for childcare and the smooth running of the household. Similarly, my mother gave up the opportunity to study at Law College after being accepted so that her brothers could pursue their higher education.

From as early as I can remember, the one message which was consistently repeated by my mother and grandmother was the importance of education. However, for much of my childhood, I failed to understand the importance and clear determination of my mother regarding the matter. Growing up, education often felt like a form of punishment or an obligation, a task that had to be completed before turning to the activities that brought me joy. I assume this is how many children felt growing up.

With age, however, came a deeper awareness of the values and powers of education. I began to understand why it carried such great weight, especially to my mother and grandmother. Unlike me, they had not been granted the same privilege of choice regarding higher education. What once felt like pressure gradually revealed itself to be an expression of care shaped by their own histories of limited opportunities. Although studying felt like a chore during my childhood, its meaning shifted when I realised the importance of a good education, irrespective of gender, and that many are denied the ability to make the choice. I was privileged to grow up in an environment where I was given the same opportunities as my brother, and was encouraged to choose my own path. Recognising that many young women are not given such freedom made me understand education as a privilege.

Unlike my mother, I did not have to sacrifice my dreams to educate my brother, nor was I expected to give up my career to care for my family, as my grandmother was. I came to see that the road before me had been cleared by what the women before

me had sacrificed. Education is therefore more than schooling; it is financial freedom, decision-making power, mobility, and the right to direct one's own life.

As the famous adage goes, “the pen is mightier than the sword” (Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Conspiracy*, 1839), for women, education is truly mightier than the sword. Education is what holds power for women, the power to choose and distinguish. As Malala Yousafzai reminds us, “one child, one teacher, one book is all it takes to change the world.”

Historically, education has been more accessible to men than to women. Therefore, can it really be said that education is equal for all? While my own experience reflects generational progress, broader statistics reveal that inequality persists. In Sri Lanka, female admissions to grade one in national schools fall short by 7% compared to male admissions. Though the gap may appear small, it reflects deeper structural inequalities that begin early and continue to limit girls' opportunities for social, cultural, and economic reasons (Withanage & Handrakumara, 2021).

Education gives women a voice, the ability to speak their mind, thoughts and ideas. The greatest gift a woman can give herself and society is the initiative to educate herself despite the hardships she will invariably face along the way. Literacy and knowledge can strengthen a woman's bargaining power within her family and her community, offering forms of independence that extend far beyond employment.

Empowering a woman through education is not simply about individual ambition; it is about whether real alternatives exist. Naila Kabeer, author of “Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment” describes empowerment as the expansion of the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously denied. Through this lens, the lives of my grandmother, my mother, and myself reveal changing relationships to education, work, and possibility.

For many women during my grandmother’s generation, education was often secondary to marriage, caregiving, and economic survival. Even when schooling was available, it did not necessarily translate into a career or independence. Social norms prioritised being a “good daughter,” “good wife,” or “good mother” over personal development. While my grandmother did not enter university, she completed a secretarial course which helped her in her career as a journalist. The handsome salary that she earned enabled her to sponsor her younger sibling’s education and live independently of the men in her family. However, after marriage she opted to take on the role of home-maker, while my grandfather became the sole provider. A choice, she tells me, that she made gladly. But it is important to ask if this choice was shaped by expectation rather than genuine freedom.

My mother belonged to a more transitional generation. Opportunities had widened, yet gendered priorities remained. Even though she was accepted into Law College, societal pressure made her step away and take on the double burden of

being employed while prioritising family life and carrying out domestic responsibilities. Still, she did not abandon her dream of earning her degree. Completing a degree later in life showed me that hope can be postponed but not erased. I began to understand that her insistence on my education was her way of ensuring that I could go further than she had.

The sacrifices made by the strong and resilient women in my life enabled me to pursue my higher education not as a survival mechanism or as a means of escaping the emotional burdens placed on women by society, but as an identity, an ambition, and the possibility of supporting other women along the way. Because of the push I received growing up, I am able to imagine a future beyond marriage or duty as a wife and mother.

Education also provides me with economic freedom, where I am not required to choose between employment and study, a reality that still confronts many young women. As Virginia Woolf once said, a woman needs money and space in order to think and create. Education often becomes the pathway to that money and space which in turn creates respect, mobility, safety.

The pathway to education in my life was not created by me alone. It was built by my grandmother, strengthened by my mother, and supported by the encouragement of my father and grandfather. What I once experienced as pressure, I now recognise as inheritance.

