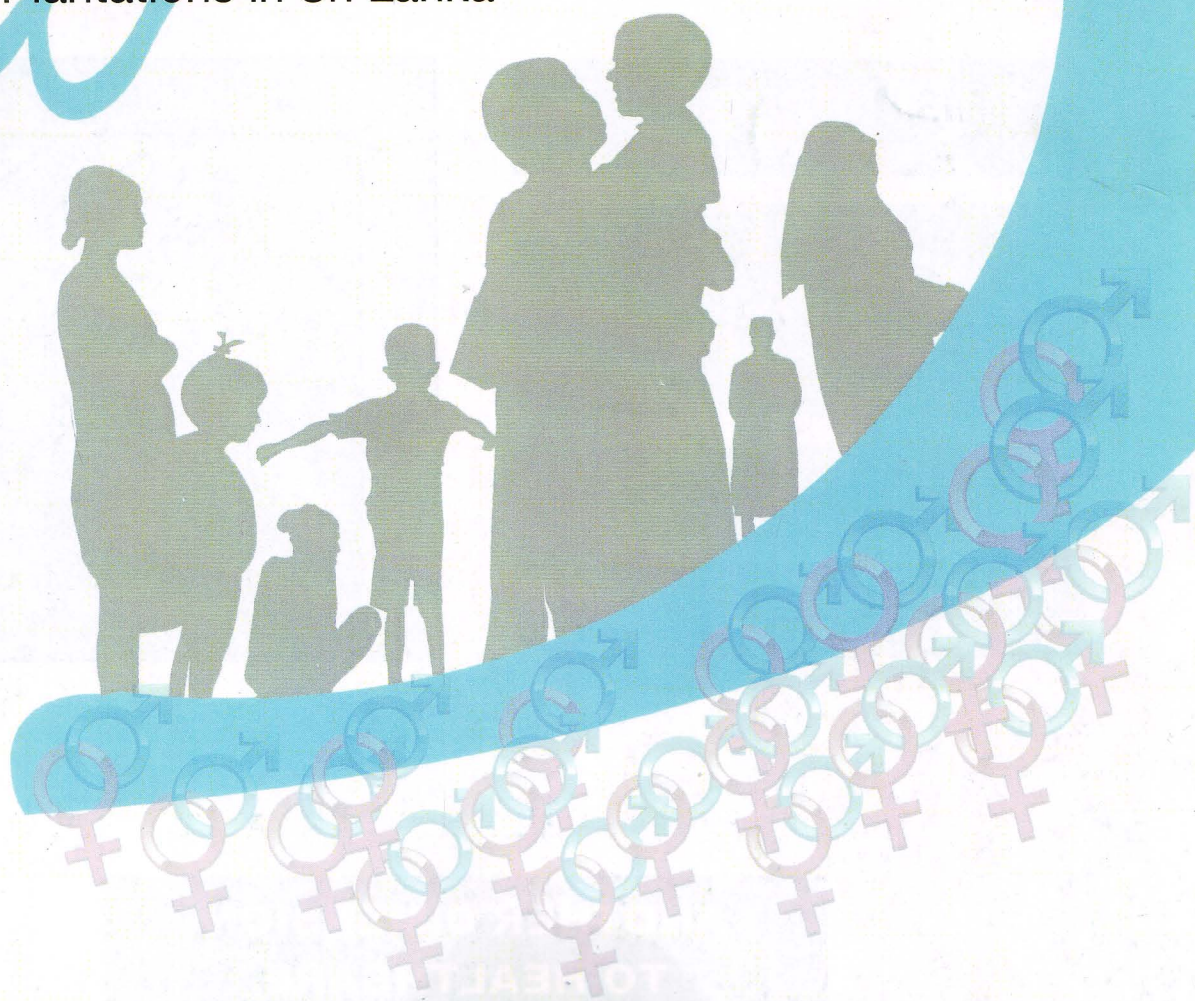


Tamil Women Development Forum
Second Women Conference - 2008

Conference Report

THE GENDER AGENDA:

Emerging Issues and
New Challenges in Northeast and
Plantations in Sri Lanka



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Gender, Women's Rights & Empowerment in Sri Lanka

Tamil Women's Conference

**17th & 18th May 2008
London**

Presented by

Tamil Women's Development Forum

THULASI

Bridge End Close, Kingston Upon Thames KT2 6PZ

*R. Pathmanaba Iyer
27-B High Street
Plaistow
London E13 0AD
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Tamil Women's Development Forum: Mission Statement

The Tamil Women's Development Forum (TWDF) is committed to providing an opportunity for Tamil speaking women to raise consciousness of issues affecting Tamil speaking women, to promote human rights and seek international solidarity. It provides a platform to voice their views, share their experiences and address common problems affecting them and to encourage mutual support to help realise their full potential.

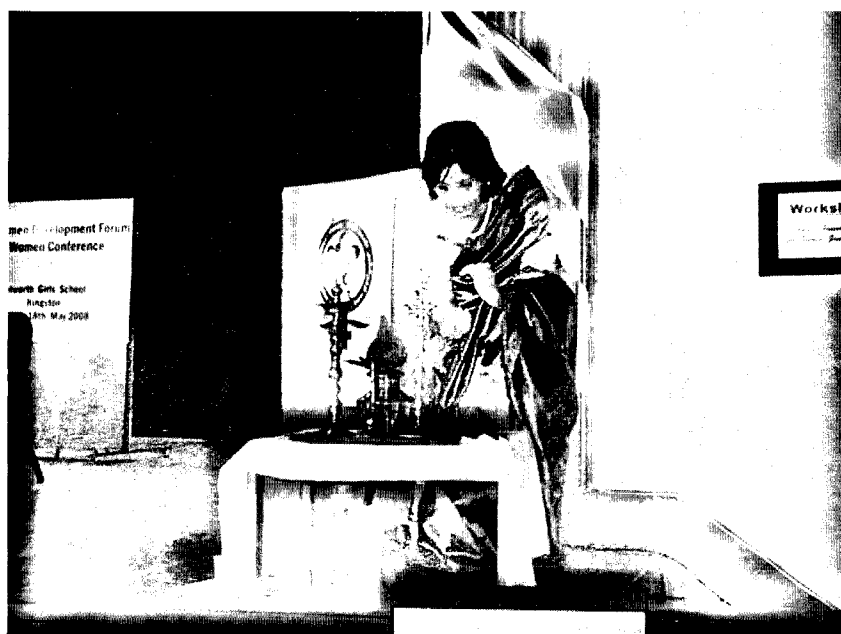
The TWDF was established in June 1995 as part of the Tamil Information Centre (TIC) to improve the position and conditions of Tamil women in the UK and abroad with the aim of improving their quality of life. A conference was organised in 2002 in the UK. The key recommendation was that TWDF should engage at a grass root level in Sri Lanka to support capacity building in local communities.

However, as a result of the tsunami disaster in 2004, the TIC registered the Centre for Community Development (CCD) as a charity in the UK. TWDF now functions as an arm of CCD involved in village re-generation work in Sri Lanka. This is carried out in Eravur, Navalady, Maruthamunai, Akkaraipattu and Thambiluvil.

TWDF aims to achieve its objectives by engaging with women of Sri Lankan origin (Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim) as well as with international women's movements.

Women constitute more than 50% of the population but own less than 5% of the wealth in the world...

"PEACE FIRST, NEGOTIATIONS LATER"



Gender, Women's Rights and Empowerment in Sri Lanka: Foreword

The 2008 Tamil Women's Development Forum was held in London and brought together women and men interested in women's issues. The theme of the 2 day conference was Gender, Women's Rights & Empowerment and included presentations on key human rights issues in Sri Lanka and globally and workshops on areas such as asylum seeking and refugee women, women and their role in economic development as well as women working in difficult situations around the world.

The conference benefited from a gathering of participants and speakers working within and with the humanitarian, development, and advocacy sectors. Speakers shared knowledge and experience of the role of women in building an effective society in Sri Lanka, and participants were encouraged to discuss, reflect on and challenge the conference themes.

During the course of the weekend we gained clarity and understanding of the key human rights issues faced by women, children and the elderly everyday. Key to the conference was personal leadership and the message that everyone can make a difference, whether its by fundraising, raising awareness, working with diaspora youth or as simple as writing to your local MP. All the while appreciating that to become effective and responsive, we as a community need to work together to better the lives of women, children and elderly in Srilanka.

Thank you for your participation.

Maduri Rajkumar
Chair
TWDF

www.ccduk.org



Thank you for attending!

The Centre for Community Development and Tamil Women Development Forum (TWDF) would like to thank all those of you who attended "The Gender Agenda: Emerging Issues and New Challenges in North-East and Plantations in Sri Lanka". This was the Second Conference organised by the TWDF and was held at the Tolworth Girls School, Fullers Way North, Kingston, on 17-18 May 2008. We wish to thank the subject specialists and the women activists involved in gender advocacy who presented their work at the conference. They eagerly welcomed the idea of such a conference in London when it was first suggested and we are delighted that some of them were able to come and present their work, ranging from areas such as health, economic independence, and access to education to conflict resolution, peace-building, and political participation. We also wish to thank all those who participated throughout the two days of the conference. In particular, we were delighted to see other scholars, young students and members of the Tamil community engaging in the debates and questions over the two days.

We owe a special thank you to our sponsors whose generosity made the conference possible. Lastly, we are deeply indebted to the numerous volunteers who gave freely of their time and energy to make this possible. They worked so hard and their good humour, high spirits and drive made this conference not only possible but a thoroughly enjoyable experience. Thank you all very much and we look forward to seeing you again next year.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Theva Nathan
Chair, Centre for Community Development



Saturday, 17 May 2008

Session	Contents	Who
Registration	Registration, Refreshments	Mrs Nalayini Rajkumar, Mrs Pathma Perinpanayagam, Mrs Shyla Visahan
Introduction	Introduction and Welcome Address	Ms Maduri Rajkumar, TWDF Committee Chair
Keynote address 1	Implementation of UN Resolution 1325	Ms Charlotte Onslow, Coordinator, Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS UK)
Film Extract	Documentary Film Extract -"War with No Guns"	Ms Rhona Jack, Managing Director, Blue Click PR Ltd
Panel Presentations	Introduction	Session Chair: Dr Ramani Chelliah
Message	Mainstreaming Gender in Peace Building	Ms Susan Kramer, MP for Richmond and Kingston
Presentation A	Gender, Rights and Empowerment in North-East Sri Lanka	Mrs Sushila Rajah, Director Synergy
Presentation B (Reading)	Gender, Rights and Empowerment in the Plantations	Ms Megamalar Shanmugam, Human Rights Education Coordinator, Home for Human Rights
Presentation C	Gender Equality in Sri Lanka, the Challenges and Opportunities	Ms Visaka Dharmadasa Parua, Chairperson of the Association of War Affected Women, Sri Lanka
Presentation D	Refugee and Asylum Seeking Women: Challenges, Changes, Choices	Mala Ponusamy, Solicitor, ECL Solicitors
Lunch		
Parallel Workshop Sessions	1. Women working in Difficult Environments 2. Women in Economic Development 3. Asylum seeking and Refugee Women	Dr Ramani Chelliah, Mrs Sushila Rajah, Dr Theva Nathan
Plenary	Key Messages from Workshop Sessions	Facilitated by Chair, with speakers from each workshop
	Closing Remarks by Chair	Session Chair: Dr Ramani Chelliah

