



# PRAVAHINI

WERC News Letter

JULY 1996

## About The Women's Charter

The Women's Charter is a list of human rights and gender equality commitments accepted by the government as guidelines for legislation and development in the public and private sectors, and in the public and private lives of women. Drafted in 1992, and officially approved by the government on March 3, 1993, it is based on the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which was ratified in Sri Lanka in 1981. The incorporation of CEDAW into the Sri Lankan Constitution places an international obligation on this country to guarantee and implement gender equality.

The Charter is divided into two parts. Part I lists the rights that should be accorded to women to address all forms of gender discrimination, subdivided into the following sectors: Political and Civil Rights, Rights within the Family, Right to Education and Training, Right to Economic Activity & Benefits, Right to Health Care & Nutrition, Right to Protection from Social Discrimination and Right to Protection from

(cont'd page 2)

## The Women's Charter as an Instrument of Change

How can we make the Women's Charter more effective? Vikasha, a consortium of three women's organisations viz; Women's Education and Research Centre, Muslim Women's Research and Action Front and Voice of Women, convened an open forum on 16th March 1996 to commemorate International Women's Day. The conference, entitled "Using the Women's Charter as an Instrument of Change," was attended by the original drafters of the WC, NGO representatives, women scholars and professionals, and invited guests, most of whom presented talks on each section of the Charter. The presenters highlighted what the Charter had accomplished and what inequalities and injustices remain unchanged in the sectors of : political and civil rights, family, education, economic activities, social discrimination and gender violence. Many issues were covered including migrant workers, FTZ workers, access to credit

and technology, gender roles in school curricula, abortion, rape, maternity leave, etc. All participated in round-table discussions, sharing ideas on how best to translate the Charter's objectives into concrete action to improve the lives of all Sri Lankan women.

Dr. Wimala de Silva, Executive Director of the National Committee for Women (NCW), opened the conference by recounting the history of the WC and the NCW, and to what extent the mandate has been fulfilled. Although the NCW is recognised as an official advisor to the Minister in charge of Women's Affairs, and all the Committee members are appointed

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## ***Instrument of Change ...***

*cont'd:*

by the President, the NCW works on a skeleton budget without support staff. Only recently did the government allocate money to relocate the NCW headquarters out of Dr. de Silva's private residence. The government's heel-dragging in respect of financial support for the NCW seems to be reflective of their lackadaisical attitude in pushing the WC into legislative authority.

An advisory board was called to strengthen the NCW and bypass bureaucratic circles. This would be a group of women comprising human rights activists, journalists, lawyers, educators, and representatives from women's groups who would "make noise," something the NCW cannot officially do.

The consensus of all participants was unanimous: the effectiveness of the WC as an authority for creating lasting change is dependent upon its status as a legal document. "The Women's Charter is not a legally binding document, unlike the Worker's Charter. We need a legal document to challenge existing laws," said Ramani Muttetuwagama, a lawyer who presented to the panel a commentary on the legal aspects of the Charter. Currently, the WC is just an agenda of gender rights that the government is not legally bound to follow.

## **Some Positive Changes in Legislation Since the Drafting of the Women's Charter**

- \* Women with children born outside of marriage are entitled to maternity leave. Previously, women would have had to obtain a report of rape by the police to keep her job and receive maternity leave.
- \* Abortion was legal only when there was a physical risk to the mother. Now extended to cases of rape and incest.
- \* Age of consent increased to 16 years (was 12 years).
- \* Minimum age of marriage raised from 12 years to 18 years for all non-Muslim communities.
- \* Greivous hurt expanded to include child molestation.
- \* Rape now applies to married but separated couples, but marital rape is still legal. The term "rape" also includes gang rape, custodial rape, rape of the physically and mentally disabled and rape by a public employee.
- \* New penal offences include: incest which can receive a maximum of 20 years in prison, sexual harassment, child pornography, and grievous sexual abuse (which includes children as victims).

