

EARLY FOOTFALLS IN THE GROVES OF ACADEME: WOMEN AT UNIVERSITY COLLEGE (1921-42)

Modern education is an area in which Sri Lankan women have made significant gains over time. This achievement was the culmination of a slow trek, spanning well over a century of British colonial rule and nearly a half century thereafter. The focus of this paper is on the closing phase of British rule, a period in which women created their own space in one of the earliest sanctums of higher learning, University College. Education as an agent of social change is often rated below politics and economics. Nevertheless, social analysts are agreed that the education of women has been largely instrumental in enhancing the physical quality of life in Sri Lanka. Despite its early class bias, the expansion of women's access to higher education has had far-reaching repercussions on the rest of society. To chart the history of women at University College (1921-42) is to look at how women responded to the challenge of new opportunities and became trail-blazers in an ever widening social phenomenon, which has to a large extent transcended both class and gender.

British colonial policy in Sri Lanka during the nineteenth century set in motion certain fundamental social changes, some of which gathered a momentum of their own. One such was female education. The need for English educated personnel to man the middle levels of the colonial administration and the belief that Westernisation and Christianisation could be effectively achieved by providing these junior administrators with educated Christian wives were significant factors behind the promotion of English teaching.¹ The local response to this scheme of thinking came from the Sri Lankan elite who had secured social prominence by the second half of the 19th century. Having benefited from colonial economic enterprise, they had the financial resources to send their sons and daughters to English schools which levied high fees, and on the completion of high school, some among them could even afford to send their children to Universities overseas e.g. Madras, Calcutta, or London. English education was yet another attribute of elite status and a passport to professional or administrative positions.

¹ Swarna Jayaweera, "Colonial Educational Policy and Gender Ideology under the British Colonial Administration in Sri Lanka." *Asian Panorama: Essays in Asian History, Past and Present*, ed. K M de Silva, et.al., Vikas, 1990, pp. 218-220.

In seeking out English education for their offspring, boys seem to have had favoured treatment, as parental aspirations were directed towards public office and professional careers for their sons and mere western social graces for their daughters.² Administrative positions were not available to women and the opening up of the professions was a slow process. Fewer girls than boys enrolled in the schools and in the early years very few of the former opted for anything beyond an elementary education. This situation changed with time and during the last two decades of the 19th century the enrolment of girls in English schools rose from 9.5 percent of total enrolment in 1880 to 26.8 percent in 1895 - a nearly three-fold increase.³ The demand for English education for girls and the growth of missionary schools appear to have complemented each other and preparing for Cambridge examinations kept the standard of English education available to boys and girls on an even keel.

The first Sri Lankan girl sat the Local Cambridge Senior Examination in 1885. By 1910 the number had risen to 44, 8.5 percent of the total.⁴ For the large majority of these girls it was the end of the road as far as education was concerned. The J.J.R. Bridge Report which provides some very interesting data in this regard states that of the 108 boys who passed the Local Cambridge Senior Examination in 1911, 17 took up medicine, 16 law, 27 teaching, 4 government service, 6 joined the church, 6 went to British universities and 12 entered a school to study for the Intermediate Examination. As for the girls, 17 were successful at the same examination. Of them a few are said to have taken up teaching and other professions but the majority stayed at home or were married.⁵ It is important to note that at least a few school-leavers among the girls were taking to the professions, a fact that was recognized by the Macleod Committee on Education which "was not thinking of a complete domestication of women and had recognized the extra-domestic roles of women."⁶

Responses to the questions raised by the Macleod Committee showed that

² *ibid.*, pp. 217-220.

³ *ibid.*, p. 215.

⁴ Report of J.J.R. Bridge on Secondary English Schools in Ceylon. *Sessional Paper XXI* of 1912, p. 14.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶ Swarna Jayaweera, 1990, *op.cit.*, p. 221.

those who advocated Cambridge examinations for girls were not strictly targeting them for tertiary education or careers. Even parents who wished their daughters secure Cambridge certificates mostly considered a high level of English socially desirable for marriage. Nevertheless, changes once initiated develop a natural momentum of their own and the aspirations of some, both parents and students, were kindled. Verona E Wirasekera, recalling her entry to Medical College in 1903 says that it was to fulfil her father's aspirations and not her own that she decided to become a doctor.⁷

The only institution of higher learning which admitted women at the turn of the 19th century was Medical College. Although founded in 1870, it took 22 years before the College could recruit its first female students, Misses E. Davidson and H. Keyt, in 1892. Even afterwards female enrolment at Medical College was painfully slow. Miss Alice de Boer, who entered Medical College in 1893, was the first woman to get her Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery.⁸ However, the turn out of women doctors was a mere trickle compared to that of male doctors. Women were not yet equal competitors in the field of higher education. The legal profession which was available to men from the early years of British rule was opened to women only in 1930 and Law College, founded in 1911, took in its first 2 women students in 1934.⁹ The government English Teachers' Training College was opened in 1903 and women were allowed admission in 1908.

The lack of opportunities for the education of girls beyond the formal school system is eloquently stated by the Head Mistress of Clifton School, Maligakanda, in her response to the Macleod Committee: "As it is there is a break in a girl's education after 17; if she is ambitious and poor she joins a correspondence college in England; if she is ambitious and rich, she has private tutors. If she is not ambitious she either leaves school or hangs on until she is made a teacher, and then, perhaps, after a year's experimenting, joins the

⁷ Miss Verona F Wirasekera, "The Medical College in My Time, 1903-1909," *The Colombo Medical School Centenary, 1876-1970*, ed. S R Kottegoda, Colombo, 1970, pp. 21-24.

⁸ Deloraine Brohier, *Dr Alice de Boer and Some Pioneer Burgher Women Doctors*, Social Scientists' Association, 1994, p. 25.

⁹ R K W Gunasekera, "Legal Education" *Education in Ceylon, A Centenary Volume*, Colombo, 1969, p. 862.

Training College."¹⁰

Not many avenues, in fact, were available to school-goers of either sex in terms of higher education during this period. However, girls were much more disadvantaged than boys. Some of the bigger schools were affiliated to the Universities of Calcutta or Madras for the First in Arts and BA examinations, a practice which was abandoned after 1911. These opportunities were mostly available to senior boys as very few girls' schools had facilities to train students beyond the entrance examinations of these universities. A few parents who had adequate financial resources sent their children to India for further qualifications,¹¹ but here again males would have predominated given the cultural norms of the time. That the education of sons had priority over the education of daughters bears repetition. It is noteworthy that of the girls who sought admission to Indian universities, the majority were from the Tamil majority schools of the northern province--and Calcutta and Madras were not their only choice. A few girls ventured out even as far afield as Singapore for medical degrees.¹² The numbers involved, however, were very few and far between.

For parents with high aspirations for their children, Indian degrees were only a second best compared to British qualifications. However, only the very affluent could send their sons to England to obtain these qualifications. It would seem that daughters were considered for a British education only on very rare occasions.¹³ In 1870 boys of the Colombo Academy were afforded the

¹⁰ *Sessional Paper XX* of 1912, p. 88.

¹¹ A.G. Fraser, "Madras or London," *The Ceylon National Review*, No. 1, January 1906, p. 36.

¹² *Chundukuli: Jubilee Reminiscences 1896-1946*, Jaffna, 1946, p. 350.

¹³ Responding to the Macleod Committee on Education (1911), Rev. G.J. Trimmer, Chairman and General Superintendent of the Wesleyan Mission in North Ceylon, recalls just one girl who qualified in Europe as a doctor. *Sessional Paper XX* of 1912, p. 190. Nallamma Williams Murugesu of Vembadi Girls' High School, Jaffna, first went to study medicine in Madras and later went to Edinburgh and Dublin for further qualifications. It is claimed that she was the first Tamil lady to take up medicine and practice as a doctor. *A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon, 1814-1964*, ed. W.J.T. Small, Wesley Press, Colombo, n.d.,

opportunity of competing for an annual British University scholarship, a privilege which was thrown open to other schools of equal standing in 1880. Girls however, do not figure in this scheme. 1907 saw the establishment of 2 scholarships instead of one, awarded on the results of the London Intermediate Examination in Arts and Science. These examinations were now held locally but very few girls' schools were equipped to train students for them. Between 1908 and 1910, 34 boys sat the Arts Intermediate Examination, the number of girls was only 2. They were both from St. Johns' Panadura. During this period 11 boys presented themselves for the parallel science examination for which there were no girls.¹⁴ What seems clear is that higher education for girls had neither institutional nor social support.

Although numbers were small, by the beginning of the 20th century the entry of women into higher education was a *fait accompli*. Women had begun to enter Medical College; London Intermediate classes for girls were started in a few schools; enrolment of Sri Lankan women in Indian universities was not uncommon and there were rare instances of parental support for daughters in western universities. It is important to recognise that these developments were the result of an internal social dynamic unaided by any clear commitment to the higher education of women in terms of government policy. In 1900 the Director of Public Instruction, arguing for the establishment of a local institute of higher education, states that parents want for their sons a degree without having to send them to England for it.¹⁵ Again the Macleod Committee on education echoes these same sentiments regarding the aspirations of parents for their sons.¹⁶ As for girls, the Committee emphasises the need to impart domestic skills in the higher forms, as the majority of parents opted for marriage for their daughters.

