



Pravahini

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Women in Peril

The earth has settled gently we hope on the Sri Lankan maid Sithy Unisa whose dream of finding her fortune in the Middle East turned out to be a nightmare when she finally faced a firing squad. The shock waves that swept through our country as well as the civilised world at the gruesome fate that befell her at her employers request have subsided. The anger, laments and doubts that filled the air have wafted into silence. We hope at least the incident has left behind a trail of conscience - stricken women and men.

Local women from our villages and suburbs leave the shores of their motherland in search of money for their impoverished families. For all of them it is a venture they undertake into an unknown future - women who have only known the warmth of their native soil and the concern of their families and friends.

The Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment estimates the number of Sri Lankan females working as domestics in the UAE as 450,000.

The foreign exchange that they earned in 1993 made up 55.3% of the country's private remittances, keenly collected to boost our much needed foreign exchange and proudly announced on many a public

platform. The women themselves are probably unaware that they rate among the top assets of the country.

It being common knowledge that the environment they come from, the little education they have, their language, culture, traditions and religious practices are totally different in their new environment. These women need to be considered as a special category who require and deserve special assistance from their country to enable them to survive in an alien environment.

Such assistance at present is minimal, haphazard and certainly not considered a responsibility or moral obligation by any authority.

It behoves the authorities, who still value the foreign exchange that they bring in, to genuinely concern themselves to give these helpless women a better chance of survival in their new jobs.

As far as it is practicable the jobs available and the prospective employers and the working conditions could be monitored.

A more comprehensive and a closer and continuing tab could be kept on all our immigrant women workers, whether registered or not.

A training in the type of work they will be expected to undertake and the modern household gadgets they would be expected to handle is essential.

Even more importantly they should be familiarised with the foreign culture, language, laws and religion into which they will have to fit or at least to tolerate.

And most important would be the security that can and should be afforded to them by our authorities resident in these countries, by being easily accessible, concerned, understanding and sympathetic. This indeed would be the maids' most

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valued asset - the native compassion and understanding from fellow country men.

However, these migrant workers, from reports published time and again, have only complained about the complete lack of support from the Embassies and now hard on the heels of this tragic incident, which we hoped would galvanise authorities into action, a foreign news report reaches us of other Lankan maids from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia who have been murdered. The Embassies have been unaware of their deaths until they read newspaper reports. There seems to be very little our

country can do or will do except to make arrangements to bring home the bodies.

The Philippines reacted very differently to a similar incident regarding a Filipino worker. They recalled all their immigrant workers from that country and displayed their concern for and their moral obligation to their nationals.

In contrast, Sri Lanka's recent reaction requesting its missions to "keep a closer tab" on the workers confirms its, disturbingly disinterested attitude.

Cannot more drastic steps be taken to arouse some positive humanitarian action to safeguard our maids from violence?

Are we to continue to read almost every week that a Sri Lankan maid has been murdered?

Are we helplessly leaving the Middle East employers to believe that Sri Lankan maids can be harassed as they please and no questions will be asked?

Why this pathetic national apathy in a matter of life and death?

Sri Lankan National Desk for Child Abuse

"One of the most monstrous and heinous forms of slavery found on our Planet Earth is flourishing in Sri Lanka" - Child Abuse and Child Prostitution.

That these crimes are rampant in our country is constantly brought to light by media reports. Tourism which has been boosted in no small measure in recent years has been treated as an indicator of the country's attraction and popularity and the foreign exchange it brings in as a sign of prosperity. Nevertheless, it is a well known fact that modern tourism has been the root cause of sexual child abuse making it one of the gravest social problems of the day. This problem - this tragedy that awaits our innocent children-as it is today has many faces and it is obvious that whatever legislation there is to combat it, is outdated and ineffective in enforcement.

The local and international media have for long years been campaigning for positive action to save the children of the world from this plague. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has as its signatories a large number of countries of the world including Asian countries. It was signed by the President of Sri Lanka and ratified in 1991. This Charter requires that "State Parties take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while

in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any person who has the care of the child".

Many countries have already taken action with regard to legislation and punishment. A young international organisation ECPAT (End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism) has campaigned for passing of laws to protect children.

Australia may be quoted as playing a leading role and in 1994 laws were revised in Australia to prosecute offenders who commit these crimes abroad even if that country does not have such a law and "video - link" evidence has been accepted at trials. Other countries which have adopted similar legislation are Canada, Japan, France, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Germany.

Thailand and the other Asian countries are revising their laws and are also seeking ways to better enforce them. Special Police Task Forces have been set up.

Sri Lanka too is revising its laws and the draft is now ready to be presented to Parliament to be eventually placed in the Statute book. In the meantime "Police Headquarters has established a National Desk for child abuse and violence against women". Such information desks will be set up in every Police division. This will help to bring to light cases

which up to now have easily gone undetected and offenders who as easily have slipped out of reach.