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The discussion became more animated as participants called for a lobbying force to

1) pressurise the government into ratifying the WC and  
2) be political leverage in addressing gender inequalities and injustices. Ms. Muttetuwagama made a very important point: the Constitution has never been challenged on the basis of gender discrimination, and a lobbying force to ratify the Women's Charter "might actually coalesce into a real women's movement in Sri Lanka."

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## **Women's Charter ....**

*cont'd :*

Gender-Based Violence. Part II establishes the NCW and its purpose and duties: to examine "progress made on the realisation of this Charter and for monitoring the achievement of its objectives"

*(Women's Charter Part II, 17.1)*

**To view a copy of the Women's Charter come to Women's Education and Research Centre library!**

## BOOK SHELF

HERE ARE SOME RECENT ACQUISITIONS TO WERC'S LIBRARY:

### THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

By Giri Raj Shah  
Volumes 1 & 2; 828 pages  
Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi 100 002. (1995)

*Informative text on women's issues such as status, history, crime, marriage, economic aspects, laws, etc. Aspects of family, dowry, divorce, sexual violence, religious and social constraints are dealt with in detail.*

### • POWER AND DECISION: THE SOCIAL CONTROL OF REPRODUCTION

By Gita Sen and Rachel C. Snow  
348 pages with references and notes  
A Harvard Series on Population and International Health  
Harvard University Press, Boston (1994)

*This book provides an analysis of how disparate policies, seeming unrelated to production, are implicitly "pro-natalist" or "anti-natalist." It also explores the current legal, economic, political and scientific trends for gender relations and women's health.*

### • A TREATISE ON THE LAWS AND CUSTOMS OF THE SINHALESE INCLUDING PORTIONS STILL SURVIVED UNDER THE NAME KANDYAN LAW

By Frederic Austin Hayley  
XLV, 108 pages, appendices  
Navrang, New Delhi (1993)

*In this book, the author explains the legal customs of the Sinhalese with a statement of the Kandyen Law in the early part of the 20th century. It contains appendices of Simon Sawer's Memoranda, Notes of Early Decisions, Examples of Deeds, etc. This book is a detailed reference source for Kandyen Law and useful for students and academics.*

## Gender and Education

On one of our trips to Trincomalee to meet with the women of Female Headed Households we came across Pushpalatha a 12 year old girl.

Her father was killed in one of the violent incidents in Trincomalee. We were grieved to realize that Pushpalatha has also been turned a bread-winner. She sells curd in the market twice a week to supplement her mother's earnings and so she had to stay away from school, 2 days a week. Being a girl education was considered not that important. The equation of poverty and gender should not however, be missed here.

The staff of WERC discussed Pushpalatha and decided that we should do something to uplift her from the predicament she has been pushed into.

We made a collection and opened an Account in her name in the Bank, so that she could get monthly what she earns by selling curd. She could then attend school regularly and be relieved of the burden of earning for the family.

We have solicited the help of the Principal of the school and some community leaders to ensure her regular attendance at school. We are happy that she is now attending school regularly and there are signs and symptoms that she has reclaimed her childhood.



### Call for Research Material

**WERC is presently engaged in a research on the missionary activities with regard to women's education in the north of Sri Lanka. We shall be happy to buy or borrow any relevant material available - old news papers, journals, magazines etc.,**

**PLEASE CONTACT US.**

## **WERC PROJECTS**

### **Female-headed Households in Sri Lanka:**

WERC is carrying out the first comprehensive study on this topic. The political conflicts in this country have left many women as widows and therefore the breadwinners of the family. The goals of the project are to determine 1) the number of female-headed households islandwide 2) how these women and children and the communities in which they live are affected psychologically, socially, economically, and legally 3) how these women cope with such a relatively unorthodox role, and 4) to compare and contrast the experiences of individual women. WERC's project coordinator is Ms. Vinodini de Silva. The initial desk research has been completed. The areas selected for research are Hambantota and Monaragala in the South, Trincomalee and Ampara in the East and Mulativuthe and Jaffna in the North. This project will highlight the issue to the government, NGOs, donors and the media. It can provide a better basis for development and humanitarian programmes targeting women, with the aim of being the basis of an Oxfam publication.