Despite the weightage given to the domestic roles of women, the Macleod Committee report displays a clear commitment to careers as a possible option. This was however circumscribed by the notion of appropriate careers of which teaching took pride of place. In 1912 there were 133 locally recruited women teachers in English schools and 74 foreigners, of whom only 4 had

pp. 442-443.

¹⁴ *Sessional Paper XXI* of 1912, p. 19.

¹⁵ *Admin. Report of the Director of Public Instruction*, 1900.

¹⁶ *Sessional Paper XIX* of 1911/12, p. 5.

university degrees.¹⁷ That the large majority of teachers, both men and women, were not qualified to teach was the view of the Macleod Committee as well as of J.J.R. Bridge, who reported on the English Secondary Schools in 1912. This is one of the strongest arguments used in both reports for an institution of higher learning (university college or university), one which would provide qualified teachers for the English schools. One notes here a commitment to university education that was gender blind - women were not out of the reckoning. A report by Sir Robert Chalmers, the Governor, in 1916 clearly enunciates the principle that women will be admitted to the future University College.¹⁸

The establishment of a university college in 1921 was a significant event in the history of female education in Sri Lanka. Many of the obstacles women had to contend with in the sphere of higher education began to crumble, albeit slowly. The concentration of training facilities in a single institution of higher learning eliminated gender disparities created by the unequal distribution of tertiary level teaching resources in boys and girls schools. Being more affordable than a British education more parents could spread out their incomes on the higher education of both sons and daughters. One cannot however disregard the fact that some parents would still have had to decide between sons and daughters in regard to a college education. In addition to tuition fees there were examination fees payable to London University and for students outside Colombo there was the additional burden of hostel fees. Also accommodation itself appears to have been a problem for outstation women students. The financial constraints which prevented the government from providing a hostel for women find repeated mention in the administration reports of the University College Principal prior to 1932. In this year the Representative Council of Missions set up a University Women's hostel and the Principal's observations in this regard brings out one more reason why women were poorly represented in University College during the first decade or so. He says "the opening of a hostel is bound to result in an increase of women students as parents from the outstations have been reluctant to send their daughters to Colombo without adequately supervised accommodation."¹⁹ University College did have a system of scholarships, exhibitions and studentships but these were not adequate to equalise educational

¹⁷ *Sessional Paper XXI* of 1912, p. 10.

¹⁸ *Sessional Paper XIV* of 1916, p. 2.

¹⁹ *Administration Report of the Principal, University College, 1931-32, Colombo, 1933, p. B11.*

opportunities either in terms of gender or class. With regard to studentships the women may have had an advantage although on the face of it they appear discriminatory. These studentships were awarded to 2 boys and 1 girl annually.²⁰ Considering the wide gender disparity in admissions the few women who sought admission may have had a better chance of obtaining a scholarship from among those reserved for women.

Additionally, University College was an answer to the cultural prejudice that some parents would have had against sending out young girls for a university education to distant lands. This is why Indian universities were favoured by Jaffna parents - proximity and cultural affinity being potent reasons.²¹ It would seem that University College opened out much wider vistas for women than had hitherto been available. Affiliated to the University of London, it trained men and women for arts and science degrees of that university.

Women had a fair amount of backlog to clear before they could make full use of the advantages University College had to offer them. When the institution opened on 24 January 1921, the number of students on roll was 115,²² of whom 4²³ were women, a mere 3.5%. This is not surprising, considering the lower enrolment of girls than boys in the schools and the poor retention of girls in the higher forms. In 1920 female students in English schools

²⁰ *Ceylon University College Prospectus, 1936-37*, Colombo, 1936, pp. 12-13.

²¹ The cultural factor perhaps explains why some Jaffna parents continued to send their daughters to Indian universities, particularly of the south, even after the establishment of University College and later the University of Ceylon. As late as 1946, apart from enrolment at the University of Ceylon and Medical College, girls from Chundukuli Girls' College, Jaffna, were studying at Women's' Christian College, Madras; Queen Mary's College, Madras; Holy Cross College, Trichinopoly; Medical College, Vellore; Adayar, Madras; Annamalai University and Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow. *Chundukuli Jubilee Reminiscences 1896-1946*, Jaffna, 1946, pp. 350-352.

²² *Ceylon University College Prospectus, 1925-26*, Colombo, 1925, p. 4.

²³ They were Misses P Sornacanthu, Laurel Tambimuttu, Dorothy Anghie and Ernestine de Silva.

were about 22% of the total. As for the Cambridge Senior and London Matriculation forms gender disparities were even greater. Socio-cultural attitudes did not provide the same incentives to both girls and boys to remain in the higher forms.

Students seeking admission to the full course at University College were expected to have the London Matriculation or to have gained exemption from it, having satisfied certain conditions at the Cambridge Senior Examination.²⁴ Most higher level English schools trained students for the Cambridge Senior and only very few of them sent up students for the London Matriculation, less so the girls schools. Once the admissions policy of University College was spelt out, there was some concern that the schools were not producing a sufficient number of matriculated students. The administration reports of the Director of Education for both 1919 and 1920 express the hope that "when the University College is opened, more candidates will take the London Matriculation, which is accepted as a qualifying test for admission to the University College." This was a more demanding test than the Cambridge Senior and very few girls schools had a Matriculation class. For instance, in 1910 St John's Panadura was the only girls school which sent up candidates for the London Matriculation, whereas about 18 schools sent girls for the Cambridge Senior.²⁵ With this constraint women at University College had a modest beginning in terms of numbers. The expansion that followed was slow but steady. In October 1921 pre-medical students were admitted to University College. This, however, did not result in any increase of the proportion of women in the student community. There was, in fact, a very definite gender bias in science education in the schools so that in the early years the number of women opting for medical and science degrees was very much smaller than those reading for arts degrees. During the first five years female enrolment at University College grew very slowly. By July 1926 there were 15 women on the roll, the number having increased from 3.5 percent in 1921 to 4.8 percent of the total.²⁶

Further progress is recorded during the next five years. There was some increase in the number of women following the pre-medical course. Medical

²⁴ *Ceylon Administration Reports, 1921*, Report of the Acting Director of Education, p. A2.

²⁵ *Sessional Paper XX* of 1912 appendix J, p. 281.

²⁶ *Ceylon University College Prospectus, 1927-28*, Colombo, 1927, p. 5.

training was much more expensive than any other discipline,²⁷ and the linkage between financial constraints and female education has already been noted. In 1927 Medical College began to award 3 annual bursaries to cover the cost of pre-medical training of deserving students whose parents could not afford the required fee. There was a certain element of affirmative action in this scheme, for one of the 3 bursaries was reserved for women. The bursary scheme seems to have provided an incentive for more students to seek admission to a medical career, an observation made by the Acting Principal of University College in 1929.²⁸ The Registrar of the Ceylon Medical College makes the further observation that "the most noteworthy feature of the year (1928-29) is the increased entry, especially of women students."²⁹ However, gender disparities remained relatively more acute at Medical College. More important than external factors was an internal dynamic created within the system itself which began to show results in female enrolment during the second five year period of the history of University College. In fact numbers slightly more than doubled, the figures on record at July 1931 being 33 women out of a total of 355 students.³⁰ Women were now 9.3 percent of the total, a significant jump from 4.8 percent in 1926. University College in its second and last decade (1931-41) witnessed only a modest growth in female enrolment. By July 1938 women had reached the 10 percent mark, with 66 out of 664 students being female.³¹ In its last academic year, 1941-42, 69 out of 645 or 10.7 percent of the students were women. However, when the University of Ceylon came into existence in July 1942, women were back to 10 percent, 91 out of a total enrolment of 904. The reason for this drop was the amalgamation of Medical College as an integral part of the University. As noted already, gender disparities were much more marked among medical students. At this point in time only about 7 percent of the students at Medical College were women (19 out of 258), whereas among the

²⁷ *Report of the University Commission: Ceylon Sessional Papers, 1929*, Appendix IV.

²⁸ *Ceylon University College Prospectus, 1928-29*, Colombo, 1928, p. 16.

²⁹ *Administration Report of the Acting Principal, University College, 1928-29*, Colombo, 1930, p. C50.

³⁰ *Ceylon University College Prospectus, 1932-33*, Colombo, 1932, p. 5.

³¹ *Ceylon University College Prospectus, 1939-40*, Colombo, 1939, p. 5.

rest women constituted 11 percent of the total (72 out of 646).³²

Reviewing the overall numerical data of women at University College, the increase was from 3.5 percent in 1921 to 10.7 in 1942. This may not appear to be a spectacular achievement for a period of 21 years. However, the small but increasing number of women leaving the portals of University College formed a significant nucleus of educated women who acted as change agents in society.

