

FEMALE INSTRUMENTALISTS' CONTRIBUTION TO THE MUSIC INDUSTRY IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

In every field, starting from land to space, both females and males have contributed to its development. However, it can be seen that due to each society's unique set of cultural, and religious attitudes, women are subjected to certain restrictions that vary across the globe. This study was done to explore such issues faced by women in Sri Lanka, particularly, those who are instrumentalists in the field of music. The research was based on the problem that even though there are many talented² female instrumentalists in the country, there is fewer number of female music instrumentalists in the music industry of Sri Lanka. Thus, the main purpose of the study was to discover what factors have resulted in Sri Lankan female instrumentalists' limited contribution or their absence in the music industry. This study analyzed the responses of the chosen participants regarding the difficulties they have faced during their contribution to an occasion related to music. The participants included in the study were selected using the convenience sampling technique. To collect the primary data, a questionnaire was distributed among 17 female musicians that play at least one musical instrument. The questions included open-ended and closed-ended questions. The responses that the participants gave included issues related to male dominance and societal attitudes toward female musical instrumentalists, and the role they have to play in the family as a wife and mother. Additionally, it was evident that females are more reluctant to pursue music from secondary school onwards due to the issues mentioned previously. It could be stated that based on the findings, female musical instrumentalists contribute less to the music business due to the above-mentioned factors.

Keywords

Attitudes, Empowerment, Female-instrumentalist, Musician, Music business

Introduction

Sri Lankan women in general appear to be doing well in terms of empowerment considering the large number of women seen to be working in public and private banks, as well as in supermarkets (Jayaweera, 2007). Observing the social mood in parts of the population, it can be stated that many Sri Lankans are inclined to believe that this is indicative of them as having equal status and independence in society. Nevertheless, the unseen reality is that, on the whole, women hold minor positions with comparatively low pay in the workforce, especially with regard to blue collar jobs (Tam, 2010).

This research considers the position and the challenges faced by female musicians that fall under a

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2. Talented means, in this context, being able to perform in similar contexts as their male counterparts in order to earn an income.

minor category of musical instrumentalists. Furthermore, it attempts to address the reality of many young female music instrumentalists in the country. Since the 1960s, there has been a vast development in the area of entertainment in Sri Lanka as well; specifically in the field of music. Although it is evident that female singers have gained recognition for their exceptional vocal ranges and quality of their voices, an argument can be made stating that there is a significant difference between male and female singers because the male and female voices are anatomically situated in different ranges. After attaining puberty, males tend to have a deeper voice whereas females develop a higher and matured voice. Thus, as there is a difference, the music composers and the society at large loves to hear female singers. However, what happens when the same female who has a higher ranged voice, takes a violin, or a flute into her hand? The sound that is made by her is the same one that is produced by a male musician. There is no significant difference in that. When considering the role of the male and the female in the music field, Bayton's (1998:26) table draws an interesting comparison between the two genders.

| Female | Male |
|------------------|---|
| Singer | Instrumentalist |
| Backing vocalist | Manager of band |
| Fan | Live sound engineer |
| Groupie | Technician (guitar tech, drum tech, etc.) |
| Girlfriend | Roadie |
| Wife | Lighting manager |
| Mother | Driver |
| Dancer | Rigger |
| | Road manager |
| | Music press photographer |
| | Buyer for retail chain |

Figure 1: Typical gender distribution of social roles in the popular music world quoted from *Women Performing Popular Music* (Bayton, 1998: 26).

Statement of the Problem

This research is based on the problem of having a lesser number of female musical instrumentalists compared to the number of males in the field of music in Sri Lanka. As such the study intended to find out what factors are responsible for this problematic context. Female vocal artists are known to have gained much recognition in the history of the Sri Lankan music field, but instrumental-wise, there is a notable mismatch between the ratios of men to women in the music field.