### **Emerging Ethnic Consciousness of the Up Country Tamils and its Implications:**

WERC is also engaged in a research project in Up Country. Whether women are participating in the process of searching for a national identity in a conscious effort to define themselves as a separate ethnic group is a moot point. The study is now concentrating on social changes of the Up Country population with a historical perspective, with a special focus on the social, economic and political role of women in the group. The study is now in the second stage in the Nuwara Eliya and Maskeliya districts. The year-long project commenced in January 1996, and the will findings be published in Tamil by WERC.

### **Opening of the Multipurpose Building at Obeyesekerapura:**

The official opening of the multipurpose hall built by WERC at Obeyesekerapura was held on February 21st at 9:00 a.m. Present on this occasion were Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran - Executive Director, Ms. C.K. Abayaratna - Executive Secretary, Ms Vinodini de Silva - Coordinator, Obeyesekerapura and the WERC staff. Also present were about 50 women from the Women's Committee of the village. The formal group opening was performed by Ms. Georgiana Hidramani, the representative of the Christmas Bazaar.. The Chief Priest presided over the proceedings. After the observance of pansil, the traditional oil lamp was lit.

Ms. Kumari Wickramasingha, speaking on behalf of WERC, gave a brief outline of the history of the project. As far back as 1990 a project had been undertaken by Dr. Kumari Jayawardena to uplift the women of the "canal row" along Gregory's Avenus, Colombo 7. Subsequently, these women were resettled in Obeyesekerapura. Two students of the Social Service Department who wished to carry out a survey with these resettled women, requested WERC to monitor it. The survey relulted in the organisation of a self employment project for the women. In due course it was found that the women were unable to progress with their self-employment programmes because they had to look.

*(cont'd on page 5)*

## WOMEN AND WORK 'A MAN'S VIEW

"HAVE YOU MANY CHILDREN?" THE DOCTOR ASKED. "GOD HAS NOT BEEN GOOD TO ME. OF SIXTEEN BORN, ONLY NINE LIVE," HE ANSWERED.

"DOES YOUR WIFE WORK?" "NO, SHE STAYS AT HOME."

"I SEE. HOW DOES SHE SPEND HER DAY?" "WELL, SHE GETS UP AT FOUR IN THE MORNING, FETCHES WATER AND WOOD, MAKES THE FIRE AND COOKS BREAKFAST. THEN SHE GOES TO THE RIVER AND WASHES CLOTHES. AFTER THAT SHE GOES TO TOWN TO GET CORN GROUND AND BUYS WHAT WE NEED IN THE MARKET. THEN SHE COOKS THE MIDDAY MEAL."

"YOU COME HOME AT MIDDAY?" "NO, NO. SHE BRINGS THE MEAL TO ME IN THE FIELDS - ABOUT THREE KILOMETERS FROM HOME."

"AND AFTER THAT?" "WELL, SHE TAKES CARE OF THE HENS AND PIGS. AND, OF COURSE, SHE LOOKS AFTER THE CHILDREN ALL DAY. THEN SHE PREPARES SUPPER SO THAT IT IS READY WHEN I COME HOME."

"DOES SHE GO TO BED AFTER SUPPER?" "NO. I DO. SHE HAS THINGS TO DO AROUND THE HOUSE UNTIL NINE O'CLOCK."

"BUT YOU SAY YOUR WIFE DOESN'T WORK?"

"NO, I TOLD YOU. SHE STAYS AT HOME."

SOURCE: *WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE PACK*, THE CATHOLIC FUND FOR OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT, LONDON.