Despite the unequal competition they had to face in gaining admission to University College, these pioneering women were off to a creditable start when Miss P Sornacanthu distinguished herself by winning one of ten awards made to new entrants in January 1921.³³ Between 1921 and 1939 a total of 116 scholarships and 126 exhibitions were awarded to students at the beginning of their College careers. Of them 7 scholarships (i.e. 6%) and 13 exhibitions (i.e. 10.3%) were won by women, the overall percentage being 8.26 of the total. This was a fair achievement considering the fact that female enrolment during this period ranged from only 3.5% in 1921 to 10% in 1938.³⁴

Once in College, women did not have the same incentives to be high achievers. Whatever their academic record was, the most they could hope for was a teaching job and at best a principalship of a school. Even with a degree, many were satisfied with 'enlightened motherhood.' Prestigious positions in the public service were only for men. Women, therefore, were not as motivated as the men to concentrate on examination performance. The observations of Dr. K. Kanapathipillai, Head of the Department of Tamil, are quite illuminating in this regard. In his report for the year 1936/37, he deplores the careerist mentality of students. In his opinion they study only to pass examinations and not for the sake of knowledge, but adds "... the women students are less utilitarian in their studies than the men. They are in a position to appreciate a study for its own sake." This is not surprising because high academic achievement did not bring the kind of rewards which were in store for the men. Women were not in the rat race for career positions and perhaps had the time to relax and appreciate the

³² *University of Ceylon - First Annual Report of the Council for 1942*, pp. 1-2.

³³ 5 arts and 5 science scholarships were awarded for proficiency in single subjects at a special scholarship examination. Miss Sornacanthu's award was for geography.

³⁴ *University College Prospectus, 1939-40*, Colombo, 1939, p. 5.

cultural value of subjects like Tamil, as stated by Dr Kanapathipillai.³⁵ Many of the internal prizes, medals etc. went to the men. Nevertheless we do find that between 1929 and 1939 the Pestonji Dhinshawji Khan gold medal for Economics was won by a woman 3 out of 8 times and between 1926 and 1938 the Pettah Library Prize for English went to a woman on 2 occasions.³⁶ University scholarships which enabled students to proceed to English universities, awarded to the best honours candidates completing the BA/BSc degrees, also remained somewhat elusive to women. Although the award of London degrees to University College women began in 1925, the first First Class is recorded in 1935. This distinction goes to Evelyn Hester La Brooy, an English Honours graduate, who was awarded a special scholarship to study at Oxford University. She did not qualify for the regular university scholarship, being over the age limit for it by a few months.³⁷ The first woman to win a regular government scholarship for study abroad was Phyllis Treherne Dickman (later Mrs Dissanayake). She graduated with a second class upper division in history in 1938.³⁸

University College began to present students for the London BA and BSc examinations from the very first year of its existence. These early graduates would have come in with intermediate qualifications. None of the women seem to have had this advantage and for the first time two women graduated in 1925. They were Dorothy Anghie, who secured a BA in arts and Laurel Tambimuttu (later Casinader) who was awarded a BSc in economics. This event was obviously considered a milestone in the history of University College for special note is taken of it in the official reports of both 1926 and 1927,³⁹ underscoring

³⁵ *Administration Report of the Principal, University College for 1936/37*, Colombo, 1938, p. B6.

³⁶ *Ceylon University College Prospectus, 1939-40*, Colombo, 1939, pp. 19-20.

³⁷ *Administration Report of the Principal, University College for 1934-35*, Colombo, 1936, pp. B4 & B14.

³⁸ *Ceylon University College Prospectus, 1939-40*, Colombo, 1939, pp. 74-75.

³⁹ *Ceylon University College Prospectus, 1926-27*, p. 5 and *1927-28*, p. 5, Colombo, 1926 and 1927.

the paucity of women in higher education. The number of women who secured degrees during the life time of University College was not very large. The total hardly exceeded five in any given year. Between 1921 and 1938, 454 persons from the institution had got London University degrees. Of them 38 or 8.37 percent were women.⁴⁰ This seems proportionate to the intake of women during this period. It is important to note that some students, both men and women, left after the Intermediate Examination and a few failed to graduate. Marriage was among the reasons why women dropped out mid-stream. Laurel Casinader (nee Tambimuttu), one of the first women to enter University College, recalls that "of the first 3 or 4 one died and one left to be married."⁴¹ In view of these circumstances 8.37 percent of the total for women graduates seems a fair tally, especially in view of the fact that women were under 4 percent of the total intake in 1921 and rose to 10 percent only in 1938.

The high cost of English education made inevitable an upper class bias among women seeking degrees. Therefore employment and economic gain were not the main objectives of the large majority of these pioneering women. Even as late as 1948, Sir Ivor Jennings, the then Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ceylon, remarks, "the majority of women graduates do not enter the professions but get married and raise families. This is not a waste because an educated woman can do so much more for her children as a mother."⁴² The concept of educated motherhood which would bring forth great sons is characteristic of the early phase of female education in all cultures.⁴³ However, not everyone sought self-expression in the domestic sphere. Many were absorbed by the teaching profession, which was in dire need of qualified personnel. Colombo schools were the biggest beneficiaries in this regard but a few of the women graduates did fan out to places such as Moratuwa, Kandy, Galle and Matara,

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 1939-40, Colombo, 1939, p. 5.

⁴¹ Extract from the unpublished memoirs of Laurel Casinader (nee Tambimuttu). This was made available to the writer through the kind courtesy of her daughter, Dr. Suvendrni Jazeel nee Casinader).

⁴² Ivor Jennings, *Students' Guide to University Education*, Colombo: University of Ceylon Press, 1948, p. 23.

⁴³ Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment, an American Perspective," *American Quarterly*, 28, No. 2, 1976.

perhaps their home stations.⁴⁴

During the period under review almost all girls' English schools were administered by principals brought over from the west. Sujatha Nimalasuriya, a 1930 history honours graduate, became one of the first 'outsiders' to join this exclusive club of English women when she was appointed principal of Musaeus College, Colombo in 1931.⁴⁵ By 1934 Miss Neri Anandam Naekem, a 1927 graduate, became vice-principal of Ananda Balika, Colombo.⁴⁶ With the turn over of local graduates, the recruitment of school principals from overseas came to an end and by the time the English principals were due to retire, Sri Lankan women graduates, with teaching experience, were available to take their place. One needs to add that not all those pioneering women who were ready to take up leadership positions in female education were University College graduates. A very few had qualified in British or American universities. A small number sat for the London BA independently and some, especially the women of Jaffna, had obtained their degrees from Indian universities, mostly Madras. The fact that most career-minded women graduates had few other options than teaching had a salutary effect on the progress of female education during this period.

The only government department which accommodated a woman at this time was the Department of Income Tax. Mildred Felicianus Constance Weerasooriya (later Mrs Ekanayake), who obtained a BSc Economics degree, was recruited as an Assistant Assessor in 1932, not very long after graduation. This indeed was a rare instance, after which the Income Tax Department did not

⁴⁴ Girls' High School, Kandy; St. Claires, Wellawatte; Southlands College, Galle; Methodist College, Colombo; Musaeus College, Colombo; Ladies' College, Colombo; St. Paul's Girls' High School, Colombo; Presbyterian Girls' School, Dehiwela; St. Paul's Girls' School, Bambalapitiya; Moratuwa Convent; Princess of Wales, Moratuwa; Bishop's College, Colombo; Ananda Balika, Colombo and St. Thomas' School, Matara were among the early beneficiaries in terms of graduate teachers from University College. (*Ceylon University College Prospectus, 1928-29*, Colombo, 1928, pp. 47-48; 1931-32, Colombo, 1931, pp. 45-50; 1932-33, Colombo, 1932, pp. 43-48; 1934-35, Colombo, 1934, pp. 47-51; 1935-36, Colombo, 1935, pp. 48-57; and 1936-37, Colombo, 1936, pp. 52-61)

⁴⁵ *University College Prospectus, 1931-32*, Colombo, 1931, p. 50.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 1934-35, Colombo 1934, p. 47.

recruit women for many years to come. Economics was new and unknown to the secondary school curriculum and only the more adventurous among the women attempted it initially. Laurel Casinader (nee Tambimuttu), the first woman to specialize in economics says "I was very keen on continuing my studies and at that time a young Oxford graduate, Sunderalingam, joined the newly inaugurated University College affiliated to the London University and he persuaded my father to let me read economics which was the coming science."⁴⁷ But with rare exceptions as in the case of Constance Weerasooriya, this "coming science" was not very useful to university women whose professional options were mostly confined to teaching.

English, Latin and Western History were the hot favourites of most female undergraduates in those early years. A fourth subject which was required at Intermediate level was chosen from among Geography, Economics, Mathematics and British Constitution. Women who followed honours courses opted mostly for English or Western History. The bias towards English, Latin and Western History reflects the cultural ethos of that segment of society from which the early women undergraduates were drawn as well as their training in Christian denominational schools staffed by English principals and sometimes even English teachers. These subjects were also symbols of class and therefore the natural choice of those who saw the link between social status and western culture.

It took a while for women to seek degrees in 'Orientalia.' G.P. Malalasekera, Head of the Department of Sanskrit, Pali and Sinhalese, remarks in his report for 1931-32, "I particularly welcome the increasing number of women students in our Department, a very healthy sign of the growth of interest in Orientalia in this country. I have great hopes that in the renaissance of Sinhalese culture which is inevitable, the women will play a very important part."⁴⁸ This new awakening among women in oriental subjects is also noted by the Head of the Department of Tamil, Rev. F Kingsbury. He considered it important to mention in his report for 1930-31 that "for the first time in the history of the College, one woman student, Soundaramma Suppramaniam, passed the Intermediate Examination, offering Tamil as one of the four subjects

⁴⁷ Laurel Casinader, Unpublished Memoirs, *op.cit.*

⁴⁸ *Administration Report of the Principal, University College, 1931-32, Colombo, 1933, p. B5.*

required."⁴⁹ When she graduated, Rev. Kingsbury remarks once again "for the first time in the history of the Tamil Department in the University College and probably for the first time in the history of the University of London, a woman student passed the BA General Degree Examination, offering Tamil as one of the subjects."⁵⁰ Miss Suppramaniam scored first class marks in Tamil and was offered the Arunachalam scholarship to proceed to Annamalai University for a BA honours course in Tamil. She however declined the award. In 1936 a second woman, Miss T Apputhurai, got her BA London with Tamil as a subject. This again Rev. Kingsbury considered was an event worth recording in his administrative report for that year.⁵¹ In 1934 Regina de Silva became the first woman to specialize in Oriental languages or Indo-Aryan.