Sunday, 18 May 2008

Session	Contents	Who
Registration	Registration and refreshments	Mrs Nalayini Rajkumar, Mrs Pathma Perinpanayagam, Mrs Shyla Visahan
Introduction	Introduction and Welcome Address	Dr Theva Nathan, CCD Chair
Keynote Address 2	The Application of UN 1325: Special Focus in Sri Lanka	Ms Margaret Owen, Head of Widows for Peace through Democracy and a member of the UK Bar Human Rights Committee
Panel Presentations	Introduction	Dr Theva Nathan, CCD Chair
Presentation A (Reading)	Gender, Rights and Empowerment in the East (Amparai District)	Nesrina Jameel Mohamed, Field Officer MUSDA
Presentation B (Reading)	Gender, Rights and Empowerment in the East (Batticaloa District)	Ms Vathsala Panchadcharam, Field Officer Synergy
Presentation C (Reading)	Promoting Women's Capabilities	Ms Nalini Ratnarajah, Programme Officer, Gender Unit, National Peace Council of Sri Lanka
Lunch		
Parallel Workshop Sessions	4. Promoting Women's Capability 5. Laying Foundations for Future Generations 6. Gender and Peace Building Capability	Dr Shanthi Parameswaran, Ms Maduri Rajkumar, Mrs Manchula Kuganesan
Plenary	Key Messages from workshop sessions	Facilitated by Chair, with speakers from each workshop
Submission	Way Forward	Dr Ramani Chelliah



Keynote Address:
Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325)
Presented by Ms Charlotte Onslow, Coordinator, GAPS, UK



Ms Onslow began her address by explain some background to her organisation, Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS, UK), which is a consortium of thirteen different organisations advocating the UK Government to support the effective implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

The key project of her organisation is the development of a monitoring system to examine the level of implementation of UNSCR 1325, as well as discovering the gaps in its implementation.

The organisation's research is currently focussed in six countries: Afghanistan, Congo, Northern Ireland, Nepal, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka.

Ms Onslow pointed out the importance of understanding why gender and gender analysis are important to peace building, mentioning the following points.

1. Why is gender analysis important to peace building? What do women bring to peace building?

These questions require an analysis in two parts:

First: clarification of conflict processes and factors affecting the conflict. Such clarification can be achieved by analysis of key issues such as power, control, competition and development in terms of the economy, culture and politics.

Secondly: a clear focus on the individual and their communities caught up in the conflict; a focus on gaining insight into their motivation and reactions, as well as their survival strategies and reconstruction methods.

Research into international crises suggests time and time again that peace agreements, post conflict construction and conflict prevention are successful when women are involved. This is partly because women tend to have an inclusive approach to security issues and they address key social and economic issues which are otherwise ignored in normal peace building methodology.

It is evident that a sustainable peace cannot be achieved unless all the affected parties are involved. Men and women must therefore form an understanding of their specific grievances, needs, social networks in which they operation and forms of survival available to them in conflict situations. It is this understanding, necessary for building a sustainable peace, that 1325 tries to encourage.

2. What is UNSCR 1325? Who are the global leaders on the 1325 agenda? What are the challenges to 1325?

The UN Security Council unanimously passed the 1325 resolution in 2000 although its principles were not new for many women activists and organisations that had been working in that area for decades.

UNSCR 1325 requires all parties to conflicts to respect women's rights and to support the participation of women in peace negotiations and post conflict reconstruction. The resolution emphasises the importance of gender equality principles in all aspects of peace building. The key point of the resolution is that it avoids stereotyping women as only victims of conflict. It acknowledges the role of women in conflicts as combatants, informants and proponents of violence.

UNSCR 1325 can be described simply through the three Ps: participation, prevention and protection. The '3Ps' provide a rationale for linking peace and security work with gender analysis. Gender equality becomes an important tool for incorporating men and women into peace building at national and local levels. It encourages us to understand the ways in which we engage in security reforms, and to take a very close look at gender training, political participation, demobilisation, disarmament and demotivating combatants.

Global partners specifically involved in implementing UNSCR 1325 are the UK, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Canada. Their involvement at the global level involves advocacy, funding and the development of national action plans on 1325.

There are several challenges to 1325; some states do not fully understand the principles enshrined in the resolution and others are not aware of its existence. Thus, there is an urgent need to continue raising awareness of 1325 and to explore possibilities for the practical implementation of the resolution. Each state needs to formulate and put in place national action plans on 1325. Such plans would constitute a comprehensive strategy linking peace and security issues and would act as a useful mechanism to encourage commitment from governments on these issues. At present, Liberia is the only country in the process of putting forward a national action plan. The Democratic Republic of Congo is currently in discussion on the matter and needs support to formulate a national action plan, as would many other states who might consider implementing UNSCR 1325.

The advantages of the national action plan include the following: it gives space to analyse the conflict, consult stakeholders and to initiate strategic action for peace and protection of women in the context of conflict. National action plans are strategic in that they provide objectives, benchmarks and monitoring opportunities, as well as fostering responsibility and ownership among governments. They also create a forum for dialogue between stakeholders who may otherwise not understand the key conflict issues.

3. Sri Lanka:

- **Status of women**
- **Peace and security work**
- **Challenges**
- **The way forward for Sri Lanka**
- **A 1325 agenda at the local level**

It is not clear whether the concept of 1325 is understood at the national level in Sri Lanka. At the local level there is limited understanding of Resolution 1325 and little synergy between peace activities and the articulation of such activities as related to 1325. Work at a community level on Resolution 1325 is difficult given a lack of resources awareness; peace

building in Sri Lanka is not treated as a priority. There is a gap between national policy and practice, and a lack of implementation which ensures that policy is not effective at ground level. At the same time feedback is not transmitted upwards that would enable decision makers to provide the necessary support at ground level. Yet from the speaker's personal observation and information gathered from colleagues, she acknowledged that women's organisations in Sri Lanka are doing impressive work.

However, the daily struggle for survival limits the capacity of women's organisations and support from the international community is essential.

Ms Onslow informed participants that it is not possible to provide a report on the reality of the situation in the North and East as the organisation's visit was very brief and confined to Colombo. What could be said is that there is a 'disconnect' with these areas.

One of the committees working in Sri Lanka had carried out a strategic mapping exercise on peace activism in the island, which established that basic work is being carried out. This data is potentially useful to GAPS for identifying gaps and improving coordination of work. It is also reassuring that Sri Lanka has a Ministry for Women Affairs which could serve as an excellent entry point to relay messages upwards from the local to government level. There is also an advisory group to this ministry, but it is currently dormant and it is worth noting that Sri Lanka's national action plan has a section on women in peace and security. This would constitute a first step in gaining some accountability from government, provided the plan is adopted, although at the present moment the plan is stalled in its progress.

The challenges that face Sri Lanka include: lack of resources; limited coordination and networking among local groups working on 1325, coupled with little or no communication with policy makers; a less active women's committee; and loss of international funding.

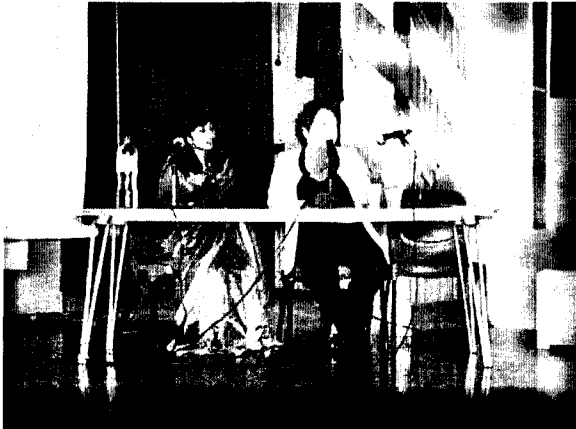
Recommendations

1. Supporting and strengthening networking processes, and the helping to improve the relationship between grassroots organisations nationally and regionally
2. Finance: identifying donors to support projects; training; capacity building; and improving communication between local organisations with a view to learning and sharing knowledge
3. Advocacy for the adoption of the National Plan of Action on Women in Sri Lanka.



Mainstreaming Gender in Peace Building: Opening Message

Presented by Susan Kramer MP, Richmond & Kingston



Ms Kramer began the presentation with a collection of media reports showing conflict victims around the world. She mentioned that in all the stories women are victims, citing the example of a Sri Lankan soldier who has raised attention about rape victims becoming sex slaves, and the setting up of a project to help them. Women victims of sexual abuse in a war context may also contract AIDS, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. These victims do not come forward for treatment, and suffer in silence; a common phenomenon in Ethiopia.

Ms Kramer said that in spite of the availability of programmes to address these types of problems, support is denied to the victims who are often not allowed to visit health and support centres.

On the other hand, there are a handful of very exceptional women in the international stage who, as a result of extraordinary circumstances and personalities, have become national leaders. The Bandaranayake family in Sri Lanka represents one such group of women.

Ms Kramer drew attention to these two extremes representing women in conflict situations, noting that there is little mention of women doing grassroots work on Resolution 1325. Women should play a key role all conflict issues and for this reason, UN SCR 1325 needs to be supported at a national and global level.

Visits to Sudan and Darfur have provided graphic illustrations of the difficulties in implementing women's roles in the peace keeping process. On one occasion in Darfur, for example, the UN invited a group of local conflict victims to meet; women attended with their male relatives. One angry woman insisted that she be heard in the meeting; she spoke honestly and demanded a solution for the conflict, without bias and propaganda.

When it comes to meeting at the negotiating table, the practice is often to invite the warring parties and not civil society representatives, nor women, who are often the victims of the conflict under discussion.

Ms Kramer pointed out that women are usually responsible for supporting victims of war and for working with people in agriculture, transport, health and education, and yet, nobody wants them at the peace table. She emphasised that the West is also complacent on this issue. A look at various institutions reveals an attitude of 'government knows best' and that 'government has all the solutions'. However, government will often call upon civil society, community-based organisations and volunteers to implement key strategies despite hesitating to let go of real power and accept civil society as part of the solution.

The speaker admitted that it will be difficult to complete the actual and full implementation of 1325. However, she drew hope from the example of Dalit women in Dacca, India. This group of women spent several years working together on the issues affecting them, developing a radio station and utilising the radio to relay messages and news, thereby

demonstrating their participation in the village council, where local and government politicians come together to listen to one another and discuss policies. Following the success of this media voice, the women began to have a big impact on what was going on in the area and ensured that people listened to their point of view. This allowed the women to make an impact on policies made in the area.

