

# Gender Imbalances in University Admission in Sri Lanka

S.M. Ahamedlebbe\*

## Abstract

*Liberalization policy has been associated with rising female labour force participation in Sri Lanka. Despite the suggestive government of Sri Lanka from independence has been giving higher priority for education, there could be seen gender imbalances in university entrance. This study is an attempt to analyze the gender development in university education and to find the gap in gender in the university admission in different fields in Sri Lanka. This is an analysis with the use of secondary data sources collected from Department of Census and Statistics, Central Bank of Sri Lanka and University Grant Commission. Finding shows that the qualified students' numbers for university education has been increasing year by year. As the eligible number of female students for University education is larger than male students, university enrolment of female has significantly increased from academic year 1942 to date in Sri Lanka. The finding further shows that the percentage share of female entrance to the total number of qualified female students is higher than male students only for arts course. However, the percentage share of female admission to the total number of eligible female students is lower than the male admission for commerce and science fields. Thus, female students' entrance is higher for arts course and lesser for commerce and science courses when compared to male students.*

**Keywords:** Gender Development, Gender gap, university enrolment, students' eligibility.

---

\* **S. M. Ahamedlebbe** is a Senior Lecturer in Economics at Department of Social Sciences, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka.

## Introduction

The total population of Sri Lanka is 20.6 million (2010) and the average annual growth rate of population of the island is 1.0 per cent in 2010. Sex ratio of total population in Sri Lanka is almost equal. The percentage share of male and female population to the total population is 49.6 percent and 50.4 percent, respectively, in 2008. It could be seen that gender disparities are spread all over the world in all sectors and divisions. This is higher in developing countries than in the developed countries. Global community, in general, has paid an attention on gender issue only after 1960s. All suggestive governments in Sri Lanka have also concentrated on human development from independence in order to enhance socio economic development in the country. Hence, Human Development Index (HDI) of Sri Lanka has improved 0.658 in 2007 and Sri Lanka ranks 91 among 169 countries in the world. However, Comparison with SAARC countries, Sri Lanka achieved highest position in HDI. As result of free education and health policies, literacy rate, life expectancy and mortality rate have considerably improved in Sri Lanka. Literacy rate of male and female is 92.8 and 90.0, respectively in 2009. Infant mortality rate per live birth was 8.5 in 2007 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2010).

Understanding gender issues can help to reduce unintended negative inputs of development programs. Internationally Sri Lanka ranks mid-way on the United Nation

Gender-Related development Index (80 out of 144 countries). In 2001 life expectancy at birth for women is 75.5 years compared to 69.6 for men. Sri Lanka's gender achievements are the dividends of extensive social welfare programs for free education, free health care and free food rations that have been implemented by successive government since political independence in 1948 (Women in Development-WID, IQC, 2004) There has been a momentous change from independence in Sri Lanka. While government policy was inward strategy in the early and middle part of 1970s, it has been followed outward strategy from liberalization policy in 1977 in Sri Lanka. It is to be noted that in the view of all development policies in the recent past were related to women labourer's participation in Sri Lanka, in general, garment sector, plantation sector and income from Middle East countries depend on women labourer's income in particular.

The last twenty years have seen several changes in the domestic and international economic environments that have had a profound impact on Sri Lanka's labour market. Sri Lanka has been a substantial influx of women into the labour market during the last three decades, reflecting a strong and growing interest in labour force participation among women. Economic policy liberalization in Sri Lanka has been associated with rising female labour force participation as in many other developing countries. New employment opportunities for women have opened up mainly in the

manufacturing and service sectors, while significant numbers have migrated overseas for employment (Gunatilaka, 1999).

While women's Bureau of Sri Lanka was set up government of Sri Lanka in 1978, the president of Sri Lanka appointed National Committee of Women NCW) in 1993 to be a monitoring body for the women's character (WID, IQC, 2004). And also Ministry of women Affairs was started by Sri Lankan government in 1983. The above all activities of Sri Lankan government have raised women's role in every sector in Sri Lanka. Thereby, women unemployment rate has come down from 23.4 percent in 1990 to 7.7 percent in 2010. Female employment rate went up from 83.6 percent in 1997 to 92.3 percent in 2010 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2010).