However, in contrast to the higher number of females present in the government and private sectors as workers in blue and white-collar jobs, females in the music business who play a musical instrument are rare to be seen. Thushani Jayawardena: a Sri Lankan violinist, is a female violinist that gained some kind of recognition in the early 20th century. She is known to be a well-accomplished violinist in the Sri Lankan field of music. As of today, there are newly formed orchestras such as the 'Gustav Mahler Society of Colombo', where there are chances of seeing female players more frequently than in previous years, but there seems to be a drastic mismatch between the ratios of males and females who play instruments in the music business today and it cannot be said that female contribution is less because females are

less musically inclined than males.

Purpose of the Study

This research attempts to explore the problematic context that result in the limited presence of female instrumentalists in the field of music in Sri Lanka . By identifying the constraining factors, it is possible to mitigate them so that females who play instruments, can be encouraged to perform music for everyone just as their male counterparts do.

Significance of the Study

By addressing the research problem, the study population as well as the academic community will benefit from the study findings in the following ways. As a result of focusing on the minority of female musical instrumentalists in the Sri Lankan music field, the majority that is exclusive will also be addressed although it is not conducted in a direct way. This study not only talks about the female instrumentalists who are at a disadvantage but also provides recommendations that may possibly contribute to the building-up of a solid music industry in the country. In comparison to musically active countries such as Britain, South Korea, and India which own very comprehensive music industries, the Sri Lankan music artists have no place to set their foot to pursue a career based on their passion. Thus, based on the study conclusions, this study sets out to build a base for the music industry in Sri Lanka.

Research Methodology



This research was conducted using the mixed-methods research design whereby both aspects of qualitative and quantitative research were employed in designing the questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed with the inclusion of 11 quantitative questions and 7 qualitative questions. The first 11 questions were designed in order to analyze data using statistical methods, whereas the second half of open-ended questions were an attempt to gather the attitudes of the population on the fair/unfair grounds they stand in as female instrumentalists. The population was selected by using the convenience sampling technique. 17 females of different ages, with an average age of 25, responded to the questionnaire sent to them as a google form.

Data Analysis

The following details the findings of the significant data collected through the questionnaire.³

The study participants were asked if they are from a musical family background to determine whether there was a positive or negative perspective of musically inclined parents towards their daughter's pursuit of music or vice versa. The analyzed data show that 88% agree that their mother encourages them to attend musical performances whereas 83% indicated that their fathers encouraged them to do so. This is true whether the respondents come from a musically inclined family setup or not. The bar chart below illustrates the responses for each of the categories, such as parents, siblings, and relatives, to the participant's announcement about an event (recording, practice session, or a concert).

Legend of the following depiction in Figure 2:

-  Encouragement
-  Negative remarks toward people in the event

3 . All data depictions are made by the author.

- Discouragement
- Making a fuss if it is a nighttime event
- Negative remarks regarding the venue
- Constantly calling to see whether you are okay