Education, to me, is no longer a chore. It is resistance, gratitude, and possibility. In the words of Bell Hooks, it is the “practice of freedom.”

A Mother's Love, A Woman's Inequality

By Nidarshana Selladurai

Gender and Women's Studies began for me long before I entered the classroom. It originates from my home, my community, and the silent struggles of the women I observed every day.

“I grew up watching my mother wake up before the sunshine,
Carrying the house on her tired hands,
No rest, no festivals, no enjoyments, only work,
I thought this was love and care,
I thought it was a role of my mother,
Now I know, it was also inequality”

I still remember what she told me about her childhood. Every morning, before going to school, she had to work - collecting water, preparing meals, and finishing household tasks.

Eventually, she stopped attending school in Grade 9 to take care of her brother's children and her younger siblings. This was not a responsibility she should have had; it was unfair. A daughter should not have to sacrifice her education and childhood for family duties.



AI-generated image

She spent her entire life working for her family, believing this was her role. Even today, she does not recognise that what happened to her was an injustice and a form of inequality. For her, it became the norm.

This was my first real lesson about gender roles and how unfairly they are imposed on girls and women. It motivated me to advocate for change for women and the younger generation.

Subjects Teach!

Even our school subjects instil beliefs about gender roles, often suggesting that women are solely responsible for domestic work, a notion reinforced in our literature and lessons. I recall a short story from the Tamil curriculum that portrayed a mother and her daughter working together to prepare for the New Year festival, with no male figures in sight. This narrative shaped my understanding of familial responsibilities, subtly implying that domestic duties were exclusively female tasks.

Reflecting on this now, I realise how these representations contributed to normalising inequality in our society, embedding the idea that unpaid care work is expected of women and girls. However, it's encouraging to see that this particular story has been removed from school textbooks.

This shift represents a broader movement toward challenging traditional narratives. By reevaluating what we teach, we have a powerful opportunity to foster a more equitable mindset in future generations. Rather than reinforcing outdated stereotypes, we can encourage students to see household responsibilities as a shared obligation, promoting a more balanced perspective within families and society as a whole.

Root Can Speak!



Selladurai, N. (2025). A.Rajeshwary at Tillicoultry Estate

The media often portrays women negatively, reinforcing ideas of patriarchy and male dominance in society. Many song lyrics also reflect this negative portrayal, and films frequently promote the notion that women should be subordinate to men and encourage them to

remain silent. I can recall some lyrics that illustrate this idea,

“Man’s kind is like the branch of a tree,
Women’s kind is like the root,
When the branch speaks, the society hears it,

But when the root speaks, who listens?
Even though the root is very strong as women it/she should be
silent and no one will listen to them!”

-Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari, A. (Director). (2017). 30 Vayadhinile
Film -

I Stepped Behind

As an activist on social media, I encountered significant challenges. Many users criticised me, misused my photos, created fake profiles using my images, and targeted me with harassment and hate speech whenever I addressed social issues. These negative experiences ultimately led me to stop posting online. I realised that, even in digital spaces, I faced the same inequality, control, and violence that women experience in real life.

Victims!

For more than ten years, I have been working in alcohol, tobacco, and drug prevention in Sri Lanka. My work has taken me to many villages, estates, schools, and youth groups. I have listened to families affected by substance addictions, meeting

women who quietly endure pain, mothers managing households alone, wives facing violence, and daughters who leave school early to care for their siblings.

I have witnessed numerous family issues and development struggles in vulnerable communities, where women are often the primary victims of these problems, which are increasing each day. Initially, I viewed these as social issues, but after studying Gender and Women's Studies, I began to understand the deeper roots of these inequalities. I recognised that power is not distributed equally. Many women are forced to remain silent even while they suffer. Additionally, I saw how society teaches men to exert control and women to accept their pain.

My background is essential to this discussion. I wanted to understand the origins of inequality, rather than just find temporary solutions to the problems. I grew up in a society where men made most decisions, and women were expected to care for the family and endure various hardships. I accepted this as normal and did not question it at the time. However, through my studies, I learned that this "normal" is often unfair to women. This insight has strengthened my resolve to address the challenges women face and to advocate for equality and respect.