It will also be useful for the Police to collect statistics and data on the problem and organise an exchange of information between national and international agencies. It is heartening indeed to know that meaningful steps are being taken to stem this growing trend in criminality.

However laws alone are insufficient for it is the enforcement of the law that has to be effective. The punishment must fit the crime, so that the offender truly pays for it. Nor can we forget the victim whose rehabilitation is a vital necessity, which should receive serious attention.

From the history of feminist thought since 1970, one can glean 3 options for women

First there is the option of agreeing to compete in the male defined world of politics on its own terms, in the manner of a Margaret Thatcher.

Second, there is the option of withdrawing from the world, out of pessimism as to its essentially patriarchal nature, creating instead an other world of female retreat.

Finally, there is the option of entering the world and attempting to change it, in the image of the woman-centered values at the core of feminism. I believe that only this last option offers any hope.

Hester Eisenstein

Political Empowerment of Women Sought at SAARC Level.

Women of South Asian countries have formed a strong committee to stress their demands for political empowerment of women. Representatives from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and India met last April in New Delhi and "emphasised the need for lobbying together to ensure both a collective and a country specific voice for women of the region". They saw political empowerment as an essential prerequisite for equality between men and women and sought equal participation in decision making issues in the Asian region. Inequality in economic policies and the burden of poverty on women were the major areas of concern. The main aim of the meeting was to work out a joint action plan to be presented at the SAARC summit due to be held in New Delhi in May 1995.

Gender in Malawi

Women's Voice is a non partisan women's organisation in Malawi, led by the country's first woman lawyer. The country became independent in 1964, but was ruled by the dictator Kamuzu Banda till 1993 when a new era of freedom dawned for Malawi after the multi party elections.

Malawi is an intensely patriarchal country with strong cultural traditions where the women were expected to care for the home and family and the fields. Women have been traditionally made to believe that they were inferior to men, and men believe that women are incapable of performing in decision-making issues. During the regime of Kamuzu Banda women did not find it possible to have women's issues included in the national plans but the present ruling party has been promising to include women in government affairs. However, it has included only 2 women in a cabinet of 20, still perpetuating patriarchal attitudes.

However, women have begun to organise themselves, to bring about a change in the status of women. Women's Voice has identified several problems which Malawi women have to face and are agitating for the abolition of discriminatory laws, involving women in decision-making at all levels, promoting and protecting women's and children's rights.

Women's Voice believes in women having an important role to play in all social and economic aspects of the nation and ensuring that women are enlightened and educated.

Gender Sensitization

Since time began women have always taken a secondary role to men. This was perfectly logical in times when physical strength was more important than mental capabilities. It was also essential that a child who required a long period of care and support before he/she could act independently should have the mother at home, while the father worked for the essentials of life. The turn of the century and the beginning of the industrial revolution began a social change that would one day challenge the traditional role of the mother. That day is now upon us. It has been universally recognised that women have the right to pursue their own ambitions and interests. In our own country without announcement or attention women have become the largest foreign income earners. In garment factories and in overseas employment they bring in the bulk of the country's much needed foreign exchange. Women are no longer the weaker sex and gender sensitisation programmes are aimed at focussing attention on this and addressing the social inequalities that still exist.

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The programme itself consists of several areas in which women are particularly affected and an overall historical perspective of the gender issues. The burning issues of violence against women, bias in employment and secondary status in education by the parents themselves who give preference to the son and the unhappy position faced by women in legal issues particularly relating to rape, abortion and domestic violence.

The media portrayal of women in features, advertisements and even news items is generally one of stereo typing and generalising. Cultural factors and traditions are another area in which women come out second best. The programme also seeks to awaken women to the less obvious ways in which they are suppressed while at the same time bring in to focus the larger issues and the ways in which women can deal with them.

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Workshops held by WERC for the purpose of gender sensitization have helped to create an awareness of gender issues.

A programme funded by CIDA was held in Batticaloa at the request of Mahasakthy Thrift and Credit Society for the benefit of single women affected by violence.

In Puttalam two workshops one for Grama Sevakas and the other for Primary school teachers were held at the request of UNICEF. The group comprised men and women, the majority of whom were Muslims.

Lectures and discussions were held on gender issues such as gender based discrimination and oppression, and social and cultural barriers against women. In addition, documentaries on women related issues, women's subordination in economic status were also included.

Interaction of men and women in dramas, skits and lively discussions were notable features of this programme.

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Gender Sensitization programmes are being planned for MEDIA PERSONNEL and will be held in Sinhala English and Tamil commencing August 1995.

People in electronic and print media who are interested please contact us without delay.