Ms Kramer ended by assuring participants that there will always be struggle on the ground. Women, therefore, need to work together in their communities and insist that they participate in the learning process.

She finished by noting that the conference event organised by TWDF where women participated together was part of this learning process.



Documentary: War With No Guns

Presented by Ms Rhona Jack, Managing Director, Blue Click PR Ltd



Ms Jack began her presentation by showing a documentary film: 'War With No Guns'. The film featured Brigadier Roger Mortlake who has served in several wars, including Vietnam, and peace-keeping in Anglola and described his experiences as a part of a peace-keeping force on Bougainville Island.

The Brigadier and his soldiers served as the fourth peace keeping force sent to Bougainville Island in the Pacific Ocean. There had previously been fourteen failed peace agreements on the island and the Brigadier was determined to achieve some

measure of success. The technique he used to secure the peace is called the Soft Power Technique and its message is a phenomenal one.

It has been ten years since peace was achieved on Bougainville Island and it still remains in place. A key reason for the peace agreement's success is that it was a grassroots peace initiative, designed by the groups of people who live in the conflict area and who must live together post conflict.

The film emphasised that external peace makers need to understand the cultural context in a conflict area. The Brigadier realised that the island's women would be a powerful force in the peace building process and persuaded them to engage with women from all conflict groups. The matriarchal aspect of Bougainvillean culture also proved instrumental in bringing the long evaded peace. Bridges were built between the two groups of women and also within the groups. The island's women pressured the male fighters to lay down their guns and participate in talks. As talks progressed, there was gradually less need for violence, and eventually peace was achieved.

The peace process demanded the support of the fighters' family members, as the prospect of peace was a matter of pride for the militant leaders. Peace was also supported by the additional concession of amnesty to the hardened core element in the conflict groups who otherwise would have created obstacles and problems. But most importantly, at the heart of the peace process was forgiveness, both at a personal and at wider levels. Before the peace accord, there was a complete loss of trust between and within the groups. However, the presence of women at the negotiating table created a real tipping point for change.

Reaching the ten year point in any conflict is a crucial marker, because usually by this point a generation of children and young people have become familiarised with violent conflict. When asked to disarm, they feel naked and vulnerable. The longer a conflict continues, the harder it becomes to secure peace, simply because there are not enough people in the community who remember peace.

The following points resulting from personal observation were presented to the audience:

'Men and women want the same thing. When there is a conflict, all want peace and want a future for their children. Perhaps there is a difference in the interpretation. The man possibly is thinking of territory, borders, wealth and prosperity and fending for children over a longer period. This sometimes gets twisted and the desire for territory and wealth becomes greed. This may be a reason why men will carry on fighting until they have wiped everybody out. Women look at borders for protection, safety and continuity and the future generation. This may be the reason why women are interested in peace.'



Message from Lesley Abdela for the Tamil Women's Development Forum



Ms Abdela began by congratulating the Tamil Women's Development Forum on their timely event and described a visit to Sri Lanka she had undertaken several years ago. Since then she has followed developments on the conflict, peace efforts and the tragedy of the tsunami.

Ms Abdela described her professional career as a civilian observer in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Iraq, where she has seen the same damaging mistakes made repeatedly by the international community, which ignores the participation and perspective of women and men as equal partners in peace negotiations and peace initiatives.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, passed unanimously in October 2000, is the first resolution ever passed by the Security Council that specifically addresses the impact of war on women, and women's contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace. Resolution 1325 spells out what needs to be done by all actors, including governments and the UN, to ensure the participation of women in peace processes and to improve the protection of women in conflict zones. The resolution endorses the inclusion of civil society groups in peace processes and in the implementation of peace agreements.

Ms Abdela described an even more trenchant **resolution** piloted through the European Parliament (EP) by MEP Maj Britt Theorin and passed by the EP in November 2000. An EP **Women's Committee** recommendation accompanying this resolution specifies that women should have at least 40 percent representation at all levels of international roles in reconciliation, peace-keeping, peace enforcement and peace-building entities.

The speaker pointed out that resolutions alone are insufficient – it is their implementation that counts.

The challenge for everyone committed to democracy and human rights is how to trigger determined commitment from politicians to implement 1325 and its European sister resolution. In the aftermath of dictatorship and conflict, everyone talks of human rights and democracy – yet women find themselves having to fight for any voice at all. It seems that the situation of millions of women around the world still fails to arouse passions in 'mainstream' politics.

Despite a plethora of conferences, advocacy from NGOs and good words from politicians, world leaders, diplomats and UN Secretary Generals, not enough has happened to address this problem.

Women continue to be excluded from negotiations, treaty-making, interim and transition-appointed governments, post-conflict reconstruction planning and policy-making. On the whole, men continue to appoint men to power, and it is largely men who set the post conflict agenda.

What do Nepal, Kosovo and **Sri Lanka** have in common? These are states which have experienced terrible civil wars or severe internal conflicts, yet in which half or more of their populations - Nepalese women, Kosovar women, Sri Lankan women, - have been excluded from their peace processes. What has happened to UNSCR 1325 in these conflict zones, given that the resolution was passed unanimously by the Security Council to include women as equal partners in peace processes?

Where are women in Sri Lanka in the painful efforts to **overcome** its conflict nightmare? The problem of the under-representation of women could equally be defined as the over-representation of men. The comment of one woman from a conflict-zone at a recent conference at the **Joan B Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice** has wide relevance: 'In current peace processes the peace is not for the people, it is for the male power groups. This is the wrong focus.'

Making a difference

The inclusion of women from the informal sector in formal peace talks can change the paradigm of how peace agreements are made. The negotiating team which drew up the 1996 South African constitution was 50% female. This remarkable gender balance was fundamental to an outcome acceptable to twenty six different political parties, according to former South African High Commissioner to London, Cheryl Carolus.

Indeed, the art of peacebuilding is far more subtle than the practice of warfare (in which men in power have had centuries of experience). It requires almost opposite characteristics, amongst them patience, creative dialogue, imagination, empathy, attention to the critical minutiae, and avoidance of grandstanding.

The gap between Resolution 1325's words and the reality of today's unresolved conflicts creates a challenge for everyone committed to democracy and human rights: how to trigger determined commitment from politicians to implement 1325 (and its European parliament sister resolution, passed on 30 November 2000)?

To quote the words of the anti-war song (performed by Joan Baez in the 1960s): 'When will they ever learn?' The answer is, only when women such as those assembled at the TWDF conference persuade them. Ms Abdela ended her presentation by wishing conference participants: 'Best of Luck for Peace!'

About Lesley:

Lesley Abdela is the Senior Partner in Shevolution. She is an independent consultant in post-conflict reconstruction, with on-the-ground experience in Kosova, Aceh, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Iraq and Nepal. She recently spent six months in Kathmandu as Gencap senior gender adviser to United Nations humanitarian agencies.



Gender, Rights and Empowerment in the North and East of Sri Lanka

Presentation by Ms Sushi Raja



Introduction

Ms Raja began by asserting that gender issues, particularly regarding the perceived role of women in society, are vitally important to the development of any society. Thus it is important to focus on gender equality, ensuring the participation of women and acknowledging the different roles and expectations of men and women in a community. An understanding of women's rights forms the basis of gender equality. This is essentially about autonomy; rights associated with voting; education; employment; ownership; freedom of speech and

writing; and marital, parental and religious rights. Gender equality encompasses the rights one possesses in society that fosters power in people, rights that can be used in women's own lives and in their communities to act on issues they deem important. This can be termed as empowerment: a multi-dimensional social process that helps people to gain control over their lives.

Historical Analysis

It is in this context that the situation in the North and East should be examined. Since independence, the Sinhala and Tamil communities have struggled to share power and take control over resources. This has led to constant conflict between the communities, with men and women exposed to violence as a result. In the event of a lack of political settlement, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam took up arms to claim a separate state.

During the 1980s the battle for Eelam was fought in the North and East, destroying infrastructure in these areas with heavy casualties on both sides. Conflict in the North and East resulted in increasing militarisation and intensifying violence throughout the country. In the meantime, the two communities have become polarised and live in a context of heightened mistrust. Although the 'right to self-determination' has been posited as the only solution to the conflict, various factions from minority communities have sought alternative strategies to solve the problems of their people.

Although many women in the North assembled under the banner of the 'Mother's Front' to challenge the government regarding disappearing sons, and some joined the combat forces, the majority of women in the North and East have stayed with their families, suffering oppression arising from the government's discriminatory practices and social oppression within their own communities.

During the 1990s mothers in the North and East faced a new dilemma as children recruited into warring factions of the struggle killed each other. This was a regular occurrence and necessitates long term mental health care for the families involved. Furthermore, an increase in cultural identification caused by ethnic conflict has led to other forms of fundamentalism: it is women who experience the brunt of this wave of fundamentalist thinking, for they are portrayed as guardians of their community's culture, religion and honour. This is currently on the increase and causes extreme anxiety amongst women. Though many of these communities have traditionally co-existed in a peaceful manner, the conflict intensifies hatred

towards the 'enemy' and anything belonging to that community; women and children yet again become vulnerable targets. The Fourth Working Conference on Women, held in Beijing, examined these issues regarding women and armed conflict.

The Peace Process and the Tsunami Disaster

The ceasefire of 2002 brought fresh hope to Sri Lankans, but the tsunami disaster of 2004 caused a level of destruction not witnessed on the island before. Women and children were disproportionately affected as they were more dependent on others for help. Donor agencies highlighted the problems experienced by women, including mental health problems, violence against women in the camps, poverty, sexual abuse and vulnerability to various other types of exploitation.

Further Displacement

After the breakdown of peace talks, the conflict between the government and the LTTE escalated, with further displacement followed by re-settlement in areas captured by the government. Disempowered and traumatised, women robbed of human dignity found themselves dependant on donors and exposed to abuse, violence and exploitation.

Issues of Concern

- The education system has failed rural communities in the North and East
- The legal system becomes complicated in the context of different cultural practices, and widows find themselves without legal ownership of their properties
- The health system has left villagers to take care of themselves and is inaccessible for many
- Government departments face a huge task in terms of reconstruction, replacement and rehabilitation. Bureaucracy and lack of capacity necessitates synergising with other agencies

Conclusion

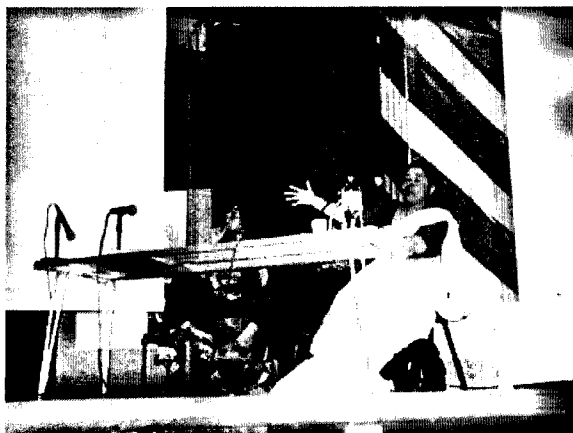
The government has a responsibility to ensure that the necessary systems and structures are in place to enable women to take control of their lives in an effective manner. UN Resolution 1325 offers a framework in which to mainstream gender and peace issues.

