

Male bastion breached

by Dr. Melva Perera

Past President - Institution of Engineers Sri Lanka

When Engineer Ranjani Lanka Haturusinha takes over the Presidency of the Institution of Engineers Sri Lanka this month she will be writing her name into the history of this prestigious professional body as its first Woman President, significantly leading the Engineering Profession into the next century and millennium. The Institution of Engineers Sri Lanka (IESL), together with its predecessor, the Association of Engineers Ceylon, has a proud history going back ninety three years to its inauguration in 1906, presided over by the then Governor, Henry Blake, who also became its first Patron. This patronage was extended by all Governors of Colonial Ceylon over the next fifty years. The Patron of the Institution now is the President of the Republic of Sri Lanka.

By a resolution of its membership in 1956, the Association was reconstituted as the Institution of Engineers Ceylon, and in 1968 incorporated by an Act of Parliament, as the Institution of Engineers Sri Lanka.

Ninety three years is just short of a century, and it is this century that is now coming to a close, and a century that has brought about unprecedented technological change globally, and social changes in our country. The history of the IESL in many ways reflects these changes. It was initiated informally in 1904, during the height of colonial rule by British Engineers, interestingly not in Colombo the Capital, but Anuradhapura, which was then the forefront of development activity in irrigation, roads and archaeology.

The first Ceylonese Engineer to become its President was H. K. De Kretser in 1938, followed by H. Wijenathan the next year. Today, its membership is totally Sri Lankan, numbering 5,940 in all categories, in many engineering disciplines, of which 2,648 are Corporate Members enjoying the status of Professional Engineers. The induction of Eng. Haturusinha as the first Woman President has not come too soon. The first Woman Engineer, Premila

Sivaprakasapillai graduated from the Faculty of Engineering, University of Ceylon, in 1964, fourteen years after its establishment, to be followed by Sumi Munasinghe. Lanka, as Eng. Haturusinha is popularly known, obtained her degree from the University of Ceylon in 1970, in Civil Engineering, and soon after was involved in the challenge and excitement of development projects of the Mahaweli Board and its successor the Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka, at a time when Mahaweli development was at its peak.

She has functioned in many positions in Construction, Designs, Planning and Administration, as Site Engineer, Chief Designs Engineer and as a Director of the Mahaweli Engineering and Construction Agency. She now holds the position of Director-Project Planning of the Mahaweli Authority, involved in the review of major projects and planning for future projects under the Authority. For her contribution to Engineering and other socially oriented activities, she has won the award of "Woman of Achievement" conferred by Zonta International. She has been the most active Woman Member of the Institution over a long period of time, having served on many Committees and in the Council for many years. All these achievements combined with a very genial personality makes her eminently qualified to hold this high office and also as the first Woman to do so.

Although Eng. Haturusinha does not see gender specific issues pertaining to Woman Engineers as a priority, she would no doubt appreciate any such problems better. To begin with, the percentage of Women Members of the Institution is in the region of seven percent overall. The proportion of female students admitted to the faculties has increased tremendously since the first admission in the early sixties and the Institution should see an increase in its female membership. More important than numbers, is the need for more active participation.

Eng. Haturusinha's ascendancy to the highest office would hopefully encourage them to do so. A young woman Engineer seeking to change employment remarked in casual conversation, that her male colleagues have better chances than she has. Perhaps



Eng. Ranjani Lanka Haturusinha

these realities need to be studied, considering however, the overall employment prospects for all Engineers. Besides the common problems with other women in employment, arising out of their role in the family and domestic life, the functions associated with engineering activity, particularly in Civil Engineering on construction sites and having to deal with a wide range of people, could pose more specific work related problems for Women Engineers.

However, there are many matters that need to be focused on. One of the important issues still pending resolution, is the matter of regulation. Sri Lanka does not have a system of registration of Engineers as many countries do. In earlier, less complex times, when the Government's recruitment criteria were the accepted norms in all sectors, the roles of the various grades of Engineers and the primacy of the Chartered Engineer was well established. But now with the diversification of the development effort, with the emergence of a greater role for the private sector in industry and engineering, and also a substantial global presence in the country in these activities, the definition of an Engineer and the roles of various types and grades of technical personnel have got confused.

In a deregulating environment there is a need to regulate professional activity for the benefit of society. The devastation caused by the recent earthquake in Turkey, was aggravated it is alleged, by poor regulation of Engineering Activity and Engineering Design and Construction. Although such disastrous events have not occurred here, there are numerous instances of problems arising out of persons undertaking work that they are not qualified to do. While recognizing the necessity for various types and grades of technical personnel in Engineering Activity, it would be in the interest of society to formulate a regulatory system that would serve that purpose, without throttling and obstructing the development process. That is the challenge the Engineering Pro-

fession and the Government has to meet. The IESL itself has to address its mind to the changing nature of the Engineering Profession. The sub-divisions of Engineering specialties and diversity of employment situations corresponding to the present complexities of technology is a far cry from the days when an Engineer could be simply categorized, and the various disciplines easily defined. The IESL has a vested interest in engineering education as its membership is largely from amongst those who graduate from our Universities. It is in recognition of this fact that the Institution established the Universities Liaison Committee, comprising of members from all faculties, thus providing a forum for discussing all related problems. The Institution could contribute substantially towards formulating an overall Engineering Education Policy.