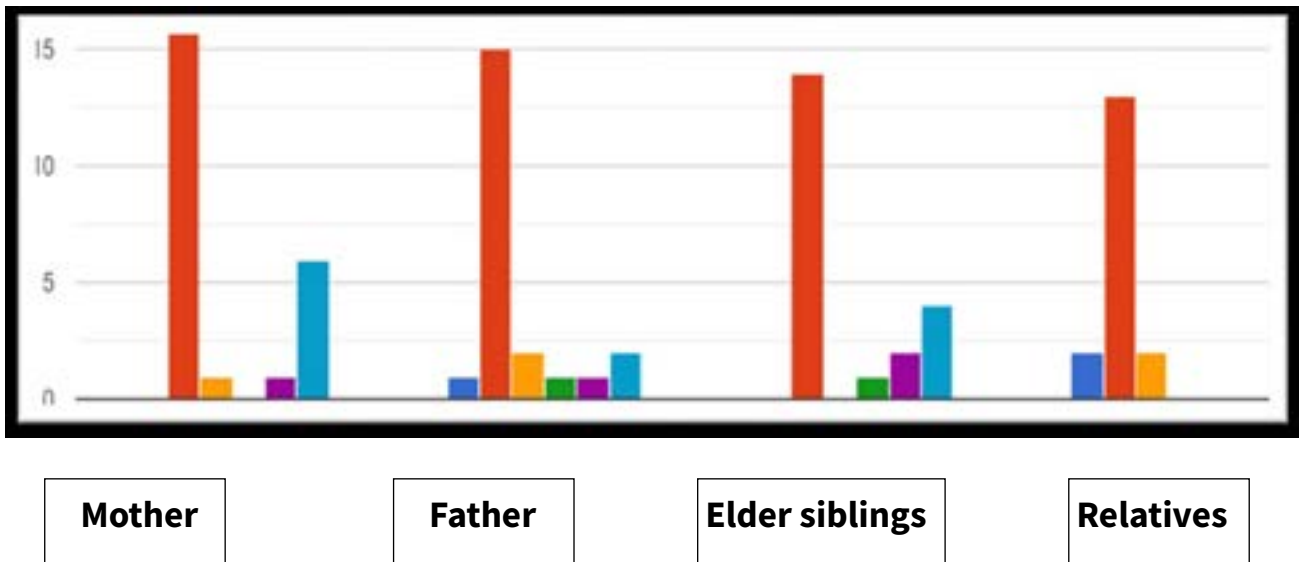


Figure 2: Attitudes of close family members regarding the female participants attending events to perform as instrumentalists.

By looking at the graph (Figure 2), 16 respondents stated that their mother encourages them to go to an event and 15 respondents said their father encouraged them to do so as well. Therefore, it is somewhat clear that the families of the instrumentalists support their daughters to follow their dreams in pursuing a career in the sector of music business.

In the selected population, only 11 respondents out of 17 had a boyfriend or a husband at the point of collecting data. Eight of them amounting to a total percentage of 72 had partners that encouraged them to attend musical events. However, five respondents (45%) selected the option “I frequently get calls from my boyfriend/spouse while on the way to the event or after reaching the point of destination”.

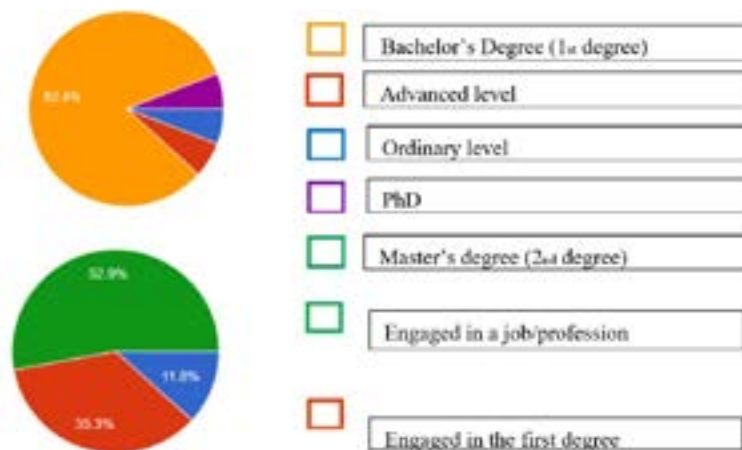


Figure 3 and 4: 82% of the population already had a bachelor's degree at the time of data collection.

The next question asked was about their professional status. It was posed to gather information regarding whether the respondents engaged in a certain profession, or were still unemployed. The figure 3 depicts the education levels of each of the respondents.

This chart showed that more than half of the population was engaged in some sort of profession related to the music business. Out of the 52% of employed people, none of them had the title of a ‘performer’ which is desirably the answer that is expected from a person engaged performing as an instrumentalist. Unfortunately, half of the respondents (52%) were either music teachers at public or private schools or involved in job unrelated to music.