In any community while there is creative growth change is inevitable. Societies often experience developmental stages where a shift in thinking occurs and old ways of thinking are replaced by new perceptions. This paradigm shift is an essential step for a maturing community. Sri Lanka has had its fair share of disasters and the lessons learnt from these crises can be used to build a peaceful, equal and just society for future generations.



Gender Equality in Sri Lanka: Challenges and Opportunities

Presented by Mrs Visaka Dharmadasa



Background Information about Women in Sri Lanka:

- Sri Lankan population is 19 million
- Women constitute 51.9% of the population
- Literacy rate 89.4%
- University entrance rate 50.6%
- Advanced Level classes 11.2% are girls
- Life expectancy of women 75.4 years
- Infant mortality 12.2%

Women's Contribution

- Contribution to the GNP 34%
- Main income earners for women are: foreign employment, garment factory work and the tea plantation sector

Women in Politics

- Women gained voting rights in 1931
- First woman-headed state in 1962
- Female President for 11 years
- Women in Parliament 5.7%
- Women in Provincial Councils 3.9%
- Women in Local government 2.9%
- Women in Pradeshya Saba 1.7%
- Women Cabinet Ministers 6.1%

Women in the Administrative Services

- Permanent Secretaries to Ministers 16%
- Additional Secretaries 24%
- District Secretaries 20%
- Divisional Secretaries 14%
- SL Administrative services 26.7 %
- SL mission heads abroad 2.8%
- Other relevant services 21.1%

Association of War Affected Women (AWAW)

This organisation was established by Visaka Tharmadasa in 1998; its offices are based in Kandy, Sri Lanka. The organisation focuses its efforts on supporting the implementation of UN Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. The organisation implements a wide range of projects which highlight the key issues of UNSCR 1325 at a village level and to other related organisations through workshops and leaflets.

Activities of AWAW include:

- Taking 1325 to village level
- A project to disseminate the content of the resolution at local and urban levels
- 25 workshops in all districts of the country in 2003–2004

Women Affected by Conflict

- The three decade-long conflict has resulted in the deaths of more than 65,000 people and millions of rupees worth of damaged property. Women are disproportionately affected by the armed conflict as they are rendered victims throughout all conflict zones. For example, in Jaffna, by 2002 there were 18,000 widows due to the conflict.

Opportunities for Women in Sri Lanka:

- Sri Lanka had the world's first female head of state, thus the idea of women in positions of political authority has long been accepted
- Educational opportunities exist
- Women are the worst affected by conflict which, in itself, offers valuable experience
- Women are able to bring an entirely new perspective to the negotiating table

Challenges:

- Negative attitude of society at large, of the family unit and of individuals (both men and women)
- Violent elections
- Lack of funds



Workshop 1: Asylum Seeking and Refugee Women Facilitated by Dr Thevakunchary Nathan



Aim:

To examine the experiences of asylum seeking refugee women living in the UK. The group consisted of participants of diverse backgrounds and experiences. The problems affecting female asylum seekers and the challenges facing them were discussed. Participants took part in a stimulating and informative debate. As well as asylum seekers, participants included professionals such as lawyers, doctors and council workers.

Immigration

This appeared to be one of the main issues for refugees. It was felt that many people find it difficult to access appropriate advice regarding immigration matters in a timely fashion. It was also highlighted that some legal professionals are not helpful and clients feel rather let down by them. The cost of legal services was also thought to be beyond refugees' affordability.

Health

Many people mentioned the difficulties asylum seekers experience in accessing medical services. It appears that many GP practices are reluctant to register refugees; some, for example, request passports with valid visas and proof of address. This excludes many refugees from registering with them. Without the help of a GP it is impossible to access specialist treatment from hospitals. It is possible, however, to access emergency treatment from Accident & Emergency units.

Asylum seekers often experience a range of medical problems, including mental health problems. Some find it difficult to communicate problems and the lack of language skills further compounds this. Hence some sensitive issues are overlooked.

Children of Asylum Seekers and Refugees

There are significant problems amongst these children including: lack access to good schools, lack of appropriate advice for school leavers, shortage of counselling and support for teenagers and significant mental health problems have all been reported.

Employment and Finance

Unemployment is a problem for asylum seekers as it is difficult to secure suitable employment without appropriate immigration status. This leads to financial hardship; benefits

for which they are eligible may be inadequate for their needs or the refugees might not qualify for these benefits in the first place.

Housing

Housing is a problem, especially for those with young children. They live in grossly inadequate accommodation and the lack of appropriate immigration status excludes refugees from accessing council housing.

Recommendations

- Lobby relevant officials to highlight problems related to immigration with a view to resolving some issues
- Create a helpline in CCD with a full time co-ordinator and furnish asylum seekers with information and support. (Co-ordinator requires training and support)
- Create a database of various voluntary and statutory agencies who could offer advice and information to Tamil refugees and asylum seekers



Workshop 2: Women and Economic Development Facilitated by Ms Sushi Raja



Aim:

To examine the experiences of Tamil women living in Sri Lanka in terms of seeking employment or securing an income. Participants consisted of men and women from diverse backgrounds and experiences. The discussion covered problems experienced by women at a grass root level which resulted in a stimulating and informative debate. Many solutions were suggested to tackle these problems.

Individual and Community

The group examined the economic position of Sri Lankan individuals and their communities, and of the country as a whole. An important point raised was that education offers vital opportunities to individuals but in recent years due to standardisation many have missed out in this area.

Difference between Employment and Livelihood

Though education offers opportunities for many people who seek employment, rural people rely for a livelihood on working alongside men in agriculture or in cottage industries. However, these opportunities too are curbed by displacement or lack of skills and capital.

Values within Community

- Secure, permanent and pensionable jobs are sought
- Very often men work away from the home, whilst their wives and children live in difficult circumstances
- The focus on white collar jobs restricts choices

Problems

- The brain drain of professionals from Sri Lanka is a key problem
- The often harsh experience of domestic workers in the Middle East
- Conflict has affected women by depriving them of livelihoods
- Cottage industries, such as yoghurt production, suffers as a result of lack of motivation and planning

Recommendations

- Offer educational sponsorships for selected children in Sri Lanka
- Offer economic / livelihood projects through CCD such as sewing and garment Factory
- Offer training programmes to Tamil women at the grass root level, including skills training, motivation and parenting



Workshop 3: Women Working Under Difficult Circumstances Facilitated by Dr Ramani Chelliah



Women in the North-East of the island are faced with a different range of problems than women in the South.

The conflict situation often leads women to experience harassment from armed men. Women are very cautious about their interactions with men and they maintain a distance from them. During periods of heightened insecurity women pass checkpoints in groups rather than individually. They do not speak about their political views or of the distress caused them by the armed forces. In addition, women do not feel secure in their homes, as their temporary houses are flimsy, and they have no male figure to protect them. Their main concern is to protect their children.

Women are generally angry and frustrated with the government's failure to provide them with adequate services and resources. They are made to feel inferior when they go to the local government offices, schools and other places to work.

Displacement due to the tsunami and conflict has left many women with little more than some kitchen utensils and a mat to sleep on. Members of female-headed households tend to borrow utensils from each other. The loss of identity cards, birth and land certificates, and the difficulty of obtaining death allowances and entitlements, decreases their safety and deprives them and their children of their rights to return to previous settlements and to enrolment in schools.

Women often struggle financially. The lack of permanent employment and financial support force them into dependency on moneylenders. The absence of a husband has also changed their role in the family and has blurred the socially accepted gender division of labour that was the basis of community respect. They adapt using different strategies to find time for child care. Women are also forced to take over their husband's previous tasks and inevitably require help from their children and from money lenders. Women perform these tasks in male dominated spheres and often experience gender-based humiliation as a result.

Many Tamil-speaking women from the North-East consider migration as a solution to these difficulties. Temporary work in the Middle East provides the opportunities to improve their children's prospects. They pay little attention to the personal risks entailed by migrant domestic work. Finally, women sometimes engage in new and socially unacceptable work,

such as selling illicit liquor. As a result of these changes and their degraded status in society, their community often stigmatises them.

Although many women find it difficult to deal with their changed status and the perception by others in the community, they are proud that they raise their children on their own. Children, however, become the main players in the family's economic and emotional survival, which often forces them to drop out of school.

It is financially difficult for single women to hold a funeral for family members. This means that acceptance of the death is rendered more difficult, especially for disappeared spouses whose fate is unknown. Several women still continue their search for answers about the dead or disappeared, but encounter difficulties due to a lack of money, verbal sexual harassment from security officers, and a disbelief that their husbands and children are still living.

There are also reports of an increase in domestic violence, and divorce or abandonment, which are often consequences of conflict-induced community problems, such as a higher ratio of women to men, lack of education and behaviour management in men, alcohol abuse and the availability of weapons.

Women Workers in the Export Processing Zone

Sri Lanka's population is over 19 million, consisting of three main ethnic groups: the Sinhalese (the majority ethnic group), Tamils and Muslims. Over 50 percent of the population and of the labour force (of 6.6 million) are women.

Sri Lanka existed as an agrarian country for over 2500 years. It opened its doors to investment in the late 1970s, as many Asian countries did, by liberalising trade. The first Export Processing Zone in the island was opened in June 1978 in Katunayake, for the production of export-oriented goods only. Foreign investors from European, American, and East Asian countries were lured by incentives such as the relaxation of labour laws and long tax holidays. But the main attraction for foreign investors was an educated, intelligent, and submissive work force consisting of young women whose labour could be exploited with overwork and low wages. Today in many factories, annual increments and government-stipulated wage increases are not granted promptly.

The incentives offered and concessions granted to investors have resulted in workers receiving a raw deal, with long working hours, including compulsory overtime, and almost impossible hourly targets to complete orders in time. Workers are addressed in abusive language by supervisors and managers, local and foreign, for the slightest mistake, and sometimes are assaulted as well. There are also reports that workers in most factories are forced to limit toilet visits by the use of a 'toilet token' system.

Sometimes monthly attendance incentives are denied for very minor infractions. The total leave entitlement is 21 days per annum and in some factories new recruits are not allowed any leave until they have worked for one whole year. Health and safety measures at some factories are not adequate, and there have been several cases of industrial accidents as a result of workers not wearing protective clothing.

Since most of the workers are young and from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, they often spend their money on clothes and jewellery whilst eating sparingly to save money; this can result in malnutrition. Most of them send money regularly to poor parents in distant villages. Away from the protection of their families, they are also vulnerable to sexual abuse, in some cases resulting in unwanted pregnancies and abortion.