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## FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

**PSYCHOLOGICAL:** ISOLATION, RESTRICTING FREEDOM, THREATS, HUMILIATION, ABUSE OF PRIVILEGES, DENIAL OF LOVE AND ATTENTION, DENIAL OF SUPPORT, THREAT OR ACT ABANDONMENT, THREAT OF HARM

**ECONOMIC:** DESTRUCTION OR SNATCHING OF PROPERTY, FORCED DEPENDENCY, NEGLECT OF OTHER PERSON'S NEEDS

**SEXUAL:** INCEST, MOLESTATION, FORCED SEXUAL ACTIVITY, INAPPROPRIATE SEXUAL ATTENTION, UNWANTED TOUCHING OR INTERCOURSE AFTER ASSAULT

**PHYSICAL:** PUSHING; SHOVING; PUNCHING; SLAPPING; THE USE OF ARMS, FEET, OBJECTS OR WEAPONS FOR DISCIPLINE; PERSONAL CONTROLS ON CLOTHING, BEHAVIOUR, ASSOCIATION AND ACTION

TAKEN FROM GLADYS GWASHURE, PROGRAM DIRECTOR, MUSASA PROJECT, AT THE SEMINAR ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, 31 AUGUST - 3 SEPTEMBER 1993, AT HARARE, ZIMBABWE. SOURCE: *SPEAK OUT/TAURAI/KHULUMANI*, NO. 27, 1994: WOMEN'S ACTION GROUP, PO BOX 135, HARARE ZIMBABWE.

## Obeyesekerapura... (cont'd from page 4)

after their children at home. It was felt that a Nursery School and Day Care Centre was needed. WERC then appealed to Christmas Bazaar, an organisation of foreign funders, who agreed to finance the project. The financial aid thus received was gratefully acknowledged while the support received to complete the building from the community and the monks of the temple was highly appreciated.

Ms. Hidramani said she was happy to be present to see the building project completed. Christmas Bazaar was pleased to have been of assistance for such a worthy cause and Ms. Haidramani was hopeful that the building would be put to good use.

Mr. Premasiri, speaking on behalf of the community, appreciated WERC's concern for these marginalized women and promised the whole-hearted support of the community. The Chief Priest, concluding the day's programme, thanked the representatives of the community for their presence and their support, and WERC for their interest in the community.

## EDITOR'S PAGE

by guest editor: Dana Quante

### *Freedom and the Woman*

"Freedom is a State of Mind" is a song from the musical "Shenandoah," set in Civil War America. In the performance, it is sung by a male African slave, a white woman, and a child. The song is an expression of self-empowerment and *metaphysical* independence from the dominant culture. The irony lies in the *physical* reality that: African-Americans did not attain full human rights until the 1960's; women did not attain full franchise until the Suffragette Movement culminated in the 1921 Amendment to the Constitution: and children in America continue to be victims of child abuse, molestation, and violence. But America has proved that passionate and peaceful solidarity, even in the face of real violent reprisal, as happened during the Civil Rights Movement, can create lasting change.

What is "freedom" and "independence" for women? I realized what independence is from my contact with Sri Lankan women who work and support their families. Independence is choosing and creating your own destiny even if it contradicts societal norms. It is not just a "state of mind" but a way of life. For feminists, gays and minorities in America, such choice is not without fear of societal criticism, or even physical attack. Yet these groups persist and grow stronger, especially as political lobbyists, because they act in solidarity. The sheer numbers - combined, they make up over 50% of the population - translate into voting power. Their media coverage is extensive because of the ways they create news in the forms of marches and rallies. In 1992, over three-quarters of a million gays, lesbians and bisexuals marched on Washington DC to petition for civil rights denied them. It dispelled the claim by the conservative right that the gay population was only a marginal percentage of the entire popula-

tion. (It is now believed to exceed 10% by Gay Rights Organizations). This march was not only instrumental in creating awareness, but the participants were also empowered by the experience.

The National Organization for Women (NOW) held a protest rally in 1995 to publicize the many forms of Violence Against Women in America. The rally was instrumental in swaying Congress not to ratify Newt Gingrich's medieval legislation proposals. Last year a million African-American men marched on Washington to promote feelings of solidarity, pride and empowerment in a persistently white-male-dominated society. The psychological impact of being among thousands of people just like yourself is the feeling of euphoric strength and renewed commitment to your group.