Very slowly a new genre of students rooted in the traditional culture of the country were taking their place in the student community. Trail blazers in this regard were people like E.W. Adikaram and K. Kanapathipillai.⁵² Women followed close on their heels. Nationalist spokesmen like G.P. Malalasekera considered the entry of women into Oriental disciplines as symbolic of a future cultural revival. The perception that women are the custodians of culture often weighs heavily on them. Nevertheless, it is significant that by the 1930s a group of men and women had begun to venture off the beaten track which had favoured western cultural values. Later on many of them gave intellectual leadership to the nationalist revival in the country. The women who mostly took to teaching were able to make an impact in the schools, resulting in a wider interest in Oriental subjects.

Science was an area of study in which women took a back seat. This reflected the inadequate facilities in girls' schools for science instruction, a fact to which Sir Ivor Jennings draws attention even in 1942.⁵³ Girls were encouraged to do home science and not pure science. It was natural that this

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 1930-31, Colombo, 1932, p. B7.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 1931-32, Colombo, 1933, p. B5.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 1935-36, Colombo, 1937, p. B7.

⁵² *Ceylon University College Prospectus, 1930-31*, Colombo, 1930, p. 51 and 1931-32, Colombo, 1931, pp. 48-49.

⁵³ Ivor Jennings, *Students' Guide to University Education*, University of Ceylon Press Board, 1948, p. 24.

gender bias in school education should extend to the enrolment pattern at University College as well. A science degree was awarded to a woman for the first time only in 1930. Violet Ponnamma Jayasothi Thamotheram, who has this distinction, read mathematics and physics for her degree.⁵⁴ The turn over of women science graduates was very small, producing a vicious circle which inhibited the expansion of science education in girls' schools. This together with the cultural prejudice against pure science for girls and its lower utilitarian value for them in terms of employment, allowed gender disparities in science education to continue for a long time. One needs however to note that the medical profession was available to women with an inclination for bio-science and some did opt for it, especially in view of the fact that medicine was considered a gender appropriate job for females. However, as has been already noted, gender disparities at Medical College were very pronounced both due to financial reasons and the lack of training facilities at school level.

In addition to the predominance of men in the student community, the administrative and academic staff were almost exclusively male. The warden of the women's hostel was naturally a female and there was an occasional visiting lecturer who was a woman. It is noteworthy that successive wardens of the women's hostel were persons with very high academic credentials. They would have provided some leadership to the few women who succeeded in getting hostel accommodation. The first to be appointed warden of "Cruden" or the women's hostel was Mrs Soma Samarasinghe who had graduated with second class honours in the Oriental Languages Tripos and the English Tripos at Cambridge University. She was later to join the staff of Women's Christian College, Madras,⁵⁵ and eventually became Principal of Hillwood College, Kandy, where she counted a long period of distinguished and devoted service. In July 1933, Mrs Samarasinghe left to join her husband in Calcutta and she was succeeded by Enid Salgadoe⁵⁶ who held the post of warden for two years. The next warden was Miss Helen Rutnam, a lady with a distinguished academic record. She had graduated with first class honours from the University of Toronto, reading English and French and was awarded two gold medals.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *Ceylon University College Prospectus, 1931-32*, Colombo, 1931, p. 49.

⁵⁵ *Administration Report of the Principal, University College, 1931-32*, Colombo, 1933, p. B11.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 1932-33, Colombo, 1934, p. B13.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 1934-35, Colombo, 1936, p. B12.

Perhaps it was this record which won her the rare privilege of being a visiting lecturer in English at University College,⁵⁸ for women do not seem to have found a place in this exclusive club very easily. Until the appointment of Miss Kanmalar Mathiaperanam in 1941 as lecturer in logic and ethics and Head of the Department of Philosophy,⁵⁹ no women were appointed to the regular academic staff. Mrs Rene Perera (nee Fernando) a 1932 English honours graduate also served as a visiting lecturer at University College for some time.⁶⁰ But Miss Mathiaperanam's was a distinctive first. An old girl of Uduvil College, Jaffna, she had an MA from Madras University where she not only secured a first class at the examination but also the first place in the Madras Presidency, a laudable achievement indeed. Before she joined University College she was Professor of Philosophy at Kinnaird College, Lahore.⁶¹

Miss Mathiaperanam's appointment was towards the end of the life-span of University College. Her contribution to the higher education of women has to be assessed in the context of the University of Ceylon and of Peradeniya where she was a towering personality. But as far as University College is concerned it would be correct to say that almost throughout, except for the occasional visiting lecturer and the hostel warden, women students functioned in a largely male environment. In this atmosphere traditions were created by a curious amalgam of both the acceptance and rejection of traditional social norms, a contradictory situation in which the juniors mostly emulated the seniors before them. Erica La Brooy (nee Christofellsz) says precisely this in a personal communication, "Regina de Silva, head girl of the hostel and Dharambhai Nilgiriya (both senior students) were my mentors."⁶²

When University College was established, an advisory academic committee of 26 members of university teachers and other eminent persons was

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 1936-37, Colombo, 1938, p. B4.

⁵⁹ *Ceylon University College Magazine*, Vol, XIV, No. 6, 1941-42, pp. 47-48.

⁶⁰ Lorna Devaraja, ed. *Growth and Development of the Sri Lanka Federation of University Women, 1941-1991*, Colombo, 1991, p. 137.

⁶¹ *Uduvil 1911-1936*, Ceylon Mission Press, Tellippalai, Ceylon (n.d.), pp. 182 & 197.

⁶² Erica La Brooy, personal communication dated 30.01.1994.

appointed. As women formed part of the student population, a token appointment was made to the academic committee, the appointee being Mrs W.T. Southern, the Commissioner of the Girl Guides Association. According to the first two reports of the Principal, University College (1921-22 and 1922-23), the academic committee was asked to consult Mrs Southern on matters relating to courses and regulations for women students. It is on record that she arranged to meet with a group of women interested in education to discuss the problems of female students at University College. Details of these deliberations are not available. Soon after, Miss G.F. Opie, Principal of Ladies' College, Colombo, was appointed to serve on the committee. Representing the headmistresses of girls' schools, she continued to be the one woman on the committee right through the days of University College and when the University of Ceylon was founded in 1942, she took her place, this time with a few other women, as a member of the University Court. Not being members of the academic staff, neither Mrs. Southern nor Miss Opie would have had much contact with students and there is no record of their contribution to women's education at University College, although Miss Opie's services as Principal of Ladies' College are well known.

For the early women undergraduates, functioning in a climate dominated by male administrators, teachers and students, interaction with these men was perhaps the most significant influence on the development of their personalities. Therefore it is important to understand the gender sensibilities of the men at University College and their attitude to this emerging class of educated women. For the latter, coming from sheltered homes and girls' schools, it was a severe testing period which they weathered with a great deal of success. Although the documented reactions of the women themselves are sometimes ambiguous, by and large they seem to have found their own space in the academic, social and cultural life of the community at University College which, according to Erica La Brooy, gave them "a good foundation for life."⁶³

Presiding over the destinies of University College for the most part of its lifespan (1921-39) was Mr. R. Marrs, the Principal, whose annual reports appear to suggest that his major concern was the education and training of the men in his care. The students are always referred to as the "boys." For instance in 1933/34 he speaks of the falling off of the quality of the "boys" who attempt the Open Scholarship Examination and the need to attract more mature "boys" to University College. Either the standard of the girls who entered was no concern of the Principal or "boys" was a gender neutral term for him. However,

⁶³ *ibid.*

one is not entirely convinced of this. Writing to the Reunion Supplement of the University College Magazine in 1934, he says "It is to be anticipated that a large proportion of those men who have been prominent as speakers in our debates at this College will ultimately take leading places in the public life of the country." In the same magazine the secretary of the Union Society waxed eloquent regarding the debating skills of the women, but Mr. Marris is content to single out the men. In this instance we cannot argue that 'men' was used as a gender neutral term, for women as a rule were not associated with "the public life of the country." With the University College male population consistently reaching the over 90 percent mark, Mr. Marris did not perhaps perceive the women as a significant element in the higher education structure.