Recommendations

- Encourage research to identify problems faced by women working in the North-East and in plantations
- Concentrate on the five CCD partner villages and provide the necessary economic and financial support for women, children and elderly
- Work closely with trade unions and organisations in Sri Lanka to influence changes in Sri Lanka's Labour Laws to protect women working in the Export Processing Zones



Keynote Address
The Application of UN 1325: Special Focus on Sri Lanka
Presented by Ms Margaret Owen, Head of Widows for Peace through
Democracy and Member of the UK Bar Human Rights Committee



Although there are no official statistics, it is estimated that Sri Lanka's protracted conflict of a quarter of a century has left more than 25,000 widowed heads of households in Jaffna. Tens of thousands have been displaced from their homes by the Security Forces, and IDP camps are full of widows. Many schools in the North-East are closed. Those that were destroyed in the tsunami have not been rebuilt, and many teachers have either lost their homes, left the country or are among the internally displaced. Human rights activists are themselves often homeless, destitute

and bereaved, and are unable to promote and support fundamental rights effectively. There seems no end in sight to the violence, nor any mechanisms for bringing those who perpetrate human rights abuses to justice.

Why is the conflict in Sri Lanka so ignored – by the UK, the EU, the Commonwealth Secretariat and even the media?

Sri Lanka could be the 'litmus paper' for testing the clout of UN SCR 1325. A country in conflict which, paradoxically, still can boast of economic growth, a thriving tourist industry, high levels of literacy, and the infrastructure to develop, implement and monitor policies (a far cry from the situation in other conflict afflicted countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Afghanistan, and Iraq). However, although the country's infrastructure, justice system, and civil service seem to be operating normally, there is in fact wide-spread corruption and lawlessness, a deficient justice system and a government that sees all outside intervention to persuade it to observe international conventions and resolutions (including 1325), as an interference in its domestic affairs.

The conflict has caused extreme suffering among the Tamil and Muslim communities. Unemployment and consequent poverty has contributed to increased domestic violence, prostitution, abductions and kidnapping. There is a prevailing climate of fear in the country. Every day people go missing, but there is no investigation of these disappearances. People are increasingly fearful of reporting disappearances, of bringing complaints of torture, rape and killings and of giving evidence to the police. Furthermore, there is no impartial official body with the resources to conduct investigations, and bring perpetrators of crimes to justice. There is no peace process in the pipeline. In 2006 the Minister for Science, with the responsibility then of drafting a peace policy, did not mention the requirements of 1325 since he had no knowledge of it.

The government is committed to a military solution to the conflict. Apart from efforts made by women's organisations (such as the Association of War Affected Women) UN Security Council Resolution 1325 is barely known in the island, and the government has made no moves to develop a National Action Plan. UN Special Rapporteurs who have reported negatively on the use of torture in detention centres, the situation of IDPs, the treatment of human rights defenders, and on extra-judicial killings have been accused by the government

of supporting the LTTE. Even the former UN Human Rights Commissioner, Louise Arbour, was branded as an LTTE supporter because her report highlighted grave human rights abuses committed by the state.

The National Human Rights Commission and national peace initiatives have also been paralysed, for political reasons. The HRC, composed of government appointees, has failed to follow up and investigate the cases – such as, disappearances, torture, and extra-judicial killings - reported to it. National peace initiatives have also failed to promote dialogue and a political solution, nor have they tried to use 1325 to bring women to the negotiating table. No report has ever been published on the state of human rights and peace processes in Sri Lanka.

External Mediators and Peace Brokers

Until 2007 Norway had the role of facilitator, and it did successfully broker a peace accord in 2002. The accord was severely compromised in 2005 and Norway has now withdrawn from its facilitator role. The Sri Lankan government accused the Norwegian facilitators of being 'biased' in favour of the LTTE since they would not agree to use the label 'terrorist', and actively encouraged dialogue with the rebel group. A 'co-chair' mediation group to the peace process exists, composed of the UK, US, Japan, Australia and Canada but it is without resources and is not active.

It is possible that its place will be taken by Japan or even China, which is also heavily investing in Sri Lanka

Current Developments

A delegation of UK MPs from the **All Party Parliamentary Group on Sri Lanka**, led by labour MP Andrew Love, visited Sri Lanka in the first week of April. GAPS sent Mr Love a message reminding him of the importance of mentioning the status of 1325 in Sri Lanka in his talks with the Sri Lankan government.

Recommendations

1. Prepare for a meeting in Sri Lanka in the coming year on 1325, to enable ordinary women from the North-East and the South, and other human rights and women's NGOs in Sri Lanka, to be heard
2. Encourage networking between women's NGOs in Sri Lanka (including local women's groups) and women's groups across the globe to inspire, encourage and provide solidarity to Sri Lankan organisations. We could invite high achieving leaders who have emerged from grassroots level, such as Lily Thapa from Nepal, to speak about how their NGOs have used 1325
3. Facilitate Sri Lankan women of different ethnic groups, religions and political factions to demonstrate to government how dialogue, rather than military action, should provide the basis of a road map for peace
4. Train women's groups in Sri Lanka to use international human rights machinery: e.g. provision of Shadow Reports to the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues to the UN Secretary General, which is responsible for the implementation of 1325



Challenges Facing Upcountry Tamils in the 21st Century

Presentation by Megamalar Shanmugalingam

Ms Shanmugalingam began by speaking of the difficulties in defining the identity of Upcountry Tamils. When considering this, she urged that we examine the history, problems and experiences of these people who have traditionally lived in and around the central provinces of Sri Lanka. For two hundred years, the problems experienced by this group have been largely ignored by their Sri Lankan neighbours and by India (their country of origin). Upcountry Tamils still toil in the harsh environment of mountainous terrain, struggling to make a living.

The actual population of this group is greater than official government statistics would suggest; an anomaly due to a lack of consensus on the criteria for defining Upcountry Tamils. Following independence from Britain, Upcountry Tamils were the first casualties of discrimination against minorities propelled by the Sri Lankan government. They were disenfranchised and for decades were not able to claim the citizenship rights and entitlements offered to other citizens of Sri Lanka. Despite six attempts to rectify this situation, it was difficult to achieve positive results, and many Upcountry Tamils remain stateless today. The struggle for rights such as gender, children's and labour rights is difficult given that some Upcountry Tamils have not yet been granted the fundamental right of citizenship.

Ms Shanmugalingam pointed out that the plantation sector, as it is popularly referred to, is dealt with by national authorities separately from other public sector undertakings. Plantation estates are sold to international companies and the management of individual estates tends to be very hierarchical. The estate manager possesses overall responsibility over estate workers who therefore have little opportunity to secure rights in terms of land or home.

Living conditions on the estates, first established by the British during colonial rule, are also archaic in nature. Some housing schemes were established but failed to take off due to lack of ownership rights. For instance, a house offered to a worker on an estate must be returned to the estate management if the worker secures employment elsewhere.

Health

Health provision for plantation workers is managed independently from that of the rest of the Sri Lankan population. Health provision in the plantations is administered by independent Trusts established by the Estate Owners Association and NGOs. Given these circumstances, health needs are met on an ad hoc basis and are totally inadequate.

Women on the estates are not targets of official family planning advice strategies and some women have faced forcible sterilisation without the offer of alternative family planning methods. Furthermore, schemes to address malnutrition often do not reach all estate residents; it is the needy who often fall through the safety net.

Education

This is another important sector that is neglected in many plantations. For instance, pre-school provision is not properly organised in the plantation sector and the few pre-schools that exist adhere to their own standards and are authoritarian in nature. Frequently, pre-school teachers do not have any formal qualifications or training.

Children studying in plantation schools are unable to compete for places in higher education as they are indirectly denied opportunities to access it. In some cases, those who have gained the qualifications required to secure places at university have no financial support to enter higher education.

Economy

Estate workers tend to lose out in wage negotiations. Trade Unions either collaborate with the government or do not take adequate action to improve wages. Furthermore, most women workers work longer hours than men, and there is widespread exploitation of women and children in the plantations.

Elderly people

The elderly are the most vulnerable group within the Upcountry Tamil community. Once they are no longer of working age, the elderly have no access to financial security. Neither their employer nor the government provide support, and there are no care homes for the elderly on the estates.

Globalisation

Globalisation has affected estate workers more than other vulnerable labour groups in Sri Lanka. Vast areas of land, including productive estates, are in danger of being submerged by hydro-electric schemes and other development projects. These developments are financed by multinational corporations or by foreign governments. When the projects are implemented, workers are evicted from their dwellings with no alternative arrangements for them in terms of employment or accommodation.

Violence

Due to the ethnic conflict Upcountry Tamils sometimes suffer retaliatory actions by members of the local Sinhala population and by the armed forces, including arbitrary violence, rape, arbitrary arrest and imprisonment without recourse to judicial review. Despite provision for Tamil speakers in the legal system, they are often denied the right to use their language in legal contexts. Protection granted them under the law is ineffective when faced with deliberate harassment by law enforcement officials.

The problems faced by Upcountry Tamils are great and diverse in nature. The day-to-day suppression of their basic rights and the lack of leadership in their community are the key challenges facing this population in the twenty-first century.



Gender, Rights and Empowerment in Ampara District

Presented by Nesrina Jameel Mohamed, Field Officer, MUSDA

Background:

Ms Mohamed began her presentation with background information about the Eastern Province, which consists of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara districts. Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala communities live in this area. The conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam has affected the social fabric of the community in Ampara and has destroyed the economic opportunities for people living in this area. Even though the community at large experiences hardship, women living in Ampara appear to bear the brunt of it.

Problems experienced by women:

- Poverty
- Lack of hygienic environment
- Inadequate educational opportunities
- Malnutrition
- Disrupted livelihood initiatives
- Sexual harassment, dowry issues and domestic violence

Why do we need to empower women in Ampara?

Statistics reveal that more women than men in the area experience poverty. They may be from disadvantaged communities and are heads of households, bearing responsibility for elderly relatives and children. They have very few opportunities to secure employment or engage in livelihood initiatives due to lack of skills and capital. Since they have very little experience in engaging with the outside world, there is little motivation or confidence to drive initiatives.

Economic development

- NGOs and the government are working together to help these women return to agricultural production and to return the district to being one of the country's leading areas of rice production
- Many have relied on deep-sea and fresh-water fishing to earn an income for their families. However, due to the conflict, these fisher folk are denied access to some parts of the sea. Once this problem has been addressed, many families will be able to return to fishing as a livelihood
- Cottage industries, such as weaving, are widely spread throughout the district and support for these industries will help people to get back on their feet
- Offering a market to sell the products will help these communities

Safe environment

- Women and girls need to be made aware of their rights and to understand that they do not have to put up with domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, and child abuse. Workshops on these issues will help women to claim and enforce their rights

Ms Mohammed presented profiles of selected villages to illustrate the problems experienced in this area:

THABILUVIL

Though the village of Thambiluvil enjoys a variety of resources, residents are unable to move forward because the village is in the grip of LTTE and the Sri Lankan army who restrict the

mobility of villagers. Only one third of the paddy fields are utilised by the villages, leaving two thirds uncultivated. Even though there are schools, the standard of education is low, and very few women attend school after the age of 16. Only 2-3% of women are involved in any form of employment; the rest remain in the home. Hygiene awareness has increased after the tsunami disaster, but in the absence of a hospital, local villagers have to travel long distances for medical treatment.