Helpful yet Difficult

My experience of learning about gender in Sri Lanka has been both enlightening and challenging. It is enlightening because it helps me understand the reality of inequality. However, it is

also challenging because once I recognise injustices, I can no longer ignore them. Some people reject these ideas because they continue to live in a patriarchal and stereotyped society. They view me as someone who only advocates for women, rather than understanding that I am asking for fairness for everyone.

In my classes, I explore how men and women are treated in society, the roles they are expected to play, and concepts such as gender, fairness, equality, hegemony, and patriarchy. These lessons have helped me make sense of many things I have observed for years. I now realise that the issues in our communities are not just individual problems; they are symptoms of a larger system of unfairness in society.

Outside the classroom, I have gained further insights into gender issues in real life. During community meetings, I noticed that men often dominated the discussions and decision-making, while women remained silent. Within families, issues such as alcohol abuse created significant problems, with women bearing the brunt of the suffering, often coping with their struggles alone.

Silent Fighters

I remember a woman from a tea estate saying, “Miss, my husband drinks every day and comes home angry. He shouts and sometimes hits me.” At that moment, I noticed a wound on her hand caused by her husband. She continued, “But I am afraid to question him, so I stay quiet.”

Many women remain silent because society often blames them for speaking out. In rural and estate areas, women who confront

their husbands face stigma and negative labels. Men who drink tend to insult women within their households, and women are expected to accept this behaviour. I have witnessed how many women suffer in silence, as their only means of survival is to stay quiet.

“Women learn to be strong in silence,
Men learn to be loud in power.
Society claps for the loud
And forgets the silent fighters.”

Through my studies in Gender and Women’s Studies, I understand that this silence is not a sign of weakness. It stems from fear, cultural norms, and inequality.

A New Colour in My Mind and My Work



Selladurai, N. (2025). A.Rajeshwary at Tillicoultry Estate

Learning about gender has caused me to reflect on my own thoughts and actions. Why should I remain silent? What challenges are other women facing in digital spaces? What

changes are necessary to stop online harassment and violence?

I also realised that, in my desire to support women, I sometimes spoke for them instead of allowing them to share their own voices. This insight has transformed the way I engage with communities. I now prioritise listening, encourage women to express their ideas, and gently challenge men when they try to dominate discussions.

Understanding gender has contributed to my growth as a woman and as a community worker. It has deepened my understanding of the issues people face. When planning programs, I now consider how men and women experience violence, education, harassment, and health differently. I ensure that women have the opportunity to speak and participate. Additionally, I challenge the notion that alcohol makes men strong while women should remain silent when men drink and come home.

In the future, this knowledge will guide me in creating programs that promote respect, equality, and shared responsibility within families. It will help young people question unfair beliefs early on, allowing them to develop healthier mindsets.

For society, learning about gender is not merely academic; it fosters real change. When people recognise inequality, they stop blaming women and begin to address unjust systems. When men learn to respect women, incidents of violence decrease. When women gain confidence and opportunities, families grow stronger. When children witness equality at home, society becomes healthier.

When a Daughter Dreams Beyond Expectations: Between Duty and Desire

By Janani Chaya Walisingha

“Before I was allowed to be myself, I was raised to be someone’s good daughter”

Not being loud is the first conflict they learn to manage, for many women. With confrontation or rebellion, it does not arrive. It is subtle and quiet. In the pause before answering a question, it lives in hesitation. Whether a dream is worth disappointing the people you love is a careful calculation.

The conflict is between who you quietly long to become and who you are expected to be.

Rarely does this struggle appear dramatic. Instead, through everyday decisions it breathes. To dream how far, to study what subject, how to speak boldly, how much is too much ambition, when to marry, and whether to move away. Especially for daughters often wrapped in moral duty, sacrifice and love, parental expectations often arrive. More like betrayal and less like independence is how resistance is felt.

This structural and emotional pain is universal, yet the tension

between self-actualisation and obedience is deeply personal.

The “Good Daughter”: The First Extreme

In many South Asian and Sri Lankan families, a daughter’s success is often measured not by her happiness but by her willingness to fulfil traditional roles. Being considered a “good daughter” frequently involves silently carrying emotional burdens and selecting careers that are socially accepted. This perspective prioritises family reputation over personal desires, viewing marriage as a necessity rather than a choice or milestone.

Because excellence felt safe, I remember excelling academically, but not because I always loved the subject. Praise was brought through achievement. Reassurance was brought through conformity. Concern surfaced when I questioned expectations. Approval followed when I aligned myself with them.

Over time, with obedience, I began to associate love.