Unfortunately, successive Governments' Engineering and Technical Education Policy making continues to be distributed amongst various Ministries and there is no coherent or co-ordinated policy. This lack of co-ordination has resulted in over-production at some levels and under-production at others, when compared with the structure of human resource requirements in industry. This in turn, has generated anxieties regarding prospects of employment, which is really the root cause of unrest amongst student groups.

The Institution is a professional body and has traditionally and rightly shied away from matters that would be construed as associated with Trade Union activity, such as remunerations and conditions of employment. However, the Institution will be within its mandate if it studies and researches these matters and brings them to the attention of the relevant authorities. Engineers may not have made their importance felt as vital persons in the provision of basic amenities, by depriving the public of these essential services. This should not however, deter those in authority from acknowledging the vital function performed by them in the provision of essential services and in economic development. Conditions of services in the state sector serves as a guide to the private sector at the initial stages of employment.

It has often been questioned as to what role Engineers play in the formulation of Government policy, and whether the Government's consultative mechanisms take cognizance of a body that could be considered to represent the collective thinking of the Engineering Profession. Governments would be wise to make use of this avenue of consultation, and the IESL for its part has to respond objectively and positively if it is to make a tangible impact. It is interesting to note that upto 1930, the Director of Public Works was an Ex-officio Member of the Legislative Council.

These are some of the issues that Eng. Haturusinha will have to deal with as the President of the Institution. We wish her well and success in her endeavours.

10 women ministers urge bar on human trafficking

Women foreign ministers from 10 countries, including the United States, have called for the early completion of a U.N. convention against transnational organised crime and an additional document specifically dealing with trafficking in people.

In a letter to Secretary-General Kofi Annan circulated on Monday, they said: "On the edge of the 21st century, it is unacceptable that human beings around the world are bought and sold into situations, such as sexual exploitation, domestic servitude and debt bondage, that are little different from slavery."

They said they were writing "as the foreign ministers of 10 nations, and as concerned women, to affirm our strong support for the struggle to end the repulsive trafficking in human beings, predominantly women and children."

The letter was signed by foreign ministers Maria Eugenia Brizuela de Avila of El Salvador; Tarja Halonen of Finland; Andrea Willi of Liechtenstein; Lydie Polfer of Luxembourg; Lila Ratsifandrihamana of Madagascar; Rosairo Green Macias of Mexico; Aichatou Mindacidou of Niger; Nkosazana Zuma of South Africa; Anna Lindh of Sweden; and Madeleine Albright of the United States. (REUTERS)

Saudi women make debut at consultative council

Several women have attended a consultative council meeting for the first time in the conservative Muslim kingdom of Saudi Arabia, sources close to the advisory body told AFP on Monday, Oct 03.

They said women attended a session of the all-male council on Sunday, without giving details.

The debut came after the council's chairman said Saudi women could be allowed to "observe" meetings under the same rules which apply to universities in the Gulf state where the sexes are segregated.

Unlike their male counterparts, Saudi women are not issued identity cards and they are not allowed to drive. Their job prospects are limited mainly to the health and education sectors. (AFP)

Cambodian women facing rising tide of violence and impunity: NGOs

Cambodian women are living in fear of a rising tide of violence coupled with a failure by authorities to bring known killers to justice, according to a damning statement released Monday, Oct 03.

According to the NGO Forum, an umbrella grouping representing more than 80 foreign and local aid agencies, the fresh wave in violent crime against women includes "victims both rich and poor, unknown and famous, proving that no one is safe from violence." The statement also lists 13 cases of murder against women in the year where "clearly identified suspects go free despite the presence of witnesses." The gruesome cases include a sex worker beaten to death by a pimp, and the as-yet unsolved daylight murder of Cambodia's most famous screen icon, Piseth Pilika, which stunned the crime-ridden capital Phnom Penh in July.

(AFP)

Women in Asia are the last hired, first fired -ILO

Hundreds of thousands of people lost their jobs during the Asian economic crisis, and most of them were women, the International Labour Organisation said on Tuesday Oct 05.

"Women faced difficulties with employment conditions, and in retaining work (during the crisis) ... That women are the first to be fired and the last to be hired is still true to this day," said ILO regional director Mitsuko Horiuchi. In a report released on Tues-

day, the ILO said the rate of unemployment among women in Asia was greater than among men during the crisis in 1997 than in pre-crisis years.

Women were also paid less, it said.

Horiuchi, who authored the report, said: "The wage difference has not been justified or explained by educational background. Women are still facing discrimination."

The ILO blamed a lack of political will in enforce-

ing gender equality laws and men's ignorance for the discrimination.

"It's the lack of awareness on their part (men) that feeds through the lack of awareness in government circles," Wolf-Rudiger Bohning, ILO director for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, told reporters.

Philippine labour undersecretary Rosalinda Baldoz said women were the first to go when local companies cut their work force.