AKKARAIPATTU

This village is unique in that Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala people inhabit this village together. Previously they lived in harmony, but the current displacement due to conflict causes tension amongst the villagers and an increase in hostility between communities. Apart from suffering conflict-related displacement, during rainy seasons the villagers have to abandon their homes and move to higher ground.

Though many villagers have completed their basic education there is insufficient employment for them; even skilled persons are unable to maintain livelihood initiatives given their frequent displacement due to the rains or the conflict. However, people do have basic health and hygiene awareness.

The villagers are aware that some of their basic human rights are being denied (for example: non-enforcement of the right to education, instances of child labour) but they are not in a position to challenge these rights violations. Conflict-related problems include increasing tension between school children. Village residents are concerned about a range of issues: ethnic conflict, harassment by armed groups, economic difficulties, alcoholism, the vulnerability of certain members of society, such as orphans and widows and their personal safety.

MARUTHAMUNAI

This village is occupied by Muslims and Tamils and in its past has suffered floods (in 1957), a cyclone (in 1978), and the tsunami disaster (in 2004). Marutamunai was the worst affected area in Sri Lanka following the tsunami. The villagers have been displaced several times as a result of these natural disasters and naturally their livelihood initiatives have been affected. Educational opportunities are not utilised by women in the village. Amongst the women, professional workers are generally limited to the weaving industry. Hygiene awareness in the community is minimal and the hospital facilities are distant. Problems experienced by the villagers include: poverty, lack of employment, transport, alcoholism, forced marriages and dowry issues.

Women are unable to participate equally in development as they lack capital resources, competitive ability and educational qualifications.



Gender, Rights and Empowerment in Batticaloa District

Presented by Ms Vathsala Panchadcharam, Field Officer, SYNERGY CCE

Within the Eastern Province are the districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara. The province is rich in natural resources and is home to Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim people. The three communities traditionally lived in harmony, but the present conflict has increased tension between them.

Batticaloa district has been severely affected by the conflict. Certain areas were controlled by the LTTE at various points and fighting between the rebel group and the Sri Lankan army has caused many casualties in the area. In addition, Batticaloa has suffered from natural disasters, such as floods, cyclone and the tsunami of 2004.

Women have customarily participated in fishing, managing livestock and the weaving industry but continuous displacement and lack of capital have affected their livelihood initiatives. Furthermore, women have not been able to participate in public life nor in decision-making due to cultural restrictions.

The Batticaloa Tamil community is a matrilineal one. According to this custom, women are allowed to own possessions, such as houses and land, have a say in their lives and can secure dowries for their own use. However, in the present consumer society, these customs have been distorted and power has been transferred to men. The conflict has exacerbated this tendency, since armed groups are free to take control of individuals and possessions by virtue of their military power.

Tamil and Muslim women in Batticaloa district face similar problems which include: loss of spouse, children and other family members. Many widows shoulder the responsibility for providing for their children, but the traditional customs in their communities tend to hinder their efforts. Often they do not receive support from their extended family and, as a result, conflict sometimes arises within families.

Many women go to the Middle East as domestic workers as a result of this poverty. Within their communities, however, they are looked down upon for doing so. It is common for men to refuse to marry women who have worked abroad as maids.

Caste discrimination can also be a problem for displaced persons and families who are forced to reside in temporary shelters, and women may often suffer more due to caste prejudice, occupying a lower social position in the first place.

In refugee camps and temporary shelters, women are exposed to a wide range of problems. The cramped conditions in camps have led to a high rate of alcoholism amongst displaced men, sexual harassment of and violence towards women, lack of privacy and child abuse. Women are prey to different kinds of abuse in these conditions, including verbal, emotional and physical abuse. Government actors and international agencies providing support for rehabilitation have avoided addressing these issues; for example, the financial support given to men is often more than that given to women.

Women's participation in politics

Within the Eastern Province, participation in politics by both men and women is minimal, largely due to the conflict. Many are too frightened of reprisals to engage in politics. In addition, lack of education, knowledge and skills restricts people from participating in politics.

Women, in particular, often lack the confidence to attend political meetings or to make decisions for themselves and others.

Problems experienced by women:

- No participation in decision-making
- Lack of livelihood initiatives and of marketing facilities
- Lack of health facilities
- Lack of security
- Non-participation in politics

Recommendations:

- *Offer livelihood initiatives to these women: the government needs to implement a wide range of skills training for women, together with sufficient capital to purchase implements for the livelihood activities*
- *Provide a safe and secure environment for women: many women experience domestic violence which takes place not only in temporary camps, but also in the work place. Statistics reveal that 60% of women suffer gender-based violence*
- *Support women's groups and empowerment of women: this must be prioritised, with a focus on implementing programmes for education, employment and participation in community initiatives*

Women are not given the necessary support to continue their education or to secure employment. Nor are there support networks which help them to overcome childcare problems and to make decisions regarding their careers. Despite the fact that some women do hold positions of responsibility and make decisions on behalf of the community, few real changes have occurred to improve the general status of women.



Women's Capabilities in Sri Lanka

Presented by Mrs Nalini Ratnarajah, District Coordinator, National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

The Context

- Women constitute over 50% of Sri Lanka's population
- However, their capabilities are not effectively utilised for development purposes. The potential offered by women to society, the polity and the economy is hindered as a result of cultural, institutional, social and political impediments
- Labour provided by women in the domestic sphere is not recognised as contributing to the national economy
- Social research has revealed that women in Sri Lanka, as a group, are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, domestic violence and labour exploitation. This vulnerability is high in the plantation, rural and industrial sectors
- In the North and East of Sri Lanka women are more vulnerable to armed conflict and internal displacement
- Sri Lankan women tend to be under-represented in the political sphere

Opportunities to promote women's capabilities in Sri Lanka:

- Sri Lanka is a member of the UN
- Its political system is a parliamentary democracy (and is therefore required to enact UNSCR 1325 in its domestic law)
- The country has a civil administration system
- The centralised political institutions are to devolve power at some point (according to the 13th amendment to the Constitution)
- Since the 1970s a ministerial portfolio has been dedicated to women's affairs in central government
- Several provincial governments have a ministry for women's affairs
- A Parliamentary Act has been enforced on violence against women
- A special bureau on women and children has been established in the police department
- Sri Lanka enforces the Voluntary Services Act, No.13 of 1980 that enables NGOs and INGOs to carry out social and charitable work (thus facilitating work on women's rights issues)
- There are several civil society organisations working on women's issues
- Sri Lanka has ratified CEDAW, along with other UN instruments on gender issues, including the International Declaration on Violence against Women

Weaknesses that hinder the promotion of women's capabilities in Sri Lanka:

- Divisions within civil society
- The values, norms and traditions in a patriarchal society
- State and local bureaucracy
- Under-representation of women in politics and decision-making at all levels
- Lack of education for rural women
- Lack of strategic gender education in the country
- Large number of internally displaced women
- Nationalist and feudal attitudes which advocate women's subordination
- Lack of political will to address gender issues
- Widespread view of women as a sexual commodity
- Lack of awareness amongst women themselves of importance of participation in politics

Further opportunities:

Support from international agencies, Human Rights institutions and women's organisations, along with Sri Lanka's commitment to CEDAW and its accountability to the UN can all be used to pressure the government to establish systems protecting and promoting women's human rights.

Threats:

Obstacles to the realisation of women's human rights include: the protracted ethnic conflict, child recruitment into armed groups, urban sector prostitution, unplanned urbanisation and exploitation of women in the plantation, rural and industrial sectors.

Recommendations:

- Promote organised efforts to improve women's capabilities. These should empower women in their economic and educational opportunities. Men should be encouraged to support and show solidarity for such initiatives
- Large scale education on human rights
- Implementation of gender policies
- Institutionalisation of sustained dialogue on gender equity
- Sustained collaboration between the government and civil society organisations on gender and development issues, with the aim of promoting holistic approaches

Recommendations

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Refugee and Asylum Seeking Women: Challenges, Changes and Choices

Presented by Mala Ponusamy, Solicitor

Ms Ponusamy began by pointing out that women's experience of persecution is often different from that of men, and that this is not always taken into account when asylum status is determined. Procedures might be based on the model of an asylum seeker as a young man engaged in fairly formal political activity against the state and an assumption that the political cultures in the country of origin are the same in Western Europe. Women's experience of being at risk is often ignored, when their political activity is less formal, such as providing food and shelter or passing messages. There is also a lack of recognition that gender identity itself might be a political issue.

Western governments often consider sexual violence against women as a personal issue rather than coming within the public sphere, even when connected to political aims or cultural norms (for example, the treatment of women by their communities following rape). Women who have been subjected to torture, forced marriage or mutilation should have the choice of personal interviews without the presence of family members and should have equal access to information, advice and services as men do.

The 1951 UN Refugee Convention

Female asylum seekers and refugees are unable to benefit equitably from current legal protection and social assistance measures for a number of reasons which Ms Ponusamy encouraged participants to consider.

The Refugee Convention should be properly interpreted as providing protection for women who demonstrate a well founded fear of persecution, including gender-related persecution, by reason of any of the five enumerated grounds, either singly or in combination. Any of the five persecution grounds may account for women's experiences of persecution, even where serious harm takes a gender-specific form.

Determination of status

Determination of status is founded on two points. The first concerns what constitutes persecution, and the second concerns the grounds for recognising status. Does sexual violence constitute persecution for the purpose of status determination? While there seems to be little dispute that sexual violence carried out by state agents in their official capacity does constitute persecution, agreement on the issue stops there. Where violence is carried out by groups outside government control, or when the government is unable or unwilling to provide protection for women, there is a tendency for domestic bodies determining refugee status to characterise sexual violence as strictly personal.

Detention

Asylum seekers should not be detained unless it is absolutely essential, and particular effort should be made to avoid the detention of nursing mothers and women in the later stages of pregnancy. Where detention takes place, separate facilities should be available for men and women except where specific requests to cohabit are received from all members of the family. Confidential medical assistance from a female doctor should be available upon request, and any recommendation for release made by a medical professional should, with the consent of the detainee, be taken into account by the detaining authorities.

Health

Refugee and asylum-seeking women should have access to health care, for both urgent and chronic needs. They should also have the choice of being attended by female medical

professionals. Additional psychological and trauma care and counselling, together with choices concerning reproductive health and family planning should be available. In certain circumstances, women have been refused maternity care at hospital and children refused vaccinations whilst in detention. This contravenes both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Domestic violence

This is a recurring problem which remains largely invisible in society and there is a recognised lack of funding to improve the situation. Important resources available to asylum-seeking women at risk of domestic violence are: solicitors, Social Services, refugee community projects, Women's Aid health visitors, and mental health services.

