

HOME ECONOMICS

Food riots have sent shock waves around the Arab world in a ripple effect. In Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Algeria people have taken to the streets protesting against their governments and the cost of living. When ordinary people are unable to make ends meet and feed their families, food security becomes an emotive issue that has the potential to unite people across religious and ethnic divides. Ultimately even the class divide gets chipped away as more and more middle-class people become anxious about the high cost of living. The backlash is almost always against those in power.

The rising cost of living has been a recurring cause of concern for women. Often it is women who have to manage the family budget and take responsibility for providing food for their families. The current market price for essential items such as coconuts is around Rs. 60-70. As we go to press, there is a shortage of Bombay onions. Vegetables such as green beans, beetroot etc. are being sold for Rs. 100 per 500g. Already such vegetables have been placed beyond the reach of ordinary citizens.

To add to this situation, Sri Lanka faces a shortage of eggs. Importing millions of eggs from India and selling each at Rs. 19 hardly addresses the problem of affordable nutrition for families, particularly the young and the elderly. The nutritional and health cost of these serious price hikes – as well as the increasing stress and worry on women who have to make ends meet in this unfavourable economic climate, is certainly not lost on women.

Food Security

We know that there is a global food crisis (or crises). Floods and droughts caused by climate change and their impact on food crops pose serious problems that require long term strategic responses, not only from the developing world, but also the developed countries. However, ensuring food production and supply within a country such as Sri Lanka which is rich in diversity whether in terms of climate, peoples,

soils and agricultural products should surely have been possible with clear long-term economic policies. This has not been the case. Acres of coconut lands were allowed to be sold off to housing development companies. Subsidies to farmers were removed, re-introduced and removed again by consecutive governments or even by the same government in power. Precious forest cover is allowed to be cut down by those who have one or another politician's backing.

Given this track record it does not come as a surprise that Sri Lanka is on the threshold of a serious food crisis. Those who hold the reigns of power may do well to re-educate themselves on basic economics. The importance of food security as an integral part of economic planning. This should have been recognized earlier by planners.

Conspicuous Consumption

These problems have been compounded by the conspicuous consumption of those who have both political and economic power. Come elections, massive banquets were held on a daily basis for thousands of people strategically targeting the media, the corporate sector, professionals, academics etc. We were told that the cost of the food and drink (including alcohol) were borne through donations. This may have taken care of who paid the immediate bills. But we wonder whether the shortage of food items such as chicken and eggs had something to do with this undue surge in demand.

Over the last couple of years, such practices have become legitimized and today feeding potential voters has become an integral part of election campaigns. Not only is this an utter wastage given the sheer numbers involved and the fact that most invitees are those who can well afford a meal. These practices have also driven the cost of successive elections higher, and had a direct impact on women running for political office. Many women who are interested in entering politics

have complained that they cannot muster the necessary financial resources to run an election campaign.

Econogimmicks

Inflation has steadily increased from 4.3% in July 2010 to 5.8% by September, and 6.6% by October 2010. In November 2010 the Dept. of Census and Statistics stated that inflation was 7%. This figure surely went up during the Christmas season. Economists maintain that there have been a number of factors that have kept inflation down from its dizzy peak of 28.2% in July 2008. These include the relatively stable prices of oil in the world market (the price of oil has just gone up again), the Middle East dollars brought in by women migrant workers, and the IMF loan that has shored up foreign exchange reserves contributing to the stabilization of the rupee.

Yet 7% inflation is nothing to crow about if women now have to buy their vegetables and other products in smaller quantities. Nor is an increase in per capita income meaningful when people are unable to save anything from their earnings because of the cost of living. What does it mean when marketers have to re-package their products in order to sell them? Nestomalt now comes in smaller packets as does Shampoo and a bevy of other consumer items. This also leaves room for unscrupulous marketing gimmicks. A 100 gram packet of well-known brand of biscuits stayed at the same price but almost imperceptibly became 90grams overnight.

While the price remained steady the packaging was downsized in the hope that the customer would not notice. These are well known marketing gimmicks. Others such as getting the military to sell vegetables attract a lot of publicity but hardly make a dent in food delivery at reasonable prices to households. Long queues for vegetables have re-emerged in the public space. A military lorry with a meagre load of vegetables looks like the bare shelved co-operative shops of the bad old days. When people have to spend a lot of time in queues and are unable to get what they want, frustration increases.

Warning Bells and Women Voters

There has been a tendency in Sri Lanka, during a crisis to divert attention to trivial, populist issues. There is no point distracting people from the real economic issues – on to mini skirts and taking pot shots at foreign bogeys NGOs and westernized folk etc. The real issues need to be discussed and addressed. The country is under a huge debt burden. The fundamentals are not sound and policy makers need to get things right.

At a time when women bear the burden of high prices and low wages, one can again urge that in the forthcoming local government elections, women's representation in politics should be drastically increased. For there is no doubt that their presence in local government would be a huge incentive towards tackling some of the serious socio-economic problems the country faces today. ■

CITIZENSHIP, PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

What constitutes citizenship in a country? What are the benefits of citizenship? What can we expect from it? What are our rights and entitlements as citizens? For those of us fortunate enough to be privileged and mainstream, we hardly think - or need to think - about citizenship in this way. We can take it for granted. For those of us who are heterosexual and conform to the sexual behaviour expected of us, we enjoy the perks of citizenship without much thought. But the recent events held to commemorate Pride month, and discussions held around issues that haunt the lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual (lgtb) communities in Sri Lanka, brought up the fact that, for these communities, citizenship remains a vexed legal, socio-political subject.

Equal Rights

The Sri Lanka constitution guarantees equal rights to all its citizens. Yet it is commonplace that discrimination and inequalities occur. For instance, Sri Lankan women, on the whole, are highly discriminated when it comes to political representation and certain other rights such as ownership/ access to property, particularly of state land. Our society hardly takes into account the fundamental needs and priorities of those who are differently-abled or disabled – they are usually consigned to their homes or a limited number of state institutions. Amongst those disadvantaged because they do not belong to a dominant majority, and because they do not conform to the norm, are women who love other women.