So may be a more realistic lyric would be: "Freedom is a State of a Collective of Minds," for the original lyric implies that injustice can be tolerated if one thinks one is "free." Taken by itself, "freedom is a state of mind" is the old keep-the-victim-passive philosophy because it isolates and separates an individual from one's peers and from one's oppressors. It addresses one's inner life without acknowledging the empirical reality of one's outer life. Human life exists and thrives within a nexus of relationships. Freedom depends not only on how you perceive yourself, but how others perceive you. Women can change their self-perception, but their role in society will change at a tortoise pace if men do not also change their perception of women.

In fact, Sri Lankan women face this dilemma of passive-inner freedom and active-outer freedom everyday. Sri Lankan societal norms accept a very limited definition of what it is to be a woman: feminine, dependent, obedient, demure, and self-sacrificing. Yet this same society, which is committed to economic liberalization and a war that leaves many women as refu-

gees and/or breadwinners of the family, expects women to adapt to these new challenges - requiring them to be assertive, independent, and brave - while still maintaining traditional female gender roles and appearance. It must be very confusing to receive such mixed messages, especially for working class and rural women.

The women of Sri Lanka today have no role models to deal with these new expectations. They are the living models for the next generation, independence pioneers, so to speak. And if these independent Sri Lankan women continue to work in solidarity to create awareness of the "independence process" and to empower each other, then the next generation of women might have the luxury of taking personal freedom for granted.

#### **Oh! to be an independent woman**

(excerpt from an article by Punyakante Wijenaike in *The Weekend Express*, 20/1/96)

"...to be a woman who can live with dignity, confidence and freedom so enjoyed by a man, she has to have the following rights:

- to be able to walk the streets alone in dignity, without being looked at or dragged somewhere and raped.
- to be able to walk unafraid into a police station alone and lodge a complaint
- to be able to enjoy a meal alone in a restaurant or with a member of the opposite sex
- to be permitted to enjoy solitude by the sea or in a cinema
- to be taken seriously when she voices an opinion on general matters
- to travel by public transport without harassment
- to drive a car on a public road without being pushed off the road by a male driver or driven mad by his tooting"

## The Woman's Guide to the Internet

"During the past decade, advances in information technology have facilitated a global communications network that transcends national boundaries and has an impact on public policy, private attitudes and behaviour, especially of children and young adults. Everywhere the potential exists for the media to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women."

*-from the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Unedited Advanced Text), item J.234*

The Internet is a rapidly growing "Network of Computer Networks" comprising about 50 million computers in over 150 countries encompassing various sectors, including Commerce, Finance, Education, Research, Entertainment and Communications.

*-from Lanka Internet*

The Internet can be a valuable research tool for academic and business women that is extremely easy to use, even if you have never touched a computer before. Imagine accessing information from NGO's from around the world; sources of funding; fellowships and higher education in other countries; papers and the latest information on women's studies, economic development, religion, statistics, health, etc.

The Internet can also bring you to Newsgroups which are discussion fora on specific topics (such as philosophy or women studies). You could discuss any topic with academics from around the world and acquire hard-to-find information from researchers in your discipline.

There are two Internet cafes in

## STAFF NEWS

Welcome into our Women's Centre.  
The two men who are willing to be converted.

Mr. Cyril Sudhaharan  
Mr. Amirthanayagam Nixon

### STAFF TRIP:

The WERC staff went on their annual trip on 2nd March 1996 to the Wadduwa Holiday Resort, spending the day in the very pleasant surroundings. Ms. Bernadine Silva, Director, Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran, Executive Director, and present and former staff members made up the group of 15.

After the welcome drink, everyone proceeded to relax and enjoy themselves. Before long the younger members were in the pool enjoying a cool dip. Some were flying high on the swings while others relaxed in the shade chatting with each other. The more energetic ones migrated from the pool to the sea.

A sumptuous lunch awaited us which was greatly appreciated by all. We then retired to a cool verandah and played a few indoor games organized by the Committee. Cake and tea were served in the evening and we left the Resort having spent a really relaxing day.

We record with appreciation the ready attention and service we received from the Resort and we say Thankyou to Ms. Aberatne the chief organiser of the rendezvous.