Summary

Ms Ponusamy ended her presentation by asserting that European states should develop best practice guidelines on the determination of asylum claims from women, at regional and national levels. Any of the five enumerated grounds can and should provide a legal basis for the recognition of women fleeing persecution as Convention refugees. Country of origin information should be collected that can serve as evidence in gender related claims, and this information should be routinely utilised by decision-makers.

European decision-makers should not evaluate gender specific forms of harm according to a standard different from that applied to other forms of harm which may amount to persecution. Human rights instruments should be used as the basis for assessing the risk of persecution. Where a woman has not been happy to seek protection from state authorities, for example when such action might have put her at further risk of abuse by a male relative, this fact should not prejudice her claim for asylum.



Sri Lankan Women Migrant Workers

Presented by Thishanthini Mestiyage

Status of women in Sri Lanka

The introduction of a market-oriented economic policy in 1978, and changing labour markets resulting from globalisation, have had a tremendous impact on the status of women in Sri Lanka. They have increased both opportunities and pressure for women to change their traditional role as house wife into a more enhanced role.

Sri Lanka's labour force is largely made up of men and the percentage of women in the workforce is only half that of males. However, migrant women add a large percentage to the country's foreign remittances and since the 1990s a steady acceleration of female migrant labour from Sri Lanka has been noted.

Gender Promotion Programme Working Paper 9 states that of the 858,000 Sri Lankan migrant workers, 590,420 are women and 78% of these migrant employment placements are in the unskilled category, which includes housemaids. Case studies carried out by Gamburd & Dias portray the average female migrant domestic worker as 'poor, married, with two children, educated to the 5th or 6th standard and not employed in the formal labour market'.

Reasons for migration of women:

- High rate of unemployment among females in Sri Lanka
- Poverty: migration becomes a strategy for family survival
- Seeing foreign employment as a convenient means to escape domestic problems, such as alcohol addiction in male members of the family

Labour migration to the Middle East

Sri Lanka's first women migrant workers left its shores in the 1970s. Although departure for foreign employment may seem an opportunity, in reality it exposes women to the threat of serious human rights violations. Women migrant workers experience:

- Harassment and intimidation
- Threats to themselves and to their families
- Racial discrimination
- Economic and sexual exploitation
- Xenophobia
- Poor working conditions
- Increased health risks
- Trafficking into forced labour
- Debt bondage
- Involuntary servitude
- Situations of captivity

Case study

Sumali left for Saudi Arabia in April 2001 to work as a housemaid. She worked in a household with nine children. On one occasion she accidentally dropped boiling water on her leg. Her employer provided no first aid or medical treatment, despite her pleas. The leg became infected and Sumali escaped her place of work and made her way to the Sri Lankan High Commission. There she received hospital treatment and was sent back to her family.

Regulatory framework in Sri Lanka and the recruitment process

The labour migration policy of Sri Lanka encourages migration as a method of boosting the country's foreign earnings. The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) is supposed to provide the following safeguards for foreign workers:

- Negotiating contracts of employment
- Making agreements with foreign authorities
- Providing assistance and guidance to migrant workers
- Dealing with the welfare and protection of migrant workers
- Implementing model contracts to ensure fair wages

Society's responsibilities towards migrant workers

David Soyza, Director of the Migrant Services Centre, highlights the need for attitudinal change in society by bringing about voting rights for migrant workers. Dudley Wijesiri asserts that SLBFE is the body responsible for training migrant workers and should offer meaningful and effective programmes that will empower workers employed abroad.

A landmark move for migrant workers

- In Kuwait two groups of employment agents from Sri Lanka and Kuwait have come together to pledge to support and to provide for the welfare of migrant workers
- Job agents are perhaps undergoing some soul-searching as demonstrated in an article by Feizal Samath in the Sri Lankan Sunday Times Online of Sunday 27th April, 2008

Suggestions for future interventions:

- Encourage coordination between the ministries of Health, Education and Labour to enhance the quality of migrant workers and to provide for the well-being of returnee workers
- Introduce regulations for recruitment agencies to protect workers and avoid exploitation
- Provide support networks and mechanisms to migrant workers prior to employment, at the workplace, and when returning from overseas work placements
- Offer health insurance, pension rights, counselling while on the job, model contracts, appropriate training for workers, and guarantees for back payments
- Reduce human smuggling and risky transportation



Workshop 4: Laying the Foundations for Future Generations

Facilitated by Maduri Rajkumar and Sinthuja Visahan



Aim:

The aim of the workshop was to examine how to lay the foundations for establishing a forum for young Tamil people living in the UK. The workshop group consisted of twenty-five participants from diverse backgrounds and experiences, but only a few young people. This aside, several innovative ideas were put forward and discussed at length by participants.

The group discussed social issues affecting young Tamil people in the UK:

- This includes the pressure from parents experienced by young people and the growing gap between the two generations
- The importance of Saturday Tamil Schools which offer opportunities for young people to maintain contact with their culture and to network with other young people from the Tamil community.

Ideas discussed included:

Youth magazine: Suggestions were put forward to write and distribute a youth magazine aimed at young Tamil people, featuring debates and discussions of relevant topics. The magazine would offer an opportunity to young people to express themselves. Initially, the publication could be distributed to a fixed number of people, with the inclusion of new recruits over time. A journalist participating in the workshop volunteered to take on the task.

Youth flyer: An information bulletin highlighting important events of interest to young people was considered useful. However, help will be required from TIC for this initiative.

Networking: Many present in the workshop revealed that they were involved with other charitable, fund-raising organisations. However, they stated that very little was known about these other charitable interests. Therefore, a database could be developed to share information, expertise and networking.

Recommendations

- To develop a youth magazine and circulate
- To develop a database of individuals interested in community work



Workshop 5: Promoting Women's Capability Facilitated By Dr. Shanthy Parameswaran



The Context in Brief:

1. Sri Lanka is a democratic republic with a population of approximately 19 million, of which more than 50% are women
2. Women constitute 33.7% of the labour force in Sri Lanka
3. A key issue in Sri Lanka is that women's capabilities are not effectively and efficiently utilised for the country's development. Women's potential for society, politics and the economy is limited due to cultural, social and political impediments
4. In Sri Lanka, women's contribution to the household market sector is considerable (compared to developed countries). However, women who work in the domestic sphere are not officially recognised as contributing towards the national income
5. Social research has revealed that Sri Lankan women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, domestic violence and exploitation in the labour market. Exploitation of women's labour is particularly a problem within the plantation, rural and industrial sectors
6. In the North and East, women are more vulnerable to armed conflict and internal displacement
7. Women are under-represented in the political sphere

However, there are some reasons for optimism:

1. Sri Lanka is a member of the UN and has given support to UNSCR 1325
2. Sri Lanka is a parliamentary democracy, and should be able to enact UNSCR 1325 in domestic law and to implement the resolution. Since the 1970s, a ministerial portfolio has been dedicated to women's affairs in central government: the Ministry for Women's Affairs. Several provincial governments have also established ministries dedicated to women's issues
3. Parliament has introduced a specific Act to tackle violence against women

There are cultural and social obstacles that prevent women from developing their potential:

- A. Differing values, traditions and cultural norms within the three main ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. Hindu Tamils, Buddhist Sinhalese, Christians and Muslims all view the role of women in different lights
- B. Under-representation of women in politics and general decision-making both in the public and private sectors
- C. Lack of education and health care in the rural and plantation areas. Unemployment is also a problem for many women.
- D. Certain attitudes which advocate the subordination of women hold sway in Sri Lankan society. All political parties claim to be committed to equal opportunities for women, although none put their words into practice

In light of the above, Sri Lankan women attempt to influence government policies through the women's committees of their political parties. Unfortunately, women's committees do not possess sufficient power to confront male-dominated political parties. It is interesting to note that women have only been able to assume leadership roles as a form of political inheritance from husbands or fathers, e.g. Srimavo Bandaranayake or Chandrika Kumaranathunga. Furthermore, none of the parties elect leaders on merit, meaning that women are unable to compete on an equal basis with their male colleagues.

Women in Sri Lanka are seen as sexual commodities whose principal role is to bear and rear children. In the context of domestic subservience, violence and marital rape become acceptable. Women's lack of education, combined with ignorance about their human rights, makes them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Despite the nominal verbal support given to women's issues by politicians, there is a lack of political commitment to women's human rights in Sri Lanka. In the workplace, women are often discriminated against, and are rarely found in high positions, particularly in the private sector.

Recommendations:

1. Promote organised networking

Increase the awareness of human rights amongst women and men. Men must condemn domestic violence if violence against women is to stop. This could take the form of organising women groups ('sangam') in villages and distributing information leaflets about women's human rights.

2. Education on equal rights

Education on rights and gender issues should begin at an early age; at school, for example. It should be communicated to young people that human rights apply equally to both men and woman, perhaps in the context of humanities studies. This is a long term approach but eventually we would hope to see sustainable changes in the recognition of women's equality.

3. Implementing policy advocacy

Women in Sri Lanka need to advocate for the implementation of policies on equal opportunities. Equality of opportunity in the workplace should apply, not only in the state sector, but also in the private sector. The government could consider establishing a commission with sufficient authority to enforce and monitor such policies.

Households should also be encouraged to include women as joint property owners on legal documents.