When concerning the outfit which the participants choose to wear to a certain musical events, for practice sessions, recordings and concerts, a percentage of 82.4 have selected the choice: “unwillingly choose to care about the nature of the outfit” meaning that even if individual-wise they really do not care much about the outfit to be worn, due to societal pressure to dress in a certain manner and the cultural beliefs of “women as being targets ” for harassments. The figure below illustrates this point: .

Question: How much do you care about the outfit you wear to such a place?

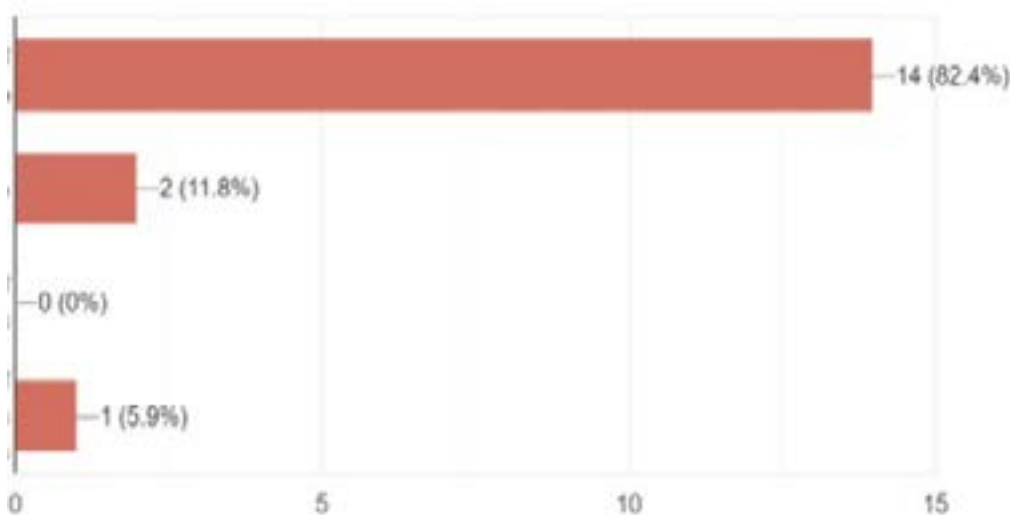


Figure 5: Responses regarding the selection of the dress code.

Out of the 17 respondents, 14 of them have chosen the option of unwillingly choosing to be concerned about the attire to be worn to a place of practice, recording, or concert, as the population in such places is outnumbered by the male gender and the societal pressure given to the female counterparts to dress in a certain manner is higher. This option may have become the most common out of all due to the reason that sexual violence against women in Sri Lanka is not a fact that cannot be ignored. “Violence against women in Sri Lanka remains a hidden practice” with the incidents being under-reported and its perpetrations under-penalized (Gunawardena, 2015:17).

1) What reactions do you get from parents and spouses if the concert or recording takes longer than the announced time? Write down the responses separately.

The above question was responded to by 17 participants and a majority stated that a delay caused as a result of the exceeding of the time mentioned to them, the parents and the spouse or boyfriend ‘scolds,

and make a fuss” The 6 respondents who were not in a relationship stated that their parents ask them what the reason for the delay is and shows much concern for their safety. Two respondents separately mentioned that their parents have an idea about how things are at a concert or such events and as such, they do not make any complaints and have major concerns due to their understanding.

2) ‘When you go to such a place, do you face any difficulties as a female? What are those?’

The response of participant number 3, who plays the violin in both the western and eastern fields was, (as per translated from Sinhalese)

A: ‘Yes, definitely. The rate of rejection is higher. I have faced situations where when there is a difficult passage of music to play, and I pause a little, the response I get is ‘oh don’t you have enough strength? So, when such questions are asked in front of a whole orchestra, the amount of unease I feel as a female is immense.’ Another participant who is a guitarist answered the same question as follows, ‘Most people in Sri Lanka think that the guitar is an instrument usually played by a male. So even if I play it with my utmost capacity, the compliments I get most often from both genders is “You play better than a boy” and that makes me think that these people just measure us from the perspective of gender differences than from the effort and the time we put into practice our instrument. This is a very sad situation in Sri Lanka and a reason to be disappointed as a female instrumentalist.’