Women, however, did come into his ken when one of them gained some special distinction or when the Principal was called upon to address a pressing need such as a ladies' common room or a women's hostel. The latter took 11 years to become a reality, although from 1929/30, rising numbers made him draw repeated attention to the need for it. Quite ironically Mr. Marris found himself taking note of women in his very first administration report. Commenting on the unfortunate death of Mr. E.B. Fernando, the Treasurer of the student society, he says "his place as Treasurer has been ably filled by Miss E. de Silva."⁶⁴ There can be few institutions of university status, other than those founded for women only, in which a lady student occupies a position of this nature. Our lady students are small in number, but there seem after this to be few rights left for them to claim."⁶⁵ He seems suitably impressed by the fact that a woman had attained to this position despite their poor numerical strength and also that they were creating their own niche in student government. In his second report, Mr. Marris says "the Treasurer is still a lady student, and everyone will be gratified to see the ladies establish a tradition with regard to this post."⁶⁶ For the Principal the treasurership of the student society appears to have been the ultimate in women's rights. What one misses here is the hope that women might attain to greater heights in the future. As far as Mr. Marris was concerned, his concerns were centered on the men. For sometime after this the treasurer continued to be a woman but it had become too commonplace for

⁶⁴ Ernestine de Silva died before graduation on 14th August 1925 (*The Ceylon University College Magazine*, Vol. I, No. 2, 1925, p. 38).

⁶⁵ *Administration Report of the Principal, University College, Oct. 1921-Sept. 1922*, Colombo, 1923, p. B6.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 1922-23, Colombo, 1924, p B9.

special comment. Judging from the records, it could be safely said that Mr. Marris was no visionary with regard to the higher education of women. Ivor Jennings, who succeeded Mr. Marris as Principal in the last year of University College, had a more positive attitude to female education. In his students' guide to university education published in 1948, he argues strongly for gender equality in higher education. But the Jenningsian era belongs not to University College but to the University of Ceylon which succeeded it in 1942.

Although there does not seem to have been much positive direction from the top, women seem to have been quite fortunate with their male teachers at University College. The pleasure with which Dr. G.P. Malalasekera welcomed the growing interest of women in Oriental languages and the complimentary words of Dr. K. Kanapathipillai regarding women reading Tamil have been referred to already. No doubt they were both a source of great encouragement to the women. Dr. B.B. Das Gupta of the Economics Department writes in lighter vein regarding the women students of his time. He compliments them on their good figures as well as their intelligence. The women he says belong to two classes, "those who are intelligent and those who are still more intelligent."⁶⁷ It would seem that Dr. Das Gupta did not consider the women second class citizens. At least two lecturers seem to have taken a caring attitude towards the women undergraduates." J.L.C. Rodrigo (lecturer in Classics) kept a sharp eye on the C.M.S. and Panadura girls" writes Erica La Brooy "and Professor Gulasekeram (lecturer in Mathematics) on those from the north." Speaking of the lecturers of the History Department she says "Professor Pakeman, Justin La Brooy (later her husband) and G.C. Mendis were very reliable and Mr. De was great fun."⁶⁸ According to her, lecturers like C.W. Amerasinghe, Professor Cooray and Justin La Brooy encouraged the women to take an interest in some of the more scholarly societies like the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. This interest, especially on the part of the younger lecturers, appears to have been more than academic, judging from the happy marriages of lecturers like C.W. Amerasinghe, Justin La Brooy and Doric de Souza to their colleagues, to mention only three.

Romance was even more in the air among men and women students. Always under 10 percent of the total, the women were very much in demand and judging from reports in the College magazine their participation in student

⁶⁷ *The Ceylon University College Magazine*, Vol, IV, No. 1, Feb. 1929, p. 5.

⁶⁸ Erica La Brooy, *op.cit.*

activities was greatly sought after. The more adventurous among the men tried to forge close links with the women of their choice, often flouting social conventions of the traditional middle class. "Pillaring" in the corridors was a common practice among College couples, according to Tissa Chandrasoma.⁶⁹ Some of these liaisons became more permanent like his own association with Gerty Fonseka, but not everyone was as fortunate. Some of these romantic men broke into poetry. A large number of "love lyrics [were] addressed to alluring females" and submitted to the College magazine. Some of these contributions, one editor of the College magazine says, he had to discard.⁷⁰ The tennis courts were a happy meeting ground even though they were not very skilled in the game. Erica La Brooy writes, "...in tennis we were in great demand - serve and stand back, I'll take the shots"⁷¹ was the attitude of the men. In 1932, according to an "observer" there were 30 female students in College, "tennis enthusiasts to a woman." Men clamour to be their partners and cutting 3 o'clock lectures for practice games seems to have been commonplace.⁷² For these students, University College was their first experience in co-education. It broke down existing gender barriers and provided the women with new freedoms, although within limits. In the women's hostel, for instance, the 6 p.m. curfew was strictly enforced and male escorts after this hour had to have prior parental approval.⁷³ Nevertheless these women were on the threshold of a process of change where existing norms and values were beginning to be challenged.

According to the available evidence, the Secretaries and Presidents of Student Societies complained frequently of the lack of participation of their female colleagues in student activities, but whether College men were anxious that women should participate equally is a moot point. Making an after dinner speech in 1926, G.C. Mendis, who had already graduated by this time, observed that what students of his generation had left undone was extending equal rights

⁶⁹ Tissa Chandrasoma, Personal interview - 12.05.1994.

⁷⁰ *The Ceylon University College Magazine*, October 1929, p. 2.

⁷¹ Erica La Brooy, *op.cit.*

⁷² *The Ceylon University College Magazine*, Vol, VII, No. 2, April 1932, pp. 10-11.

⁷³ Erica La Brooy, *op.cit.*

to women.⁷⁴ In these early years the passive role of women at Union meetings drew sarcastic comments. According to one writer they were only a distraction⁷⁵ and in 1930 the Secretary of the Union Society reports that the women only cast sweet looks at the men they favour but do not speak.⁷⁶ A female undergraduate writing under the pseudonym 'Sylvia Pankhurst'⁷⁷ confirms the fact that women were not very articulate during this time. She says, "it is refreshing to note that young ladies of our College retain that shy and retiring disposition which should be the characteristic of our sex, yet I think that the occasional upliftment of a woman's voice would relieve the monotony of the men's growling. But as at present we lack the confidence to speak in public, there is no way in which we can voice our sentiments except through the pages of your magazine."⁷⁸ She is critical of the men shuffling their feet when the women enter class-rooms but in a rejoinder to her, a male colleague states that the shuffling happens only because the women walk in after the lecturer and it is this "walking in ceremony" which brings on the shuffling.⁷⁹ Obviously the women did not feel comfortable in the lecture room, with the men. It is not surprising that they shied away from speaking to mixed audiences.

One would have thought that women were off to a good start when Ernestine de Silva became Treasurer of the main student assembly in 1922. Women held on to this position for a few more years but by about 1931 the situation changed and women began to be represented in the Union by a single 'Lady Committee Member,' a token measure which later spread to associations like the Sinhalese and Tamil Societies as well. It is somewhat ironical that at a time when women had gained equal political rights with men in the wider society, there should have been a reversal of their position in Union representation. Perhaps this situation was created by the very climate of competitive politics emanating from universal adult franchise introduced by the Donoughmore Commission. These reforms did not leave the students unaffected

⁷⁴ *The Ceylon University College Magazine*, Vol, I, No. 3, 1926, p. 4.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, April 1930, p. 46.

⁷⁷ A suffragette who fought for womens' rights.

⁷⁸ *The Ceylon University College Magazine*, April 1930, p. 25.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, Vol. VI, No. 1, October 1930, p. 32ff.

and student elections began to be competitive. Women, who were in a small minority, seem to have been reluctant to enter the fray. The post of 'Lady Committee Member' was always uncontested except once in 1936 when two women competed for it. This was hailed as an event of great significance. The Secretary of the Union Society observed that it was "encouraging evidence of the growing political consciousness of the woman undergraduate and of her determination to assert her claims openly and fearlessly.⁸⁰ But competing for 'Lady Committee Member' was a far cry from equal competition in student government. The lack of initiative on the part of women did meet with some severe criticism. In the opinion of one writer "in these days of equality, fraternity, democracy and even socialism, the ladies should face elections with the rest."⁸¹ Two ladies did just that in the following year (1940). The General Secretary of the Union Society writes: "...for the first time in the history of the Union, ladies have been found fully qualified for election to any post in the Society. Two of them braved the storm at the polls this year. This is very encouraging evidence of the growing political consciousness of the lady undergraduate."⁸² Unfortunately neither of the women won!

It is perhaps the unequal competition which women had to face that prompted women to form their own association in 1941. Ivor Jennings who was invited for the inaugural meeting considered it a progressive move but not so the men who showed great antagonism. The editor of the Union Magazine is on record disagreeing with Jennings that the women were progressive for "not one of them has contributed an article either to this magazine or the last." He pours a great deal of scorn and invective on the women for attempting to form their own Union. He says, "finding themselves inferior to the men in the standard of debate, the women have decided to form a Union of their own as a training ground for the members before they enter the wider arena of the University Union."⁸³ Women's skills in debate have been richly documented, a subject to which we will return to later in this paper. A comment by the General Secretary of the Union Society in December 1939 would suffice at this point. "As for the ladies, one wonders why in days when women are fighting for equal

⁸⁰ *The Ceylon University College Magazine*, Vol. XII, No. 1, October 1936, p. 46.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, Vol. 13, No. 2, July 1938-39, p. 11.

⁸² *ibid.*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, June 1940, p. 29.