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Female Gender Issues on Rupavahini

We are happy that gender sensitivity is being brought into state organisations. Rupavahini is presently engaged in organising monthly panel discussions on

gender issues in all three languages.

Topics include women and Dowry, Violence against women, History of Women's Movement, Media representation of Women.

Research Project 95/96

Female headed households

The research will focus on the victims/widows whose husbands have died in ethnic or civil violence in the selected areas of Hambantota and Moneragala, Trincomalee and Amparai, Mullativu and Jaffna.

War Crimes Against Women

Information and applications from research assistants will be welcome. Please contact us.

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Prestigious award

for Radhika

The American Bar Association's International Human Rights Committee has awarded the 1995 Rule of Law Award to Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy who was appointed last year by the United Nations Commission of Human Rights as Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, its causes and Consequences, a news release from the International Centre for Ethnic Studies said.

Our latest Publications

Life Under Milkwood : Women Workers in Rubber Plantations. - *An overview by Dr. J. Uyangoda.*

Media Images of Women : A collective Research Project on the portrayal of women in contemporary Electronic & Print media. *Edited by Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran*

Obeysekarapura Revolving Fund

The women's Education and Research Centre carried out a credit programme for unemployed women at Obeysekarapura shanty dwellings. The unemployed women of this area were selected for this project. The motive of the project was to basically offer self employment opportunities to unemployed women with the idea of developing their living standard.

Categories for this project were as follows:

1. Supplying food items for sale
2. Sewing garments
3. Selling betel leaves

Seven females out of a large number were selected as the most suitable for this project.

While two of them were lent money to purchase sewing machines, five others were lent money to buy material for their business ventures viz cloth, groceries, sewing accessories, betel leaves and other materials.

The participants undertook the responsibility of repaying the money lent to them, in instalments, out of their business income. The participants are being given advice and other consultations by our Organization. They keep us informed about the progress of their business activities while our staff visits them at least once a month and meets the participants for individual personal contact.

Recently it was decided to conduct this project through the Kotte Joint Community Development Society of Obeysekarapura. This came as a request from the President of the Society. The project is now better organised and it was encouraging to note that the society took the responsibility of assisting us by monitoring the repayment of the loans.



Hellman - Hammett Grant

The Hellman - Hammett grant is made from funds left by the estates of two American Writers, Lilian Hellman and Dashiell Hammett.

The grant programme is administered by Human Rights Watch, a US based International Human Rights Organisation having world- wide concern. These awards first given in 1990, were designated as assistance for writers anywhere in the world who have faced persecution.

MAUREEN SENEVIRATNE, a well known Sri Lankan writer, deserves our warm commendation as she has been named a recipient of this prestigious award being one of the 49 selected for 1995. An author of 12 books, she has often taken her themes 'from life', and Sri Lanka, in the throes of a 12 year civil war, the consequent pain and anguish and suffering in various forms have been her background.

Maureen Seneviratne's writings have been recognised for the humanitarian and human rights issues involved.

Merit Award



WERC was requested to nominate a woman from the grass roots women's organizations of the country to compete for an award made by Shelter Adams Foundation of California for the 'Resourceful Women Award 1994'.

We nominated Thilaka Herath from Women's Progressive Front at Ibbagamuwa. We are happy to announce that she has been selected for an award of merit of US \$ 1000 (of which \$ 250 is for her personal use and \$ 750 for her organisation) through our efforts.

We congratulate Thilaka Herath and also thank Shelter Adams Foundation for their donation to WERC as nominator.

Latest Issue.....

Nivedini - A Sri Lankan Feminist Journal

Vol. 1 No.2 December 1994/Vol. 2 No. 1

MAY 1995 (Double Issue)

Contents include.....

Economic Empowerment of Women

Buddhism and Feminism

Patriarchy in Language

Violence, Nature and Extent

Sinhala Cinema

Trafficking in Women

Pastoral Power

About this issue....

...." most impressive journal - its an excellent publication and ofcourse, continually breaking new ground and dealing with the most soul - searching issues,

Hope it goes to Beijing - its so good".

"The Hand that Rocks the Cradle"

The English film shown at WERC auditorium on Friday 26th May '95

Laura, a mother of two and an asthmatic, consults a physician who fondles her against her wishes, while examining her. Distressed by this, she and her husband decide to file action against the doctor, so that other women patients do not suffer the same fate. The incident is given coverage on T.V. and other women who have had similar experiences are requested to come forward to give evidence. Meanwhile the doctor is shot dead, his young wife Peyton has a miscarriage and loses her baby. While the doctors struggle to save her life, this news item is being telecast on T V and her eyes suddenly focus on the woman who was instrumental in destroying her life.