Participant number 4, who also plays the violin stated, ‘Most often, I get an invitation to play in a concert or for a recording when there is no one else. And the event managers expect us to not expect a payment, which is clearly unfair. Frequently, they are reluctant to pay us anything.’

Another participant also stated, ‘Most of the time they are reluctant to pay us. And as a female, it is also difficult to keep nagging and asking for payment.’

The above responses clearly indicate the issues that female instrumentalists encounter due to their gender as women. Sadly, both genders have learned to look at females as a subordinate type of species whose physical inferiority to males is applied to almost all aspects of life. There is a social notion that women do not have a strong influence on men and that society is inclined to use male musicians instead. Another problematic background was addressed by the respondents, which is the travelling difficulties faced by them, especially at night.

Participant number 6, who is a clarinet player and currently a member of the Gustav Mahler Society of Colombo stated:

‘I live out of Colombo, so because of that, I face tremendous difficulties when travelling to Colombo for practices. At first, my mother used to come with me by abandoning her work but it could not be continued. So later, I used to travel with a hired driver plus someone I trusted, but when practices were frequently scheduled, the expenses increased and my parents couldn’t afford it. My father also didn’t like to send me with an unknown person. So, it was very difficult.’

The same participant said, ‘Sometimes I get invitations to play in chamber orchestras, but sometimes I have to abandon the request as I happen to be the only female in the practice session and it is overwhelming to interact with only men’.

The 16th question, to which many perspectives were revealed are presented below:

3) What is your opinion regarding the place of a female musician in Sri Lanka?' The responses are as follows.

1. The ability of a musician to be independent without the help of anyone is minimal in Sri Lanka. The problem with presenting the desired music is that many people like to enjoy it, but are not willing to give the players or singers even, an appropriate amount of payment. Music altogether is one of the categories where people do a great amount of sacrifice but do not get a decent salary. The problem specific to females is that if she starts pursuing the dream of her life as an instrument player in Sri Lanka, she will need to devote her whole life to it, if not, her musical life will become unsuccessful. On the other hand, if she keeps contributing to the music field, her marriage will fall apart.
2. There are so many cultural restrictions on women based on traditional reasons. There is too much stigma for a new female instrumentalist in the field. The attempt in our society is to put down woman as much as possible.
3. Freedom is very limited for a female instrumentalist.
4. We don't have the freedom or adequate resources.
5. We have less freedom and a female performer is looked down upon by our society.

The above responses are a combination of 14 responses as most of them were similar responses given to the question posed. However, there was one comprehensive positive comment on the current situation that has arisen in Sri Lanka that given women freedom to some extent when compared with the past. Nevertheless, the same participant included issues related to conventional thought patterns that hinder the contribution of female musicians. It should be noted that this participant is a pianist and a vocalist. Given the different treatment rendered to an instrumentalist and a vocalist, she has made her career as a vocal artist. As it was initially mentioned in the introduction of this paper, the significant difference between the vocal range has been an advantage for women because their vocal range is different, but when an instrument is concerned, gender does not play a role. The comment goes as follows:

I think at present, the musicians in Sri Lanka, especially females have great opportunities to excel in the field of music. Unlike in the past, the music business is not male-dominated. We can see loads of opportunities for women and men equally. I think in Sri Lanka gender equality is becoming more accepted in modern society. However, I don't think a female musician in Sri Lanka has the same level of freedom received by a male musician, due to conventional notions that even her own family has about the role of a woman. However, at present, we can see people questioning these norms and becoming open to new concepts of gender roles that emerged from the western world. I think that this will help females all over Sri Lanka to follow their desired path.