Colombo with friendly staff to teach you the basics of "surfing the net": **The Surfboard** at the Galadari (which is impervious to power cuts) and **The Cyber Cafe** on Union Place (across from Staples Street). Within a half hour you could be searching the Net like a pro. By using the icon "Netsearch" on the computer screen, you can just type in a general topic such as "Women's Studies" and get a long list of sites dedicated to that topic. Some interesting and useful sites I have found are (Internet address underlined):

- **Women's Net** - [www.igc.apc.org/womensnet](http://www.igc.apc.org/womensnet) - deals with the Beijing Conference
- **South Asia Women's Net** - [www.umiacs.umd.edu/users/sawweb/sawnet](http://www.umiacs.umd.edu/users/sawweb/sawnet)

- **Women's Issues** via Washington Web - [www.washweb.net:8000/washweb/community/women](http://www.washweb.net:8000/washweb/community/women) - a good index of Women's sites on the Internet.

I hope you try it! More women should have access and fluency with information technology. Good Luck!



## LIBRARY SERVICE

at  
WERC

**Weekdays and Saturdays: 8:30am to 4:30pm**

**Books, Periodicals, Video-Cassettes and Documented Newspaper Clippings are available in English, Sinhala and Tamil.**

**Special Areas: Social Sciences including Women's Studies, History and Mass Media**

**We are located in Wellawatte:**

**Women's Education and Research Centre  
58 Dharmarama Road  
Colombo 6  
Sri Lanka  
☎ 590985 or 595296**

**Our new auditorium/seminar facilities are available on hire for your next meeting or conference.**

## Revealing Numbers....

Women perform an estimated 60 per cent of the world's work but own only one per cent of the world's land and earn just 10 per cent of the world's income.

- Women constitute nearly 60 per cent of the world's one billion poor; of the one third billion people living in absolute poverty in the world today, over 70 per cent are women.
- US \$11 trillion is missing from the global economy each year because of unaccounted for and unpaid housework, childcare, agricultural and other labour performed by women.
- Wages for women lag behind those for men for similar work in all countries (the average is 30 to 40 per cent less than men for comparable work).
- Women work longer hours than men in almost all countries; they put in 12 per cent more time than men in market activities and household work taken together.

- In rural areas of developing countries as many hours as men (9.7 hours versus 0.9 hours), collecting fuelwood and water.

- Women account for half of the food production in developing countries.

- One-fourth of families worldwide are headed by women. • About 3.4 million women are battered each year worldwide.

- About one-fifth of women worldwide experience some degree of domestic violence during marriage.

- Women and their dependents constitute 80 per cent of the world's 23 million refugees.

- Women are often victims of torture, disappearance and systematic rape as a weapon of war. They have little role in decisions leading to wars and other conflicts but are left to maintain families in such situations.

*from Femina, Vol. 36 No. 23, Dec. 8, 1995, page 22.*

## News of the National Committee for Women

NCW has organised the Post Beijing National Plan of Action on women which has appointed Sectoral Committees to deal with the following areas:

Violence Against Women  
Human Rights and Armed Conflict  
Economic Activities and Poverty Alleviation  
Education and Training  
Health  
Environment  
Media  
Political Participation and Decision Making  
Institutional Strengthening

The Committees comprise persons with outstanding experience and expertise in these areas of critical concern. Their proposals are being evaluated and finalised by the NCW.

## Call For Papers:

- \* WE INVITE READERS TO SUBMIT PAPERS SUITABLE FOR PUBLICATION IN THE ENGLISH/SINHALA/TAMIL NIVEDINI (WERC JOURNALS WHICH ARE PUBLISHED BIANNUALLY, (JUNE AND DECEMBER)).
- \* MANUSCRIPTS ON GENDER ISSUES COULD BE SUBMITTED FOR PUBLISHING TO THE PUBLICATIONS COMMITTEE. PUBLICATION COSTS WILL BE BORNE BY WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND RESEARCH CENTRE (WERC).