Government of Sri Lanka takes various steps implementing gender balance in every sector. As a result, the role of female participation in education, employment, Politics and also other sectors has increased from last three decades. However, female participation in education is higher than that of other sectors. Despite the government of Sri Lanka has been giving higher priority for education, there is also a gender inequality in university entrance in Sri Lanka. The share of enrolment and eligibility of female students for university education has increased every year than in the share of male students. However, female students have not received equal percentage share to their total number of

eligibility for university education as entered male students. Therefore, there could be seengender differences in university admittance in Sri Lanka. But, government of Sri Lanka has given equal rights to enter (male and female students) for university education and qualified students are admitted to the universities on the basis of GCE (Advanced Level) results.

### **Objectives of the study**

- To show the trend of female and male student's enrolment for university admission,
- To explore the gender development in university education in Sri Lanka
- To find gender gap in university entrance in Sri Lanka.

### **Data Analysis**

A descriptive analysis was done using secondary data sources collected from Department of Census and Statistics, Central Bank of Sri Lanka, University Grant Commission. The all island gender wise data in regard to enrolment, eligibility and admitted students was collected and used for this analysis.

### **Results and Discussion**

From free education system implemented in 1942, level of education not only male but female education has also significantly

increased in Sri Lanka. Rapid expansion of schools coupled with more teachers being appointed to the primary and secondary level of education has significantly improved in Sri Lanka. Limited number of universities and lack of other facilities in universities have restricted students' admission. However, total number of eligible students for university education increased annually. It could be understood that total number of eligible

female students is larger than male students. Therefore, female university enrolment significantly increased from 1942 to date in Sri Lanka. Table - 1 indicates the enrolment of male and female students for university education. According to the table1, university enrolment of female students from academic year 1942/43 to date has been increasing, while the share of male students' enrolment decreases.

**Table 1: University Enrollment in Sri Lanka, 1942/43-2002/03**

Academic Year	Gender	Enrolled	Percentage
1942/43	Male	813	89.9
	Female	91	10.1
	Total	904	
1952/53	Male	1752	78.5
	Female	480	21.5
	Total	2232	
1962/63	Male	4541	72.4
	Female	1729	27.6
	Total	6270	
1972/73	Male	6907	57.3
	Female	5143	42.7
	Total	12050	
1982/83	Male	11390	63.2
	Female	6619	36.8
	Total	18009	
1992/93	Male	16848	54.7
	Female	13916	45.23
	Total	30764	
2002/2003	Male	28012	46.89
	Female	31728	53.67
	Total	59740	

(Source: Statistical Abstract of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka)

Figure 1 obviously shows that the trend of male and female students' enrolment during last six decades. Although percentage share of female students at the beginning was very low, it has gradually increased. Thus, female enrollment went up nearly four times while male enrollment has decreased by 46 percent

### Total Number of Eligible Students for University Education

As the total number of Advanced Level students' continuously increases every year, the total number of eligibility for university education has also increased up to now in Sri