⁸³ *ibid.*, Vol. XIV, No. 5, December 1941, p. 9.

rights with men, they are yet content in the Union Society to yield the first place to the men, they never ask questions at Union meetings or join in the discussion when debates are open to the House, and why they require so much persuasion before they consent to speak in debates. But it must be admitted that whenever they did speak, they always acquitted themselves creditably and proved that they possess a dormant talent that can easily produce the Sarojini Naidus and the Chattopadyayas of Ceylon."⁸⁴ That they were inferior to the men in debate was unfair criticism to shame the women so that they would not organise on their own. In this the men seem to have been successful for we do not hear of the Women's Union anymore.

The attempt to Unionise as a separate women's group reflects the discomfort they felt in a mixed Union. Vastly outnumbered in the student population, perhaps even more so at Union meetings and given the social norms that women should be 'shy and retiring' and not be in the public gaze, the female undergraduates were obviously looking for a more congenial and friendly forum to express themselves and to realize their inner aspirations. That women were reluctant to speak from the floor at debates and discussions⁸⁵ and that sometimes it was an arduous task to persuade them to participate as formal speakers at debates⁸⁶ is a perennial complaint of Union Secretaries. Comments such as "they should not remain in ivory towers like their Victorian grandmothers"⁸⁷ and it is typical of the mid-Victorian mentality of the Ceylonese undergraduate, that while her sisters in other universities are fighting hard for enfranchisement, she, after being granted it, should remain apathetic"⁸⁸ are not infrequent. But when they did speak, which was often, women made a

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, Vol. XIV, No. 1, December 1939, pp. 20-21.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, April 1930; Vol. VII, No. 2, April 1932, p. 3; Vol. XII, No. 3, April 1938, pp. 12-13; Vol. XIV, No. 1, December 1939, p. 20; Vol. XIV, No. 3, November 1940, p. 46; Vol. XIV, No. 4, September 1941, p. 30; Vol. XIV, No. 5, December 1941, p. 41; Vol. XIV, No. 6, March 1942, pp. 30-31.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, Vol XIII, No. 1, December 1938, p. 11, Vol, XIV, No. 1, December 1939; Vol XIV, No. 3, November 1940, p. 29.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, Vol. XII, No. 3, April 1938, p. 76.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, December 1938, p. 11.

positive contribution, and not everyone had to be so 'arduously persuaded.'⁸⁹

It is from the beginning of the 1930s that one detects the increasing involvement of women in the activities of the Union Society and also of other cultural associations where they played significant roles. This phenomenon coincided with the increased associations where they played significant roles. This phenomenon coincided with the increased enrolment of women at University College by 1931, which may partly account for a new feeling of courage. One has also to remember that at this point in time women were taking significant strides in the wider society. Equal voting rights with men, admission to the legal profession and the election of a woman (Adeline Molamure) to the State Council were important milestones reached during the 1930-31 period. This was also a time when the educated youth were gripped by the prevailing intellectual and political ferment in the country created by the agitation for independence from British rule, the demand for social reform, the spread of Marxist ideology and anti-imperialist campaigns like the Suriya Mal movement. These issues were widely discussed at Union meetings and judging from the subjects debated in the Union Society, the Sinhalese Society and the Tamil Society, even the women's issue seems to have been high on the undergraduate agenda. The men no doubt were more vocal. In fact Tissa Chandrasoma (1932-35) remembers the students waving black flags during the visit of a member of the British royal family.⁹⁰ The women were not completely silent. Some debated current issues at meetings of undergraduate associations, although they most often seconded the men. Others made their views known through the College magazine and a few like Selina Peiris and Sarojini Sivapragasam took an active part in the prevailing political discourse.

The academic year 1931-2 marked the entry of women to the debating platform of the Union Society. The novelty of it was not lost on the Secretary even in the following year when he wrote, "The ladies stepped forward, threw off their veil of shyness on several occasions and lent us the charm of their personality and the music of their language."⁹¹ There were however some limitations to these exercises in public speaking. As already noted, when the women joined in as debaters whether it was in the Union, Sinhalese or Tamil Societies, they seconded the proposer and opposer of the motion, leaving the

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, June 1940, pp. 29-30.

⁹⁰ Tissa Chandrasoma, *op.cit.*

⁹¹ *The Ceylon University College Magazine*, Vol. VIII, No. 2, 1933, p. 21.

men to take the lead roles.⁹² Whether social conventions precluded the women from pressing forward or the men preferred to arrange things that way are themselves debatable issues. That not all the men were happy to see women in the forefront is brought home by the report of the General Secretary in 1935/36, a time when women reached high visibility in Union Society activities. He says, "the charge of feminism has been levelled against the Union Society by carping critics who appear to resent the prominence given to the fair sex in a few of the debates held this year."⁹³ Women did lead discussions when debates were arranged between all female teams.⁹⁴ There were some occasions when men and women took opposite sides in serious debates,⁹⁵ although those arranged by the male hostels with the residents of the women's hostel and non-resident women were more social events.⁹⁶ One or two instances where a woman appeared as the first speaker seconded by a male have been documented,⁹⁷ but the rule was for women to bring up the rear. In the Union Society magazine published in December 1938, Theja Piyadasa (later Gunawardena) remonstrates with her female colleagues on this score--"Apart from merely seconding the proposer and opposer, ladies should speak from the house and contribute ... to the ... debates."

Even as second speakers the women seem to have performed extremely well. At freshers' debates the young men, who led the discussions, were usually heckled throughout their speeches but when it was the turn of the women to speak they were listened to with "the traditional behaviour of members towards

⁹² *ibid.*, Vol. XI, No. 1, Dec. 1935, p. 44; Vol. XII, No. 1, Oct. 1936, pp. 47-48.

⁹³ *ibid.*, Vol. XII, No. 1, May 1936, pp. 30-31.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, Vol. VII, No. 2, April 1932, p. 25; Vol. VIII, No. 1, October 1932, pp. 18 & 22; Vol. VIII, No. 2, June 1933, p. 22; Vol. IX, No. 2, April 1934, pp. 26-27.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, Vol. X, No. 2, March 1934, p. 30; Vol. VIII, No. 2, June 1933, p. 22.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, Vol. XIV, No. 1, December 1939, pp. 43-49; Vol. XIV, No. 3, November 1940, pp. 64-65; Vol. XIV, No. 6, March 1942, pp. 60-62.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, Vol. XII, No. 2, 1937/8 (Sinhalese Society), p. 127; Vol. XIV, No. 1, December 1939 (Union Society), p. 22.

ladies."⁹⁸ The age of chivalry was not dead! Numerous compliments are paid to women debaters and comments such as "certain new-comers among the ladies came off with flying colours,"⁹⁹ and "the lady speakers made remarkable speeches,"¹⁰⁰ are not infrequent in the College magazine. Young women who had learnt to compete only with members of their own sex at school and who were used to giving way to their brothers at home now learnt to compete with men in the tutorial class, at examinations and a few were emboldened to debate with them on issues which were both serious and at times lightly humorous.

Women appear to have kept out of Union Society activities particularly when the going was rough. During the 1937/38 period Union meetings were getting to be very stormy and it is reported that there was a lack of restraint at debates. The poor participation of women drew this angry comment by the secretary: "The crass indifference of the ladies towards all matters concerning the Union cannot be condoned."¹⁰¹ However, a different observation that: "Except for a few hardy spirits, the women students generally boycotted Union meetings"¹⁰² seems to explain why women made themselves scarce. But already the situation had begun to improve with the election of Theja Piyadasa (later Gunawardena) as Lady Committee Member of the Union Society. She seems to have given her female colleagues a strong and dynamic leadership improving their participation in Union activities.¹⁰³

Like Theja Piyadasa, there were other charismatic individuals who gave direction to their fellow-women at University College. One of them whose personality becomes visible through the papers of the College magazine is Regina de Silva (later Mrs Balasuriya). Short in stature, according to her contemporaries, Regina de Silva towered among the rest leaving her imprint on a number of College activities. Erica La Brooy, who was Head-girl of the

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, December 1938, p. 49.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, Vol. IX, No. 1, October 1933, p. 5.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, Vol. XII, No. 3, April 1938, pp. 12-13.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, December 1938, p. 11.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

women's hostel, counts Regina de Silva as one of her mentors.¹⁰⁴ Among her major concerns was the promotion of the Sinhalese language and culture, a concern which had been close to her heart even in earlier times. She was a teacher at Visakha Vidyalaya before she entered University College and Gerty Chandrasoma (nee Fonseka), one of her pupils at that time, recalls with awesome praise the skill with which she inspired the Visakhians of her class to take an interest in their own language and literature. For her own prowess in Sinhalese writing (Gerty Fonseka was joint-editor responsible for the Sinhalese section of the Union magazine in 1933/34 and she was a composer of Sinhalese verse),¹⁰⁵ Mrs Chandrasoma gives full credit to this great teacher who inspired her in her school days.¹⁰⁶ As an undergraduate, Regina de Silva became an enthusiastic supporter of the Sinhalese Society, "stimulating other ladies to attend meetings regularly." At a time when it was difficult to persuade women to act on stage, she consented to take part in the annual Sinhalese play in 1930/31 "in spite of many inconveniences." Her acting has been described as 'skillful.'¹⁰⁷ In the following year she co-edited the College magazine, taking charge of its Sinhalese Society when Dr. G.P. Malalasekera was its President, "a definite recognition of the part women were playing in the Society's activities."¹⁰⁸ She went on to become the 'Lady Committee Member' of the Union Society in 1933 and it is said of her that she "made herself indispensable to the Committee by her very useful advice, criticisms and suggestions."¹⁰⁹ Regina de Silva's hopes for women are embodied in an article she wrote on 'Viharamahadevi,' in the College magazine, where she holds out this courageous and patriotic queen as a great exemplar worthy of emulation.¹¹⁰ The first woman to graduate in Indo-Aryan, she took to teaching, the only career then

¹⁰⁴ Erica La Brooy, *op.cit.*

¹⁰⁵ *The Ceylon University College Magazine*, Vol. IX, Nos. 1&2, October 1933 and December 1934.