4. Sustained dialogue on gender equality

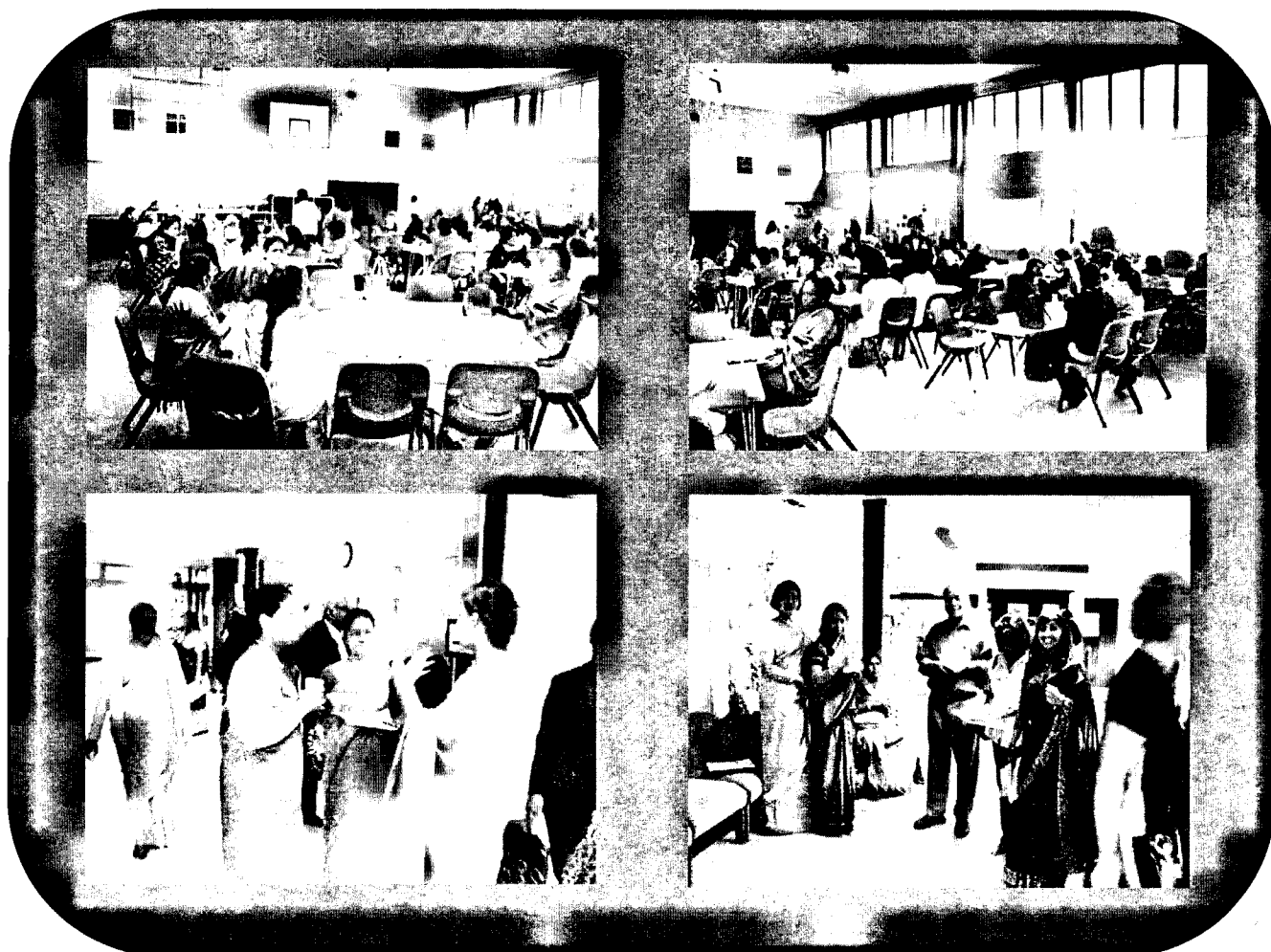
Sri Lanka needs a consistent and continuous policy discussion on gender equality and the government's commitment and obligation in this regard according to international standards.

Training should be prioritised on skills for daily life, e.g. working within a budget, healthy cooking, and simple preventive health measures, such as boiling drinking water.

Strategies must be put in place to encourage children to learn basic skills; children may then be able to read for and educate their parents. Education offers the best chance for overcoming poverty and discrimination, and educated women are more likely to seek medical care for themselves and their children, and less likely to become pregnant at a young age.

5. Collaboration between Government and Civil Society Organisations involved in women's rights issues

Following the 2002 ceasefire agreement between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, women's sub-committees were created to coordinate on gender issues. The sub-committees highlighted the importance of women's participation in the peace process and advocated UNSCR 1325. Unfortunately, the peace process collapsed and women's participation in peace talks ended. We must encourage a strong relationship between the government and civil society organisations working for women's human rights to facilitate collaborative work, thus fostering further women's interests.



Annexe 1

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and Women in the North-East and Plantation Areas of Sri Lanka

The ongoing conflict in Sri Lanka has had a devastating impact on the lives of ordinary people. With the disintegration of civil society, women within the civilian population carry the ever increasing burden of caring and providing for their families and the wounded, while struggling to survive on the margins of a war-ravaged local economy.

The Tamil Women Development Forum (TWDF) aims to focus on the specific needs of women living in the North-East and plantation areas in order to support them in their daily struggle and to empower them to become a force for positive change.

A formidable tool that strengthens this endeavour is the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security which places an obligation on the UN to:

- build a gender perspective within its work on conflict resolution and peace processes
- involve women at every level as decision makers and field workers

It urges Member States and all parties to armed conflict to do the following:

Representation of women (Article 1)

This article urges Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and in mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict;

Negotiating and implementing peace agreements (Article 8)

Calls on all actors involved, when negotiating and implementing peace agreements, to adopt a gender perspective, including:

- The special needs of women and girls during repatriation and resettlement and for rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction;
- Measures that support local women's peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution, and that involve women in all of the implementation mechanisms of the peace agreements;
- Measures that ensure the protection of and respect for human rights of women and girls, particularly as they relate to the constitution, the electoral system, the police and the judiciary;

Comply with legal obligations (Article 9)

Calls upon all parties to armed conflict to respect fully international law applicable to the rights and protection of women and girls as civilians, in particular the obligations applicable to them under:

- the Geneva Conventions of 1949,
- the Refugee Convention of 1951
- the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989

and to bear in mind the provisions of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court;

Take measure to protect women and girls (Article 10)

Calls on all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and all other forms of violence in situations of armed conflict;

Put an end to impunity (Article 11)

Emphasizes the responsibility of all States to put an end to impunity and to prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes including those relating to sexual violence against women and girls, and in this regard, stresses the need to exclude these crimes, where feasible, from amnesty provisions.

Refugee camps and settlements (Article 12)

Calls upon all parties to armed conflict to respect the civilian and humanitarian character of refugee camps and settlements, and to take into account the particular needs of women and girls, including in their design.

Planning for disarmament (Article 13)

Encourages all those involved in the planning for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration to consider the different needs of female and male ex-combatants and to take into account the needs of their dependants.

The TWDF intends to put to maximum use the power of UNSCR 1325 to leverage the political, financial and technical support of the UN and the international community to support and empower women living in the Tamil homelands of Sri Lanka.

Tamil Women Development Forum (TWDF)

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17 May 2008

Annexe 2

Collective Cultural Bereavement

The civil war in Sri Lanka has raged for nearly 27 years. There is no winner or loser in this conflict. The chronic nature of the war, compounded by abductions, killings, displacements, losses and general hardship, continues to exacerbate the physical and psychological problems of members of society caught in the middle.

At an individual level, losses resulting from the war have led to immense grief. When the losses, as in the majority of cases, have resulted from a traumatic event, the grief experienced is even more severe and disabling. The trauma of the event has to be first dealt with before the grief associated with the loss can be handled. Not surprisingly alcohol and drug abuse in these circumstances is not uncommon as many use this as a way to overcome underlying depression.

Suicide rates in Sri Lanka are the highest in South East Asia. Anecdotal evidence informs us, for example, about a father who saw his two young sons questioned by the army and shot as terrorist suspects. He turned from social drinking to alcohol abuse, eventually spending almost 24 hours of the day in a semi-drunken state. He had felt powerless to prevent the killings of his children, and alcohol helped him to forget the incident for at least a short time; this was a coping mechanism. His wife not only lost her two sons, but also her husband, this time, to alcohol; she became depressed and later committed suicide.

A number of psychological problems have been noted in children too, such as fear, separation anxiety, sleep problems, behaviour problems and other post traumatic disorders.

It has also been shown that trauma can induce personality changes in an individual. People become irritable, suspicious and aggressive leading to relationship problems and conflicts both at home and work.

When an individual suffers the family suffers as well. The traditional family unit has been irrevocably changed by the long-standing conflict. Children's respect for their elders has markedly diminished. Traditionally fathers took the lead at home but if they have been traumatised by experience of the conflict, their parenting skills are affected. In this situation, the father is viewed as powerless and incompetent by his children, particularly by his sons. Sons witness their fathers behaving submissively towards the army and other authorities outside the home, and lose their confidence in him. They no longer trust their father for protection and, as a result, feel insecure. Insecurity can promote aggressiveness in their behaviour.

Aggressive behaviour is now common amongst younger people and it is commonplace for them to engage in gang warfare, using guns, knives and other weapons; even grenades have been used during gang fights.

Furthermore, a higher incidence of single parent families is impacting on family dynamics. In a conflict situation males are more frequently victims of violence, resulting in a greater number of female headed households. In these households, sons are often forced to drop out of education and look for work. Similarly, mothers also become financially responsible for their families, in a reversal of traditional roles. When women are at work, child care is left to friends and neighbours, which can sometimes lead to child abuse.

Poverty and hardship combined with mental health problems can lead women to abandon their children. According to anecdotal evidence, women sometimes leave their children on the steps of children's homes and do not return to collect them. This kind of behaviour is alien to Sri Lankan culture and reflects the desperation these mothers face.

Orphanages have mushroomed in the conflict areas, resulting from large numbers of children losing one or both parents. Such children are raised by multiple carers in these institutions without experiencing a normal family life. They are denied the experience of living with consistent parental figures and siblings, which enriches a person's outlook on life. The long term problems caused by this lack of normal family experiences will be known only in the future, but could include issues such as attachment disorders, for example.

At a community level whole villages have been displaced and uprooted; for example, fishing communities who have been displaced to refugee camps, as fishing activities have been restricted by the army for security reasons. Inter and intra conflicts are rife in these camps as men become idle and despondent as a result of the restrictions and difficulties resulting from displacement. A similar fate has befallen farmers who have been displaced from their traditional areas, and are thus rendered incapable of cultivating their lands and of earning a living. Other traditional traders, such as carpenters, masons and bakers, have been similarly affected.

There has been a marked change in social values with a dramatic increase in sexual abuse and teenage pregnancy. Many families have been displaced from their familiar and protective environment; the lack of privacy in camps, crowded surroundings, alcohol abuse and lack of parental control have all contributed to these problems. One World Health Organisation worker observed that some mothers actively encourage their teenage daughters to become pregnant as then the girl and the child's father will be exempt from joining the LTTE.

A further significant social change is that negative practices, such as caste and other forms of social exclusion, ostracism and discrimination (such as hierarchies emerging from one's "uur" or village of origin) have diminished. Members of the diaspora, however, continue to idealise and romanticise their family and village roots, and often maintain such caste and status differences abroad.

The current conflict has an impact not only on the individual but also on the family, community and society as a whole. Peace, when it does come, will not immediately offer a solution to this collective cultural bereavement; it will sadly take generations to achieve this.

Dr Shanthi Parameswaran
Consultant Child / Adolescent Psychiatrist
Executive member of the UK Sri Lanka Trauma Group, and
Member of Tamil Women Development Forum (TWDF)



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The TWDF's mission is to develop and advocate for Tamil speaking women of Sri Lankan origin equality in global policy as they support their families and communities. The project fulfills this purpose through research, advocacy, community based services and programmes and by working in partnership with empowerment and social justice, in Sri Lanka and abroad.

Centre For Community Development

The Centre for Community Development (CCD) is a humanitarian organisation committed to supporting poor and disadvantaged people and works with people's organisations benefitting poor and marginalised communities irrespective of gender, ethnicity or religion. Email: admin.ccd@sangu.org

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