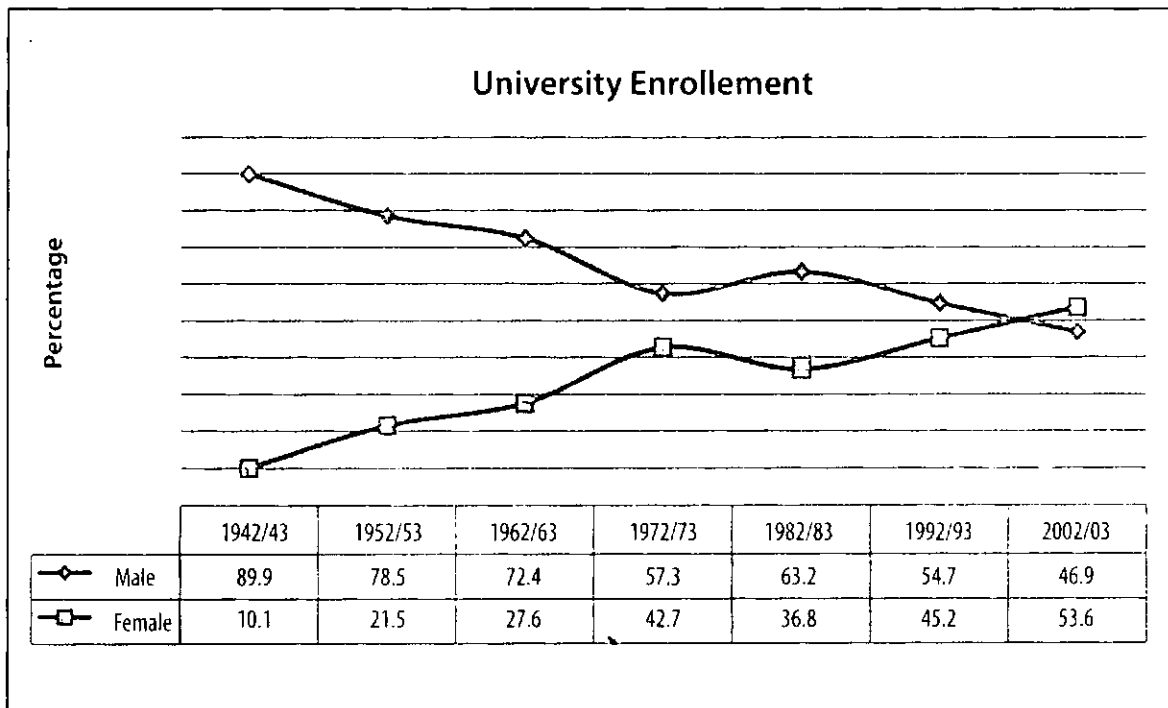


Figure 1: Trend of University Enrollment in Sri Lanka, 1942/43-2002/03

during this period. In academic year 2002/03 female enrolment is larger than male enrolment. This scenario clearly indicates that a gender imbalance in higher education has been reduced or gender balance has been improved.

Lanka. Table 2 shows the gender wise total number of eligible students and admission for university education in Sri Lanka. Total number of eligible students was 34,491 in academic year 1989/90 but it was 119,955 in academic year 2006/07.

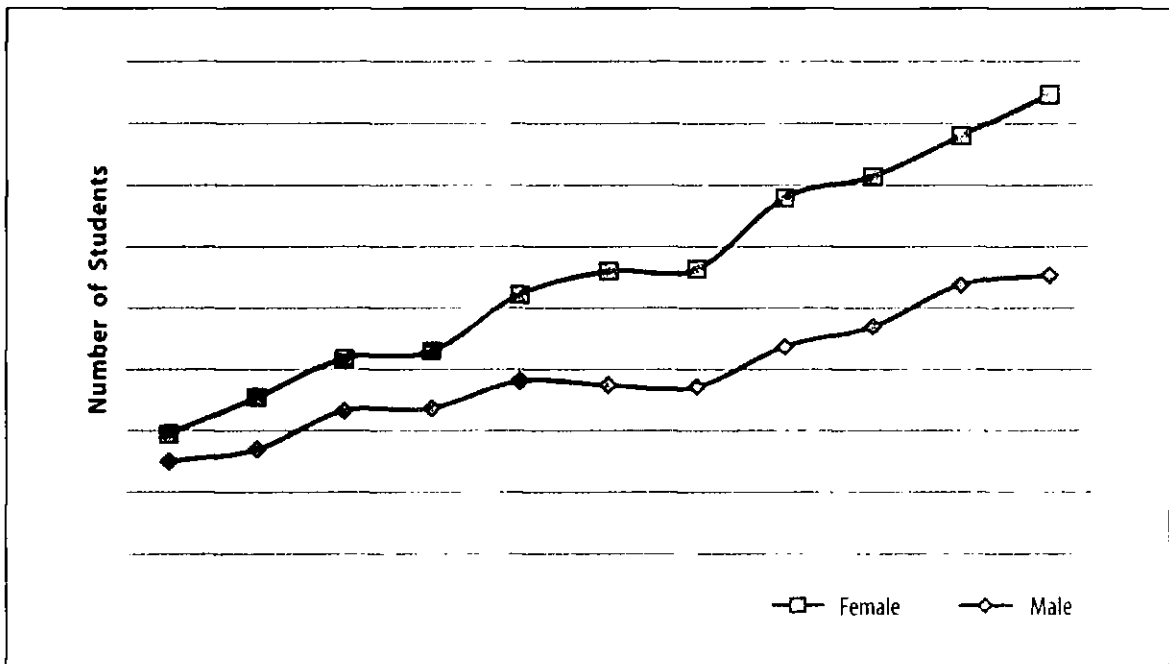
**Table 2: Total Students for University Education in Sri Lanka, 2002/03-2006/07**