¹⁰⁶ Gerty Chandrasoma, Personal Interview (12.05.1994).

¹⁰⁷ *The Ceylon University College Magazine*, Vol. VI, No. 2, March 1931, p. 41.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, Vol. VII, No. 1, October 1932, p. 24.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, Vol. IX, No. 1, October 1933, p. 29.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, Vol. VII, No. 2, April 1932, p. 40ff.

open to women with a degree in the arts and humanities, and eventually became principal of Sujatha Vidyalaya, Matara.

The above cameo of Regina Balasuriya (nee de Silva) illustrates the fact that the more charismatic and dynamic women did respond to opportunities available to undergraduates, their gender notwithstanding. In some ways Regina Balasuriya was a trend-setter. After her it seems to have become almost a convention that a woman should edit the Sinhalese section of the College magazine. The chain of women editors (Misses de Silva, Fonseka,¹¹¹ Pathville¹¹² and Randunu¹¹³) was broken only in 1936 when D.J. Wijeratna stepped into this position. The tradition was once again revived by Miss D.V.B. Kannangara in 1939.¹¹⁴

A student society in which women found space for self-expression was the Dramatic Society. Functioning under names such as the 'Dramatic and Musical Society' and the 'Dramatic Club' at different times, it brought together a small group of people interested in drama and music. Women found a congenial atmosphere here, as gender disparities were not very pronounced. From the composition of the committee over the years, one can see that women rose to responsible positions and they seem to have been always part of the decision-making process. It is significant to note that at most times two or three office-bearers in the Committee were women. In early 1935 history was made in the Society when Evelyn La Brooy became its first 'Lady President.'¹¹⁵ This was repeated in 1938¹¹⁶ and in 1940,¹¹⁷ an index to the high level of female

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, Vol. IX, No. 1, October 1933, p. 31.

¹¹² *ibid.*, Vol. X, No. 1, October 1934, p. 21 and No. 2, March 1935 (Sinhalese section), p. 1.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, Vol. XI, No. 2, May 1936 (Sinhalese section), p. 1, *ibid.*, Vol. XI, No. 1, Dec. 1935 (Sinhalese section), p. 1.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, Vol. XIV, No. 1, December 1939, p. 64.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, Vol. X, No. 2, March 1935, p. 34; *ibid.*, Vol. XI, No. 1, March 1935, p. 40.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, Vol. XII, No. 3, April 1938, p. 92.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, June 1940, p. 38.

participation in the Dramatic Society. On many occasions the Vice-President was a woman¹¹⁸ and almost always women were assigned the post of Junior Treasurer.¹¹⁹ Women were popularly elected to the post of Secretary as well. Members of the society had opportunities to give expression to their talents at musical performances and on stage. At special meetings men and women played instrumental music, pianoforte recitals being the forte of women.¹²⁰ With respect to their main interest, drama, starting with play-readings where women were enthusiastic participants,¹²¹ the Dramatic Society graduated into play production. During the period 1929 to 1932 plays were staged for in-house audiences at University College. In 1933 the Dramatic Society had its first public performance of a play with a not so inappropriate title "Where women rule."¹²² Whether it was for public or College audiences, there is no record of any reluctance on the part of women to act on the English stage. It is noteworthy that many of the women who took part in these plays belonged to the Burgher community but there were some Sinhalese as well. This compliance contrasts with the negative reactions of women to act in Sinhalese and Tamil plays. The social acceptance of women acting in English plays probably had something to do with encouraging facets of western culture and also the fact that they were playing to exclusively English-speaking audiences, one's own social club as it were. Whatever the reasons, there is no doubt that the actresses themselves developed a great deal of self-confidence and derived a sense of fulfilment. Also the Dramatic Society afforded undergraduates opportunities to develop close staff- student relations, for, not only were members of the academic staff involved in play production but some of the younger men acted on stage with the undergraduates.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, October 1929, p. 34; Vol. IX, No. 1, October 1933, p. 32; Vol. X, No. 1, October 1934, p. 22; Vol. X, No. 2, March 1935, p. 34; Vol. XI, No. 1, December 1935, p. 51; Vol. XII, No. 3, April 1938, p. 92, Vol. XIV, No. 1, December 1939, p. 63.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, Vols VI-XIV, 1929-1940.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, Vol. VII, No. 1, 1931-2, p. 21; Vol. IX, No. 2, April 1934, p. 28.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, Vol. I, No. 2, p. 22; No. 3, 1925-26, p. 33; Vol. II, No. 1, 1927, p. 22; Vol. VI, No. 2, 1931, p. 39.

¹²² *ibid.*, Vol. IX, No. 1, October 1933, p. 33.

Acting in Sinhalese and Tamil plays was obviously not a desired social attainment. According to one undergraduate writer, women took a great leap forward in 1930 when they consented to act in a Sinhalese play.¹²³ However the practice did not catch on. Finding women to take part in Sinhalese plays was uphill work,¹²⁴ and in 1941 the last year of University College, the Sinhalese play had to be abandoned because it was not possible to find actresses.¹²⁵ The Tamil Society found their situation to be far worse. Having staged "Savitri" in September 1932, the Secretary strikes a very optimistic note. "This is perhaps the first time in the history of Ceylon when Tamil ladies (amateurs) have appeared with men on stage and it certainly augurs well for the future of our womanhood."¹²⁶ But from that time onwards a regular lament of the Tamil Society was the difficulty of finding Tamil speaking women willing to appear on stage.¹²⁷ In a comment on Tamil plays, a writer to the 1934 Reunion Supplement of the College magazine says "...parents yet exist who are not prepared to allow their daughters to appear on the University College stage."¹²⁸ Parental resistance no doubt stemmed from the cultural norms in traditional society where even in the folk plays women's roles were performed by men in appropriate dress. In 1935 a Tamil play had to be abandoned as there was no one to take the heroine's part.¹²⁹ In 1940 the Secretary sums up the situation when he says that "it has always been a problem to get our ladies to take part in plays."¹³⁰ However, those women who did act in Sinhalese and Tamil plays had the courage to swim against the tide and perhaps paved the way for renowned dramatists like Ediriweera Sarachchandra to find some of his most

¹²³ *ibid.*, Reunion Supplement, 1934, p. 20.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, July 1939, p. 86; Vol. XIV, No. 2, June 1940, p. 54.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, Vol. XIV, No. 6, March 1942 (Sinhala section), p. XIX.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, October 1932, p. 19.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, Vol. XI, No. 1, December 1935, p. 40; Vol. XII, No. 2, 1936, 85, Vol. 14, No. 2, June 1940, p. 56.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, *Reunion Supplement*, 1934, p. 19.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*, Vol. XI, No. 1, December 1935, p. 49.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*, Vol. 14, No. 2, June 1940, p. 56.

talented actresses from the undergraduate community later on. Therefore this is an area in which a few University College women challenged existing values and norms, setting a trend which society came to accept. Playing to public audiences in the social climate of that time demanded a great deal of courage. The struggle between conformity and liberation for women had only just begun.

Two societies, devoted to academic pursuits, in which women showed serious interest were the 'Literary Circle' and the 'Curia Historica.' This is not surprising, English and History being the two most favoured subjects among women. Women functioned as office bearers in both societies and one of them, Erica Christoffelsz (later La Brooy) was elected to the position of President of the History Society.¹³¹ Women participated in presenting papers at meetings of the Literary Circle and the Curia Historica,¹³² and their contributions were no less esteemed than those of the men. The fortunes of the two societies had an uneven history, so did women's participation in them. By and large it would seem that the smaller associations provided women with greater space for self-fulfilment and leadership. In them men and women worked together, perhaps a new experience opening out new perspectives for both groups.

Interaction between the sexes was also manifest in the arena of sports where men and women played together. As noted already, tennis was the game favoured by women. Despite cynics who believed that the men's game suffered by playing 'mixed-doubles,'¹³³ and 'conservative' critics who deplored 'their masculine garb' describing them as 'mildly insane tomboys,'¹³⁴ the women continued to play tennis. After a time they had sufficient confidence to play with the Women's International Club, albeit losing all their matches in 1934 and winning one out of five in 1941.¹³⁵ Hockey and badminton were games in

¹³¹ *ibid.*, Vol. XI, No. 2, May 1936, p. 38.

¹³² *ibid.*, Vol. I, No. 1, 1924, p. 25; Vol. I, No. 3, 1926, p. 39; Vol. 2, No. 1, 1927, p. 22; October 1929, p. 15; April 1930, Vol. XI, No. 2, May 1936, p. 39; Vol. 13, No. 1, December 1938, p. 89 & Vol. 14, No. 1, December 1939, p. 58.

¹³³ *ibid.*, Vol. VII, No. 2, April 1932, pp. 10-11.