She plans her revenge, and enters the household of Laura as a nanny, gradually winning the confidence of the family. She stealthily breast feeds the baby whom she feels belongs to her, seduces the husband, and now plans to kill Laura, so that she could have a husband children and home. When her true identity is discovered, she tries to kill Laura and her husband and take the children away with her. In the ensuing struggle Peyton is killed and the

family at last is safe. Losing her husband, baby and home clouds her reason and makes her scheming, seductive and she even plans to murder her mistress without any compunction. But she loves the baby and is prepared to go to any lengths to keep him. She is portrayed as a shallow materialistic person who is dependent on the possessions her husband's position provides but ignores his abuse of his profession. She is totally dependent on him, and has no resources of her own. Laura, the wife, is a loving mother who fights to save her family, even when she finds the husband attracted to the nanny. She wins the sympathy of the audience as she courageously takes a stand against the unethical actions of the doctor.

The solidarity of the women who back her with evidence of their own experiences is also an eye opener. The predominant qualities in both women is the love of children and family. Both are prepared even to kill or be killed in the struggle to get possession of the baby.

The many ways in which women use their strength and courage, and the lengths to which love of home and family can take them is portrayed in this film.

Book Shelf



BETWEEN FEMINISM AND PSYCHOANALYSIS
Ed. Teresa Brannan

Routledge Publications, London (1993), 265pages.
A collection of essays relating psychoanalysis to feminism and feminism to psychoanalysis.

MANY

RAMAYANAS

The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia

Ed. Paula Richman, Oxford University Press, Delhi (1992), 261 pages

Explores the diversity of Ramayana tradition, while demonstrating how non-dominant groups have re cast the Rama story to reflect their own views of the world or how selected incidents from the epic have become the teaching of religious liberation or demands for political separatism.

FEMINISM AND NATIONALISM IN THE THIRD WORLD

Dr. Kumari Jayawardene

Sajiva Books, Colombo Asian Ed. (1980), 274 pages
Reconstructs the little known history of these political struggles women launched in Asia and the Middle-East from the 19th century onwards.

GENDER AND ETHNICITY IN SCHOOLS: Ethnographic Account

Edit: Peter Woods and Martyn Hammersley
London Routledge and The Open University (1993), 228 pages

A sample of recent ethnographic work which considers the dimensions of gender and ethnicity in pupils experiences and addresses the issues they raise.

ASIAN PANORAMA: ESSAYS IN ASIAN HISTORY, PAST AND PRESENT

Ed. K. M. de Silva, Srimal Kiribamune and C. R. de Silva
New Delhi : Vikas Publishing House, (1990) 970 pages
A selection of papers by scholars on new findings in Asian History as well as other aspects of Asian Studies presented at the 11th conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia. It also includes women's history relating women to social changes in South Asian countries.

NECTARIN A SIEVE:
A Novel of Rural India by Kamala Markandaya
Jaico Publishing House, Delhi, 189 pages.
In the land where everything depends on rain and rice the setting up of a tannery brings about changes in the lives of Rukmani and Kunti. A novel of all times.

OUR LIBRARY IS OPEN FROM 9.00AM TILL 4.30 PM ON WEEK DAYS.

SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSES

Sinhala and Tamil classes for beginners are in progress and a fair number of participants are well on the way to conversing in the language that was once unfamiliar to them.

Any one interested is welcome to join. Please inquire from WERC.

Staff News

Ms. Tilaka Dissanayake has just returned having participated in a month's exchange programme organised by MATCH International Centre, Canada which is dedicated to "strengthening women's movements globally". This programme Linkages for Women's Lives is a sharing of experiences of women concerned with women's issues.

Ms. Rockey Ariyaratne joins us happily whenever she has time to help us out in temporary work.

Ms. Vinodini de Silva continues to undertake project work.

Ms. Rose Sinnathanby joined us as Administrative Assistant in April this year.

Ms. Chitra Abayaratna was appointed to the post of Executive Secretary.

Don Herera Embuldeniya a 4th year student from York University Canada joined us in July as a volunteer. He is concentrating on Gender Relations in Sri Lanka.

We thank all those who worked with us last year and wish them success in their future endeavours.

WERC will be moving to its new and more spacious premises at 58, Dharmarama Road, Colombo 6 in August 1995. Tel. 590985, 595296.

Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma (Myanmar)

Aung San Suu Kyi's release, after 6 years of house arrest by a military junta in spite of appeals by United Nations Human Rights Commission is hailed by all who hold democracy and human rights sacred.

Nobel Peace Prize winner for her struggle against tyranny for freedom and dignity, she became the most feared captive in Burma. "An example of the power of the powerless" we welcome the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and salute this courageous woman who faces undeterred, the challenges ahead" with cautious optimism" on behalf of her people and her country.

We stand in solidarity with her in her future endeavours.

Women's Education and Research Centre