Academic Year	Gender	Eligible	Admitted	Percentage
1989/90	M	15021	3766	25
	F	19470	2697	14
	Total	34491	6463	19
1991/92	M	16976	4651	27
	F	25478	4249	17
	Total	42454	8900	21
1993/94	M	23275	4545	20
	F	31869	3470	11
	Total	55144	8015	15
1995/96	M	23689	4979	21
	F	33014	4211	13
	Total	56703	11381	16
1996/97	M	28136	5649	20
	F	42246	5732	14
	Total	70382	11381	16
1999/00	M	27437	5720	21
	F	45985	6085	13
	Total	73422	11805	16
2001/02	M	33722	5616	18
	F	57954	6528	12
	Total	91676	12144	14
2004/05	M	43740	6851	15.7
	F	67985	7669	11.3
	Total	111725	14520	13.5
2006/07	M	45310	7471	16.5
	F	74645	9725	13
	Total	119955	17196	14.3

(Source: Statistical Abstract of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka)

Therefore, students' numbers has increased by 85,464 or 248 percent during last two decades. However, increasing rate of female students is higher than the male students. Total number of eligible male and female students was 15021 and 19470, respectively in academic year 1989/90. But this numbers went up by 30,289 and 55,175 in academic year 2006/07, respectively. So, male and female students increased by 201 percent and 283 percent, respectively, during this period (see figure 2). This figure reveals that female participation in higher education is moving up than that of male students. Figure 2 also shows the gap between male and female eligible students is continuously widening from academic year 1989/90 to 2006/07.

It is to be noted that the government of Sri Lanka has been increasing the degree of total admission for university education in order to reduce the gap between total students' eligibility and admission for university education. Total number of admitted students was only 6463 in academic year 1989/90 and it increased to 17,196 in academic year 2006/07. However, the gap between total eligibility and admission increased from 28,028 in academic year 1989/90 to 102,759 in 2006/07. Figure 3 shows the gap between total number of eligibility and admitted students for university education in Sri Lanka. This figure clearly shows that the total admission was not granted at least one fifth of total numbers of eligible students for every year. The trends of eligible number of