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, Vol. XI, No. 2, May 1936, p. 7.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, Vol. X, No. 1, October 1934, p. 27 & Vol. XIV, No. 4, September 1941, p. 27.

which both men and women participated but not many students were attracted to either. Cricket was the game of men but the women were there to cheer them on at matches.¹³⁶ Netball, introduced in 1933, was exclusively for women and it was the turn of the men to watch.¹³⁷ Athletics for women was the *bete noir* of the conservative male. "Spirited admonitions on the inadvisability of athletics for young ladies" were heard in the tuck-shop according to one report.¹³⁸ In 1936 a male undergraduate who euphemistically calls himself 'Conservative' expresses great satisfaction that athletics was still not available to women and hopes that it never will be.¹³⁹ But by 1939 they had crossed this barrier and for the first time women ran a 'ladies race' at the athletics meet. They had indeed come a long way. The editor of the College magazine remarks, "it is gratifying to note that having vindicated their rights in the tuck-shop, they have now established their equality in the competition for colours."¹⁴⁰ It would seem that women had broken into another male preserve. This equality spread into other areas as well. "It has now become fashionable for university women to ride bicycles," observes the editor of the College magazine in 1941.¹⁴¹ More than a decade earlier Dr. Das Gupta speaking of College men who own bicycles and those who are owned by them says "the women only ride rickshaws."¹⁴² Women riding bicycles seems hardly to have been anticipated. Although events such as this may not be characterized as major revolutions, they are symptomatic of the slow but deep-seated change that was taking place in social attitudes in general and women's lives in particular. Contributing in some measure to these changing mores was the experience of co-education at University College.

Besides an internal momentum of change created through mutual interaction among students, conflicting signals were received from outside. Conceptual positions regarding women's roles ranged from ultra conservative to

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, Vol. VI, No. 1, October, p. 41.

¹³⁷ *ibid.*, Vol. XI, No. 2, May 1936, p. 35.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, October 1929, p. 3.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, Vol. XI, No. 2, May 1936, p. 7.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, Vol. XIV, No. 1, Dec. 1939, p. 10.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, Vol. XIV, No. 6, March 1942, p. 8.

¹⁴² *ibid.*, Vol. IV, No. 1, February 1929, p. 5.

mildly liberal during this time. These positions informed the larger debate between tradition and change. Western values were a challenge to traditional norms and responding to this challenge was the upsurge of traditionalism and nationalism. Men and women at University College were part of this debate which echoed down the groves of academe. The social position of women was widely discussed and on this issue the female undergraduates were as much vocal as their male colleagues.

Perhaps it was natural that higher education for women and co-education found acceptance in both student and staff circles at University College. Frequent admonitions to women that they should give up "Victorian mentalities," leave their "ivory towers" and fight for equal rights with men show that further progress was a desired goal. Nevertheless, some of the topics taken up for debate show that there were lurking doubts which remained in some quarters. Well over a decade after the establishment of University College it was still considered topical to place both co-education and higher education for women on the debating floor.¹⁴³ With the mooted of an autonomous university, the issue of university education for women came up for debate in the form of a motion that "women should have no place in the Ceylon University."¹⁴⁴ Predictably, it was defeated. It can be argued that undergraduate debates were mostly intended to be provocative and in lighter vein. Nevertheless, the fact that the subject could have been raised even in jest nearly 20 years after women had gained entry to University College, shows that the issue had not been fully laid to rest.

Whatever misgivings there were, higher education for women was a *fait accompli*. The major concern was how it would affect gender roles. Setting up barricades and limiting opportunities are the usual strategies of those who wish to safeguard privilege, and these strategies were used in the 1920s and 1930s to keep women in their place. That higher education was good and desirable for enlightened motherhood¹⁴⁵ vied with the view that it was "detrimental to the

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, October 1932, p. 18 & No. 2, June 1933, p. 22.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, June 1940, p. 20.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*, Vol. XI, No. 2, May 1936, pp. 5-7; Vol. XIV, No. 5, December 1941, pp. 14-16.

interests of the home."¹⁴⁶ At times women were humoured with cliches such as "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world"¹⁴⁷ and "woman is the unquestionable goddess of the home."¹⁴⁸ Not surprisingly Westernisation was a women's issue. The Sinhalese Society debated the proposal that "the western system of education was not suitable for Ceylon women" and it was carried by a large majority.¹⁴⁹ In the same year the Union Society took up a more positive attitude when it debated that "it is desirable that eastern women should be granted the same privileges as their western sisters."¹⁵⁰ The principle seems to be that westernisation for men was a given, it is the women who have to tread warily on that path. A concession that is sometimes made is that they should take what is good from the west while respecting their own cultural norms.¹⁵¹ That women, not men, are the custodians of culture is not new.

The public-private dichotomy strongly underscored the discourse on gender roles and women, in spite of their degrees, were not encouraged in the public arena. Appropriate professions were medicine and teaching as they fitted the caring and nurturing roles of women. Although in principal the legal profession was opened to them in 1930, some appear to have continued to entertain doubts. The Tamil Society debated the issue in 1933/4.¹⁵² Two years later a 'conservative' critic has gone on record that the law courts and kachcheris were not the place for women. He even expressed the view that votes for women "sounded the death knell of the sanctity of Ceylon's womanhood."¹⁵³ This had been part of the rhetoric against the grant of equal political rights to women during the deliberations of the Donoughmore Commission. College students had taken note of these discussions, having

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, 1932, p. 18.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, Vol X No. 1, March 1935, p. 30.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*, Vol. II, No. 1, 1927, p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*, Vol. II, No. 1, 1927, p. 23.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*, Vol. XI, No. 1, December 1935 (Sinhalese section), pp. 1-2.

¹⁵² *ibid.*, Vol. IX, No. 2, April 1934, pp. 26-27.

¹⁵³ *ibid.*, Vol. XI No. 2, May 1936, pp. 5-7.

debated a motion in 1924 that "Women in Ceylon should be given equal political rights with men."¹⁵⁴ With only 22 women on the roll in 1928, one could hardly expect a women's lobby as such and when the Union Secretary observed in that year that "..... the ladies did not seem anxious to support the proposals for female franchise,"¹⁵⁵ it could be a reference to the poor representation of women at meetings. This question was once again raised at a time when two women had already taken their place in the State Council. The election of Adeline Molamure and Naysum Saravanamuttu to the legislature followed quickly on the heels of the Donoughmore constitution. One wonders if this sent alarm bells ringing, for in 1935, the students debated the proposition that "this house views with alarm the entry of women into politics."¹⁵⁶ It was lost by 17 votes.

Political rights and University degrees did not create for women equal opportunities in social or public life, nor did women demand them at this stage. There was a contradiction between intellectual attainment and the unequal utility value of such attainment as far as women were concerned. According to Conway "...if co-education were really to result in equal treatment for males and females, there should be the same pattern of career development for men and women into the professional elites of society."¹⁵⁷ Attention has already been drawn to the limited employment opportunities available to women. No one, not even the women, thought of equal participation in the public service. Women were content with teaching, the lowest rung in graduate employment. In an editorial of the College magazine in 1938, the jobs available to graduates are spelt out in order of preference. Teaching, it is said, was the last resort of the unemployed graduate, "the graduate scum," in the words of the editor. This last choice of the men was the only choice available to women. Thus existing socio-economic imbalances between men and women remained unchallenged.

Nevertheless, by fanning out to the English schools as teachers these women graduates satisfied a demand and performed a useful social role. As a special cohort of educated women who had had exposure to an environment of

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*, Vol. I. No. 1, 1924, p. 14.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*, Vol. III, No. 1, 1927-28, p. 18.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, Vo. XI, No. 1, December 1935, p. 44.

¹⁵⁷ Jill K. Conway, *American Higher Education: Toward an Uncertain Future*, Vol I, Fall, 1974, p. 239.

challenge and change, they were able to provide leadership and often acted as role models and mentors to a new generation of educated women. A changing value system would have percolated into the middle class through the schools where these early graduates found employment. Women graduates were perhaps in the best sector of employment to function as agents of social change.

"Education at times reflects society and the changes within it. At other times it reacts with change and brings about further developments. At yet other times because of its autonomy and its own dynamics it develops contradictions and conflicts...."¹⁵⁸ The general tenor of debate among undergraduates shows that despite some enlightened opinion, there was no consensus among them on the emancipation of women from the shackles of the past. Ambivalence between conformity and change is present in all societies and this is mostly true regarding the role and status of women in the period under survey. Higher education for women is not associated with social mobility during this early period. It catered to the demands of the upper classes and remained very much their privilege. In a sense during this period, higher education even exacerbated existing social imbalances by widening the gap between the English educated class and the rest. One must, however note the credit side. There is no doubt that from the experiences at University College there emerged a new female personality. For some it served to nurture new ambitions and skills. Academic training would have broadened intellectual horizons and individual achievement no doubt gave a feeling of self-worth. Although there was oscillation between tradition and change, women at University College did break new ground when they acted on stage, contested elections, spoke in public, took part in athletics and even rode bicycles. The female graduates of University College were the forerunners of an ever widening circle of educated women whose dynamism has in no small measure influenced the improvement of the status of women in Sri Lanka.

SIRIMA KIRIBAMUNE

¹⁵⁸ A.R. Kamat, "Higher Education," *Higher Education in India*, ed. Amrik Singh and G.D. Sharma, Konark, 1988.