Dismissed as phases were the dreams that did not promise stability. Quietly discouraged were the interests that seemed risky. I could not dream was not told to me explicitly by anyone. Yet around which dreams were acceptable, I felt the invisible boundaries.

What hurts most was the confusion it created within me, not the restriction itself. I love my parents. I understand their sacrifices. I know their expectations were shaped by fear. By the fear that I might struggle, fear of social judgment, fear of instability. But

another voice whispered within me: **What about what I want?**

Guilt was carried in that whisper.

Without feeling as though you are rejecting the people who raised you, how do you choose yourself?

Gender Socialisation: When Daughters Learn to Shrink?

Not accidental is this experience. Through gender socialisation, Feminist scholars explain it. From childhood, girls are conditioned to obedience over autonomy, conditioned to value relational harmony and care.

For others' emotional well-being, Sociologist Nancy Chodorow argues that women internalise responsibility. To identity, maintaining relationships becomes central. To feel even virtuous or natural is self-sacrifice.

For wanting something different, I began to notice how I quickly apologised. As they sounded practical instead of passionate, I carefully softened my ambitions.

Only if it did not disrupt family order ambition was permitted.

'I was not told I couldn't dream. I simply understood some dreams were heavier than others.'

Like a quiet weight, that feeling settled inside me.

Choosing Herself: The “Selfish” Woman

The woman chooses herself fully and stands at the other extreme. Even though they conflict with family expectations, she prioritises her own aspirations. She is often labelled as not “family-oriented”, ambitious, difficult, or ungrateful.

The first time I articulated a path that did not align with what was envisioned for me, there was only silence, no dramatic argument.

The anger felt heavier than silence

Cautious became supportive. Shorter the conversations, the room, something like unnamed disappointment hovered. Into a relationship that once felt warm, I felt as if my authenticity had introduced distance.

What hurt was that it required explanation, not that my dream was wrong.

“I became the problem that needed justifying the moment I chose myself”.

Liberal feminism highlights that women’s choices are rarely accepted naturally. While women are technically allowed to pursue ambition, they constantly feel the need to justify it. In contrast, men’s ambitions are often encouraged without question.

Arguing that the family can function as a site of patriarchal

control, subtly regulating women's futures, times and bodies, a radical feminist perspective can go further. To respectability and honour a daughter's life becomes symbolically tied.

I felt both sadness and relief when I began to see this structurally. Because of feeling torn, I was not individually flawed. Because the tension was larger than my sadness.

The Emotional Labour: Living in Between

Entirely at either extreme, most women do not live. Nor do we fully detach, nor do we completely surrender ourselves. We live in the middle instead.

We delay

We compromise

We negotiate

Into safer language, we translate our dreams.

Emotional labour is this constant adjustment. I learned to humbly present my ambition, before asserting to reassure, to attach passion to practical explanations.

To meet social expectations, Sociologist Arlie Russell Hirschfeld describes emotional labour as the work of managing feelings. This labour is invisible and constant for daughters.

While reassuring yourself, it is the effort of reassuring your parents.

So, it does not show that it is managing guilt.

Alongside their fears, it is carrying your own hopes.

And it is draining.

When shrinking felt easier, there were moments. Courage is demanded by authenticity. Peace is promised by compliance. Yet something inside me felt less alive, felt smaller every time I ignored what I truly want.

More than disappointment ever could, the fear of disappearing within expectations frightened me.

Why is this Conflict Gendered?

Rarely are parental expectations gender-neutral. Often, sons are allowed to explore, return and fail. As growth their mistakes are framed. However, daughters are expected to carefully plan because, as reflections on the family, their missteps are perceived.

That gender does not operate alone is reminded to us by intersectional feminism. With tradition, class, religion and culture, it is intersected with. In societies, a daughter's choices are rarely seen as entirely individual, in societies where a significant weight is carried by reputation.

Against honour, her dreams are measured.

Against sacrifice, her ambitions are weighed.

Against obedience, her independence is evaluated.

Key Message

To choose between selfhood and love, the conflict between parental expectations and personal aspirations is highlighted. To express gratitude or apologise for seeking an authentic life, a daughter should not diminish her dreams. Rather than viewing them as mutually exclusive, true empowerment involves reconciling the relationship between family and personal aspirations.