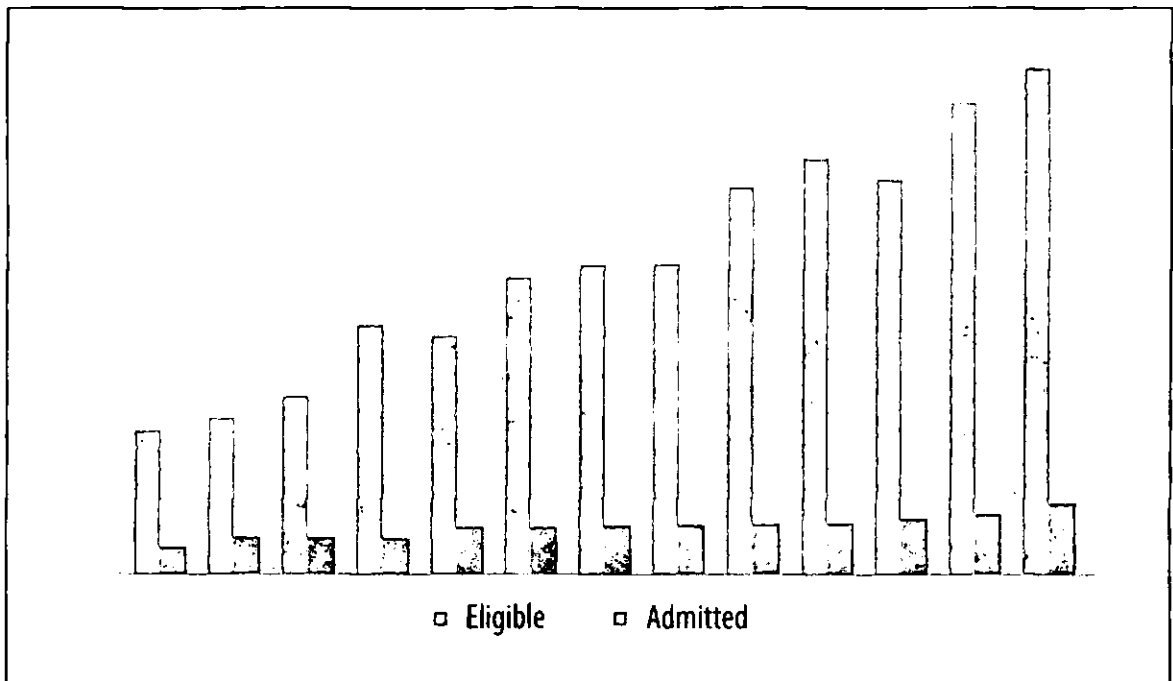


**Figure 2:** Trend of Eligible Students for University Education in Sri Lanka, 1989/90-2006/07  
 (Source: Same as table 2)

students are higher than the admitted number of students during the period of last two decades. Therefore, despite the government of Sri Lanka increases total university admission for every year, the number of eligible students is also on the rise. The percentage share of total number of admitted students to the total eligible numbers was 19 in academic year 1989/90 but it is only 14.3 in 2006/07. However, the total number of admitted students has increased between academic year 1989/90 and 2006/07.

### Gender Imbalances in University Admission in Sri Lanka

According to the data, female participation in education rapidly increases in Sri Lanka. Figure 2 depicts that eligible number of female students for higher education has been noticeably moving up in compared to male students. However, there is an imbalance in male and female students' admittance. Table 3 shows that field wise university admission from academic year 2002/03 to 2006/07. According to the



**Figure 3:** Total Number of Eligible and Admitted Students for University Education in Sri Lanka, 1989/90-2006/07

(Source: Same as table 3)



table the percentage share of female admission to the eligibility of female students are higher than male students only for arts course. In contrast, the percentage share of admitted male students to their total number of eligible students is higher than the female admission for commerce and science field. Although female students are admitted 8.2 percent to their total eligible numbers, male students are admitted only 7.7 percent for arts field in academic year 2002/03. Table 3 shows that percentage of admitted female students for Arts course are higher than male students from 2002/03 to 2006/07.

On the other hand, the percentage share of male admission for commerce and science division is higher for every year. The admission for male students for commerce and science courses is 10.6 percent and 37.1percent, respectively, in 2002/03. In terms of female students, it is 8.1percent and 25.4 percent in the same academic year. The percentage share of female admission to their total number of eligibility is lesser than the percentage of male admission. Therefore, female students' entrance is higher for arts course and lesser for commerce and science courses when compared to male students. This scenario can be seen in all academic years in Sri Lanka.