These responses altogether indicate how restrictive these respondents' lives are as females who are instrumentalists in the music business of Sri Lanka. Concerning the majority of the participants' responses, it is apparent that societal issues and male dominance have caused most of them to not pursue music as their career. These findings may differ in the future or even with another set of participants, but according to the study findings there is a strong need for societal change with regard to conceptions about the roles of women.

Conclusion

When considering the given analysis, it is evident that in Sri Lankan society, many disadvantages are faced by women who attempt to reach their goal of becoming performing artistes. Society seems to

expect women to focus more on their domestic responsibilities rather than encourage them to become professionals in any way. Most importantly, employed women appear to earn less than men and have fewer employment opportunities. Apart from the pressure at work, cultural discrimination against women in Sri Lanka is a serious issue and it needs to be acknowledged by our society in order to stop the problem from getting worse. The role of a typical woman in Sri Lanka is seemingly centered around the family. As a daughter, she lives under the guidance of her parents, then after marriage, she comes under the surveillance of her husband, and finally, the son she raises will be the one to take care of her in her later years. The living plan of a typical Sri Lankan woman is drawn as such. Due to the patriarchal social structure prevailing in the country when a female instrumentalist enters the male-dominant circles of musicians, she faces many challenges, especially as Sri Lanka still perceives a woman as the subordinate party. It is the reality of many women's lives that their burden of 'work' does not give them time or space to get involved in their music careers.

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APPENDIX

This questionnaire is conducted in order to collect details from female musical instrument players in Sri Lanka, about the difficulties and challenges they might have faced in their field. And through the data collected, analyzing them in order to pave a path to instill novel thought patterns and attitudes to the society that are favorable for the female instrumental artists in the field.

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. Age at which you started learning music?
4. Do you have any musical family background?
5. What is the musical instrument/(s) you chose?
6. Is there a specific reason for your choice of the musical instrument?
7. To which genre does your study of music belong to?
 - Western
 - Eastern
 - Engage in both sometimes
8. What is your latest educational qualification? (OL, AL, Bachelor’s degree, Post graduate degree, masters, PhD)
9. What is your current position? Undergraduate, Graduate with no job, Job-holder, freelance job holder.
10. Do you have a favorable environment in your place of living, for practicing your instrument? Or are there any restrictions?
11. When you receive an event (recording/concert/) related to your instrument, what is the reaction of the below stated persons?

| | Discouraging | Encouraging | give negative remarks about the place you are about to go | give negative remarks about the people you might meet at the place | If the course of your event exceeds the time you assumed, blaming and making a fuzz | constantly call you until and after you get to that place |
|----------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|--|---|---|
| Mother | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Father | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Elder Siblings | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Relatives | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

12. How much do you care about the outfit you wear to such a place?

- I do not care
- I care, even if i do not want to
- I do not care, but my parents want me to, so I obey
- i do not care, but my boyfriend/husband wants me to, so i care

13. *what is the reaction of your boyfriend/husband when you inform them of an invitation you get for a recording, practice session or an event related to your musical instrument?*

- Discouraging
- Encouraging
- give negative remarks about the place you are about to go
- give negative remarks about the people you might meet at the place
- If the course of your event exceeds the time you assumed, blaming and making a fuzzi
- constantly calls you until and after you get to that place

14. *What reactions do you get from parents and spouse if the concert or recording takes longer than the announced time? Write down the responses separately.*

15. *When you go to such a place, do you face any difficulties as a female? What are those?*

16. *Do you feel that when you go to such place, that you are treated less than men? What is your experience regarding that?*

17. *If you are in a relationship, or married, what are the challenges you face because of your partner/spouse. Does he like when you participate in such events? Or does he force you to stay home?*

18. *What is your opinion regarding the place of a female musician in Sri Lanka? Do they have the freedom that a Westerner has?*

19. *What do you think should change? Give your opinion on how we could improve this situation as citizens of Sri Lanka?*