Final Reflection

This conflict will continue till women like me are allowed to dream without any apology or guilt. I have come to realise that my dreams are not selfish, but I still feel the pull of expectations; they are human, so I have come to the point of realisation that my dreams are not selfish. Does not make me a lesser daughter for choosing my aspirations. Instead, while staying true to myself, it allows me to redefine love. Proving that one without diminishing the other, that selfhood and love can co-exist together. And that to belong, I do not have to shrink who I am to be worthy of the love that raised me, to be valued or to belong.

Musings of a Daughter OR Womanhood, The Grief (Grievance) of

By Sarasija Pulukkuttige

“I stand in the ring
in the dead city
and tie on the red shoes.
[...]
They are not mine.
They are my mother’s.
Her mother’s before.
Handed down like an heirloom
but hidden like shameful letters.”

- Anne Sexton

As a Second - Year English Undergraduate, I first came across Anne Sexton’s *The Red Shoes* (1972) in Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). When I read about the ‘red shoes’ that Sexton speaks of in her poem, the shoes that have been passed down from Mother to Daughter, and from Mother to Daughter yet again, ‘like an heirloom’, the very first thing that came to my mind was my Mother’s *pada salan*, which I never quite inherited.

When I think about women and what it means for me to learn about gender and women, I often think about the women in my life. I think about my Mother and her Mother before her, and the accumulation of sacrifices, both big and small, they have made for me to be here today, writing this. My Mother used to be a passionate dancing student, or so I have heard, according to the many stories and recountings over the years. She, however, did not pursue dance beyond school, because - such is *life*, and the plight of *womanhood*. As a woman living in a patriarchal society, her life was laid out for her at birth. First, a Daughter, then a Wife, and finally, the sacred office of Motherhood. And as most Mothers do, she thought she had to sacrifice her own pleasures and aspirations to accommodate the lives of those whom she birthed, nurtured and raised. Because such was the way the society she lived in was designed. So, she learnt to put herself last, and gave and gave and *gave*. Today, as a result of all her sacrifices, I am here, as an Educator, a Translator, a Woman (a girl once), following her dreams and presumably less burdened with the great many maladies that plague womankind. And sometimes, when I look at my Mother, I think of the insurmountable amount of grief it must have caused, to give up on oneself to such an extent that you forget yourself, again, and again, and *again*.

Then -

“Where does all that *grief* go?”

“Am I truly free from all that *grief*?”

.
. .

As a translator and a language teaching practitioner, much of how I perceive the world is shaped by language. So when I think about this grief that women - Mothers, and Daughters too - carry within themselves, I often think about an essay by Françoise Lionnet titled *Translating Grief* (2005), which details the intersecting nature of grief and grievance. Expounding on the shared etymology of the word ‘grief’ and the French ‘*grief*’ (grievance), both of which derive from the Old French word ‘*grever*’ (*grave* or heavy), Lionnet posits that the two terms are “co-constitutive linguistically as well as within the economy of loss” and therefore, “the work of grief and the articulation of a grievance must go together for freedom to be achieved”. Situating her thesis in unresolved racial grief, Lionnet further asks, “What might it mean to grieve in the face of losses that are so easy to attribute to another’s perceived failures that the immediate reaction is blame, anger, revulsion, or flight instead of pain and mourning? Where does grief hide when grievance takes over?” (p.320). She suggests that the articulation of grief by way of grievance in such situations relies upon the existence of binary paradigms such as “perpetrator/victim,” “oppressor/oppressed,” “innocent/guilty”, which are constructed in opposition to one another. However, she further opines that such a binary is unavailable where one is both the oppressor and the oppressed, and that attempts to articulate grief and grievance from such an ambivalent position ultimately leads to silence, and

to “unresolved grief” and “un-articulable grievances” (pp.321-324). For me, being a Woman in a patriarchal society means that we assume this ambivalent positionality Lionnet speaks of, enacting the roles of both perpetrator and victim, the oppressor and the oppressed. This is particularly evident in the relationship between Mothers and Daughters -

“Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other - beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival - a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other” (*Emphasis Mine*).

- Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1995, p.220)

For many of us Daughters(Mothers), the relationship we form with our Mothers(Daughters) takes on a special shape. This relationship is not only borne out of the love that transpire within the matrix of a familial bond which we so often take for granted, but also out of a sense of closeness we feel towards our Mothers(Daughters) with the recognition that we inhabit, in Adrienne Rich’s words, “two alike bodies” (1995, p.220). Often, this bond between a Mother and a Daughter is a site of love. Because we assume, “*Here is one person who understands me.*”, for we bear the likeness of each other, and therefore, are subject to the same suffering. However, for many of us Daughters, it is also a site of tension, a tension which frustrates what we so callously call the ‘*unconditional*’ love of a Mother. For there is

an undercurrent of grief lurking beneath the surface between us Mothers and Daughters, which often manifest in the form of a grievance that we must air at each other. For in our minds, the cause of this grievance is the other, although in reality, we are trying to blame the other for a wound they did not inflict. This is because -

“Women talk about love [...] Our obsessions about love begin not with the first crush or the first fall. They begin with that first recognition that females matter less than males, that no matter how good we are, in the eyes of a patriarchal universe we are never quite good enough.”

- bell hooks in *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (2002, p. xi)

Mothers(Daughters) — all of us women — we are born into a world where women are inherently deemed less worthier than men. Throughout our lives we are subjected to a patriarchal value system, told to behave in a certain way, to make ourselves small and to endure, endure, *endure*. In such a society, it is no wonder that women bear so much grief(grievance) within them. And when this grief has no outlet, it often manifests in the form of a grievance. This is even more so for our dearest Mothers, who enact perhaps the only acceptable role for a woman in a patriarchal society, their bodies and souls so stifled they have no choice other than to inevitably become agents of the very force that kept them manacled and pass down this knowledge to their Daughters, thereby becoming both the oppressor and the oppressed. As a result us Daughters come to learn of the patriarchal

shackles which bind our female bodies, not through society, but through our grief-stricken Mothers. And so, the knowledge of this grief(grievance) that plagues our Mothers(Daughters) is passed down, from one generation to the next. From Mother to Daughter, and to her Daughter, and to her Daughter. Unwittingly sustaining the cycle of grief within us.

For me, being an English graduate and now a Master of Gender Studies student has meant that I have been given the privilege of a language which allows me to articulate this (grief)grievance that women - Mothers and Daughters - carry within themselves in our societies. It has meant that I am given the privilege of understanding where this grief(grievance) stems from and a medium through which to articulate the same. So, for me, learning about gender and women is about understanding this grief(grievance), and finding a way to translate the same so that we may one day free ourselves from the resentment we seem to have inherited from our Mothers. So that we may reconcile with each other. For we cannot seek emancipation for all women until we free our Mothers and ourselves from the throes of patriarchy. For -

“[...] we think back through our mothers if we are women.”

- Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (2014, p. 74)

Author Biographies

Dr. Pavithra Jayawardena -

Pavithra Jayawardena is Head of the Department of International Relations at the Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo, and Coordinator of the Master of Gender and Women's Studies at the Faculty of Graduate Studies. She holds a PhD in Political Science from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, and an MA in International Relations from the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. Her research engages critically with geopolitics, international migration, citizenship, and gender, with particular attention to how these domains intersect in both policy and lived experience. Beyond academia, she is actively involved in trade union work, contributes regularly to public debates, and engages in policy advocacy.

Dr. Ramani Jayasundere -

Ramani Jayasundere, PhD has more than 30 years experience in development programming and research in the justice sector and on women's empowerment. She works on justice sector reforms, mediation, legal aid, legal empowerment, gender justice, migrant worker rights and women's rights including addressing sexual and gender based violence against women and girls. She works at policy level as well as at community level and has worked

with a number of government, non government, international, UN, bilateral and multi lateral agencies. Ramani serves as faculty on the Gender and Women's Studies masters course, and on mediation and other gender related postgraduate courses at the Faculty of Law, University of Colombo. Her research on gender justice issues has been published and has contributed to policy and practice in Sri Lanka. She is an Attorney at Law with a Masters in Women's Studies and a PhD from the University of Colombo. She served as Director and Senior Technical Advisor on Justice and Gender Programs at The Asia Foundation's Sri Lanka office and briefly held the position of Chairperson of the National Commission on Women.

Dr. Kaushalya Ariyaratne -

Dr. Kaushalya Ariyaratne serves as the Deputy Minister of Mass Media of Sri Lanka. She is an Attorney-at-Law and holds a PhD and an LLB from the University of Colombo. She also earned a Master of Arts degree from Keele University, United Kingdom. A scholar and gender rights advocate, her work focuses on women's rights, gender equity, and women's political participation. She contributes actively to policy development, legal reforms, and advancing inclusive governance.