**Table 3: Eligibility and Admission of Students for University Education in Sri Lanka, 2002/03-2006/07**

Academic Year	Gender	Arts			Commerce			Science		
		Eligible	Admitted	%	Eligible	Admitted	%	Eligible	Admitted	%
2002/03	M	15765	1217	7.7	11932	1267	10.6	9271	3441	37.1
	F	37864	3111	8.2	15070	1227	8.1	8524	2168	25.4
	Total	53629	4328	8.1	27002	2494	9.2	17795	5609	31.5
2003/04	M	13620	1201	8.8	13013	1457	11.2	8558	3595	42
	F	34009	3115	9.2	16414	1470	9	7828	2558	32.7
	Total	47629	4316	9.1	29427	2927	9.9	16386	6153	37.6
2004/05	M	15186	1275	8.4	15444	1510	9.8	13110	4066	31
	F	36576	3259	8.9	18895	1490	7.9	12514	2920	23.3
	Total	51762	4534	8.7	34339	3000	8.9	25624	6986	27.2
2005/06	M	15331	1535	10	16091	1566	9.7	14080	4797	34.1
	F	38245	4039	10.6	21037	1667	7.9	13986	3689	26.4
	Total	53576	5568	10.4	37128	3233	8.7	28066	8486	30.2
2006/07	M	14717	1330	9	17222	1499	8.7	13371	4642	34.7
	F	38865	4519	11.6	22536	1753	7.8	13244	3453	26.1
	Total	53582	5849	10.9	39758	3252	8.2	26615	8095	30.4

(Source: Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2008)

## Gender Gap

Female admission for university education is less secure than male Student's admission. To measure the gender gap, the percentage of female admitted students is divided by percentage of male admitted students in every year. So, the ratio greater than one indicates that female is overrepresented in university admission. The ratio is less than one indicates that female is underrepresented in university admission. Table 4 shows that gender gap for arts, commerce and science courses from 2002/03

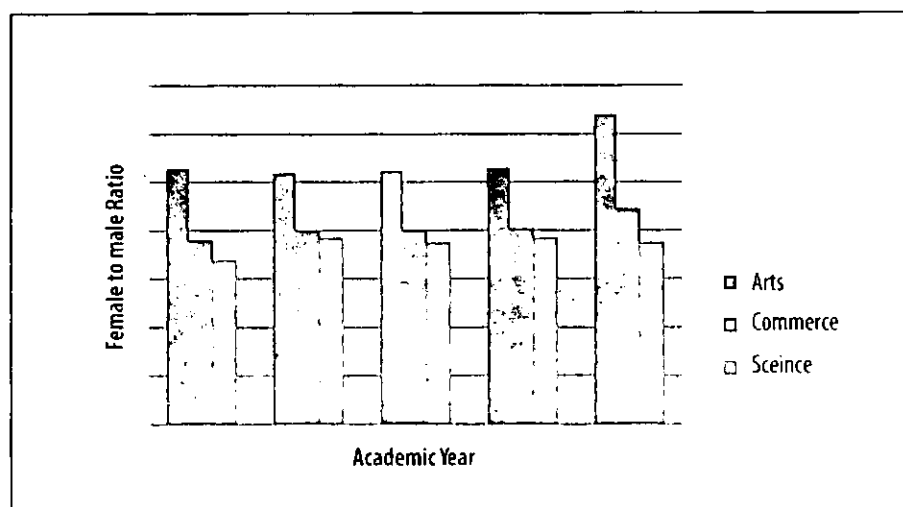
to 2006/07. According to the table gender gap for arts course is greater than one during last five academic years. This has ensured that female admissions are higher than male admission for university education in Sri Lanka. The female to male ratio of arts course was 1.06 and 1.28 in academic year 2002/03 and 2006/07, respectively. This means admission of female students for arts division enlarged in 2006/07 than that of previous academic years. As a result, gender gap has also widen from -0.06 in 2002/03 to -1.28 in 2006/07.