Dr. Kaushalya Kumarasinghe -

Kaushalya Kumarasinghe, PhD is a Sri Lankan novelist, researcher, translator, and political activist whose scholarly work engages the sociology of emotions, intellectual history,

and questions of political transformation. He currently serves as the Director of the SAARC Cultural Centre.

Dr. Unnathi Samaraweera -

Dr. H. Unnathi S. Samaraweera is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. She received the Senate Early Career Research Award at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 2025. She earned her PhD in Sociology from the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, as a recipient of the prestigious New Zealand Commonwealth Scholarship (2019-2023). Prior to her doctoral studies, she completed her MA in Sociology from the South Asian University, New Delhi. Dr. Samaraweera also received her BA (Hons) in Sociology from the University of Colombo with First Class honours, where she was awarded the N.D.S. Silva Memorial Gold Medal for being the top student in her discipline. Her research interests lie at the intersection of gender and sexuality, disaster resilience, and social work.

Hafsa Muheed -

Hafsah Muheed is an intersectional feminist with around 10 years' experience working with grassroot communities. Her work focuses on advocacy, programming and policy on women's rights, human rights, governance and climate change.

Lihini Ratwatte -

Lihini Ratwatte is a gender equality practitioner with over 10 years of experience in the development sector in Sri Lanka and the wider South Asian region. She is also an independent researcher and a writer focusing on a wide array of issues relating to gender equality and women's rights.

Onathya Wewalaarachchi -

Onathya Wewalaarachchi is a Lecturer at APIIT Law School. She is an Attorney-at-Law of the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka and is currently reading for a Master of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Colombo. She holds experience in both legal practice and academia, with teaching and research interests spanning human rights, gender studies and criminal law. Through her writing and teaching, she is committed to bridging the gap between law and lived realities, particularly in advancing conversations on gender justice and social change. She also holds a Master of Human Rights and Democratisation (Colombo) and an LL.B. (Hons) (UK).

Harini Fernando -

Harini Fernando is a gender and development practitioner and researcher currently serving as Team Leader – Gender and Development at the Centre for Poverty Analysis in Sri Lanka. Her work focuses on gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, women's political participation, and inclusive

development. She holds a Graduate Diploma in Public Policy from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore and a Bachelor's degree in International Relations from the University of Colombo, where she is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Gender and Women's Studies.

Avishki Perera -

Avishki Perera is currently pursuing her Master's degree in Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Colombo. She completed her Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in English at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. Her academic interests lie in women's voices, gendered silences, and autonomy in contemporary society.

Miranthi Pathirage -

Miranthi Pathirage currently leads the Women Empowerment Initiative at Uber Sri Lanka, creating safe and inclusive earning opportunities for women. With over 15 years of experience working across rural and plantation communities in Sri Lanka, women's empowerment has always been at the heart of her work and passion.

Tahlia M. Perera -

Tahlia M. Perera is an International Relations graduate from the University of London currently pursuing a Master's in Gender and Women's Studies. Her interests lie in gender, development, and social justice, with a focus on creating more inclusive and equitable communities.

Nidarshana Selladurai –

Nidarshana Selladurai holds a BSc in Psychology and Counselling from the University of Champagnat, xxxx. She is a community development practitioner with over 10 years of experience working across Sri Lanka, working closely with communities, especially women, children and youth, to promote social well-being, leadership, and sustainable development.

Janani Chaya Walisingha -

Janani Chaya Walisingha is a dedicated law student pursuing a Masters in Gender and Women's Studies, with a passion for reading. Outside her studies she enjoys writing and engaging with thoughtful stories that spark reflection and imagination. Her passion for learning fuels her writing and creative pursuits outside of law.

Sarasija Pulukkuttige -

Sarasija Pulukkuttige is an English (Hons) graduate from the University of Kelaniya and an Attorney-at-Law. She is currently a Visiting Lecturer of English at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, and a Sworn Translator of Sinhala/English languages. As a Master of Gender and Women's Studies student, she wishes to combine her knowledge of gender with her love of languages to explore the intersections between these areas, and utilise her knowledge for the empowerment of women.

*This publication is issued by the Faculty of Graduate Studies,
University of Colombo, to mark International Women's Day 2026.
It includes contributions from students and lecturers of the
Master of Gender and Women's Studies (MGWS) - 2025/2026.*



Printed by

Colombo University Press
University of Colombo

Prof. Stanley Wijesundara Mawatha, Colombo 07, Sri Lanka

ISBN: 978-624-5518-74-6