**Table 4:** Gender Gap for University Admission in Sri Lanka, 2002/03-2006/07

Female to Male Ratio	Gender Gap						
	Academic Year	Arts	Commerce	Science	Arts	Commerce	Science
	2002/03	1.06	0.76	0.68	-0.06	0.24	0.32
	2003/04	1.04	0.8	0.77	-0.04	0.20	0.23
	2004/05	1.05	0.8	0.75	-0.05	0.20	0.25
	2005/06	1.06	0.81	0.77	-0.06	0.19	0.23
	2006/07	1.28	0.89	0.75	-0.28	0.11	0.25

(Source: Computed from Secondary Data of Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2008)

**Figure 4:** Gender Gap in University Admission in Sri Lanka, 2002/03-2006/07



(Source: Same as table 4)

However, according to the indicator gender gap for commerce and science fields are less than one throughout the years. This clearly shows that female is underrepresented in university entrance for commerce and science courses in Sri Lanka. Female students get admission for commerce 76 percent as much as male students in 2002/03 and this has reduced to 89 percent in 2006/07. Hence, gender gap has declined from 0.24 to 0.11 during this period.

On the other hand, while 68 percent of female students have received admission for science course in 2002/03, it has uplifted 75 percent in academic year 2006/07. Thus, gender gap also declined from 0.32 to 0.25 during this period. Despite the gender gap for commerce and science has declined from academic year 2002/2003 to 2006/07, female to male ratio is still less than one. Therefore, there is not gender balance in admission for commerce and science courses.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This is a study undertaken by the researcher on gender difference in university admission in Sri Lanka. Free education system has considerably improved level of education throughout the country. Although there is a remarkable improvement in primary and secondary level of education, it could not be seen in tertiary education (university education) in Sri Lanka. Lack of university facilities in Sri Lanka has constrained admission for university education. However, total number of eligible students for university education has been rising annually.

Increasing rate of qualified number of students is higher than the increasing number of admission for university education. As the eligibility of female students is larger than the male students, the enrolment of female students to the university significantly increased from academic year 1942 to date in Sri Lanka.

Since the female participation in education rapidly increases in Sri Lanka, qualified number of female students for university education has been noticeably moving up. Total admission for male students was higher until 1995/96 than in female students' admission. But, female entrance has gone up from 1996/97 to date. However, the percentage share of female entrance to their total eligible number is higher than male students only for arts field. In contrast, the percentage share of male entrance to their total number of eligibility is higher than the female entrance for commerce and science courses.

As the female to male ratio of arts field is greater than one, female is overrepresented in university admission for arts course. In dissimilarity, this ratio was less than one for commerce and science courses. Thereby, this clearly shows that female is underrepresented in university entrance for commerce and science courses in Sri Lanka. Hence, this illustrates female students have received more chances for arts division and less chances for commerce and science fields. In spite of Sri Lankan government gives equal rights for male and female students for higher education, students are selected to the

universities on the basis of GCE (A/L) results in every particular year. According to the rank students whoever male or female will be admitted to the universities. However, this study found that male students have competed female students in commerce and science streams rather than arts division. As a result, there is a gender imbalance in terms of tertiary education (university education) in Sri Lanka in the field of Arts, Commerce and Science.

The concept of gender has captivated the attention of many scholars in the contemporary world. The role of female participation in every sector is significantly on the rise in Sri Lanka. But, lack of higher education facilities restricts the university admission. Hence this scenario leads to gender imbalance in Sri Lanka. So, it is essential for the government to formulate a policy to ensure the equal representation of students to reduce the gender imbalance or gap. This can be done only with an expansion of university system.

## References

- Central Bank of Sri Lanka (2008), "Economic and Social Statistics of Sri Lanka", Central of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka.
- Central Bank of Sri Lanka (2007), "Annual Central Bank Report, 1990-2007", Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka.
- Gunatilaka, R. (1999), "Labour Legislation and Female Employment in Sri Lanka's Manufacturing Sector", Institute of Policy Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
- Jayasundara, R. (2006), "Entering New Economic Period - Gender Approach", Economic Changes in Sri Lanka, Centre for International Ethnic Studies, Colombo.
- Kabeer, N. (1996), "Gender, Demographic Transition and the Economics of Family size: Population policy for a Human-Centered Development", United Nation Research Institute for Social Development, UNDP.