

## Ethnic Violence in Sri Lanka and the Impact on Women

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### Introduction

The island state of Sri Lanka is situated in the Indian Ocean, south east of Indian sub continent with an area of 65,525 sq Km. It's population is about 19 Million. It is a multi ethnic, multi religious country comprising 74 % Sinhalese, 18 % Tamils and 8% Muslims; 69% Buddhist, 18% Hindus, 8% Christians and 8% Muslims. Major Languages are Sinhalese and Tamil. Most of the Tamils are living in northern and eastern part of the country.

Sri Lanka gained Independence in 1948 from the British Government and since then the governing parties adopted policies in favour of majority community and it was perceived by the minorities that their rights were denied in land alienation, employment, education and development process. The minority Tamils tried non-violent agitation against the government policies initially and later they took up arms against the government and the country plunged into a protracted war in the northern and eastern parts of the country for the last twenty years. Several attempts were made to stop the war and finally, the Norwegian Government succeeded. Under the auspice of Norwegian Government, the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam ( LTTE) signed a memorandum of Understanding ( MOU) in February 2002, this year. Since then, the war has ceased and the peace process has been progressing successfully. The citizens of Sri Lanka hope that the present peace process will successfully rescue the country from the present turmoil.

The ethnic conflict, which transformed into a protracted civil war since 1983 had caused enormous human loss comprises the death and injury of civilians and combatants; the anguish of bereaved widows, orphans, the relations and friends; the displacement of people and homelessness. In addition, human suffering manifested in the form of psychosocial trauma, loss of livelihood, state of dependency, increasing number of women headed households, hatred and suspicion among communities, breakdown of social values, family separation, malnutrition, dislocation of organized socio economic life. Further, the conflict led to protective, incident induced, and forced migration of thousands of families who sought refuge in government welfare centres, with friends and relatives. About 200,000 families consisting of over one Million of persons have displaced within the country and unconfirmed number of people has fled to foreign countries including Canada as refugees. About 60,000 person had died and war widows are estimated to be around 40,000.

### Status of Women in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka maintains moderate level of gender development ( table 1). Women have attained only 69% the level of human development achieved by men. 69% GDI in Sri Lanka is considerably above the average for all developing countries, 56%. It is also above the world average, 64%. Compare to the rest of South Asia, Sri Lankan women enjoy high life expectancy, Universal literacy and access to employment opportunity. Further, Sri Lankan

foreign exchange earning is highly dependant on female labour in garments, foreign labour and tea production.

Table No. 1

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**Gender Development Performance of Sri Lanka compared to International Levels**

Country Group	Life Expectancy at Birth (years)		Adult Literacy Rate		Combined Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Gross enrolment ratio %		Earned income Share		GDI Value
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Sri Lanka	74.6	70	86.9	93.2	68	65	34.5	65.5	0.694
All Developing Countries	63.5	60.6	60.3	78.4	51.6	60.3	31.7	68.4	0.555
Least Developed Countries	51.2	49.1	34.7	56.6	30.7	40	33.1	67.2	0.323
Industrial Countries	77.8	70.2	98.5	98.5	83.9	81.5	37.7	62.4	0.856
World	65.4	61.8	70.8	83.5	57.1	63.9	33.3	66.9	0.637

Source : human Development report, 1997

The irony in Sri Lanka's relative progress in engendering development is the phenomenon of women being trapped in low-skilled, low-paid jobs clustered in domestic service, garment making and agriculture as well as traditional female occupations such as teaching, nursing and typing. Further, the gender discrimination is associated with gender stereotyping in the labour force, wage discrimination and the adverse effects of alcoholism and spousal abuse on women. Although women are politically conscious the proportion of women who participate in active politics is low. They are poorly represented in the parliament and therefore, the gender issues are inadequately voiced. In addition, the conflict has raised the population of female headed households, many young widows and children suffer from various degrees of psychological trauma and are heavily dependant on state or NGO assistance.

Though Sri Lanka had ratified, in 1981, the UN Convention on the elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), a positive response surfaced only in the early nineties with the Women's Charter (1993) which express the state's commitment to "ensure the full development and advancement of women for the purpose of guaranteeing them to exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men". A post Beijing Five year Plan of Action was drawn up for Sri Lanka in 1996, which has been updated now for the next 5 years, 2001-2005. Even though the Ministry of Women's affairs was established in 1983 together with other portfolios, it is remarkable that a the ministry was separated from other portfolios in 1997 and it's mission is; (i) to initiate, formulate and monitor policies, projects and programmes to facilitate mainstreaming of gender, (ii) ensure human and fundamental rights, gender equality and advancement of

women, and (iii) co-ordinate with public and private sectors, international agencies and NGOs to work for its mission. National Committee on Women (NCW) was established to entertain, scrutinize and take action against complaints of gender discrimination, to promote research into gender issues and to advise the ministry. In addition, Presidential Task forces on Migrant Women, Domestic Violence, Women in the Free Trade Zone, Nutrition and Child Protection were established in order to give special attention on issues pertaining to women and children.

A number of legal measures have also been taken in terms of new Acts and amendments related to women. The minimum level of marriage which was 12 for female and 16 for males was raised to 18 for both males and females. Amendments in Penal Code such as: (i) Introduced the concept of sexual harassment as an unwelcome sexual advances by words or actions and the punishment stipulated is either 5 years of imprisonment or fine or both. (ii) Defined the incest as whoever has sexual intercourse with another who stands in a relationship specified in the provision commits incest and the offender is liable for 7 years minimum imprisonment and a 20 years maximum term. (iii) Recognized the concept of marital rape as a crime offence. However, this had been limited to judicially separated spouses only. The amendments also recognized the concept of custodial rape and gang rape especially for the purpose of punishment. The ILO Conventions related to women such as Night work for women, Discrimination in Employment and occupation, Maternity protection and Underground work were ratified by the Sri Lankan Government.

Even though the Government of Sri Lanka had taken important steps for the development of women in Sri Lanka, practically the women in rural villages do not see any visible changes in their position. The government prepare very good plans and programmes, but it has inherent weaknesses in implementation. It doesn't have sufficient financial resource and the existing bureaucratic and social systems do not allow the changes to trickle down. Finally, the government plans and programmes are only in paper and they do not filtered through to the bottom level to reach the persons who are in real need.

### **Violence against Women**

Violence against women in general and sexual violence and domestic violence in particular are now recognized as crimes and violations of the human rights of women. An alarmingly high level of violent crime against women is reported in Sri Lanka ( Table No.2). Majority of women writers link violence against women with a lack of economical independence. The cultural factors such as sexual economic inequality, a pattern of using violence for conflict resolution, male authority and decision making in the home are strong predictors of wife abuse. It has been observed that due to the war the generation born in the 1970s and thereafter being the most exposed to the moral breakdown and the culture of violence. The conditions created by the war, the availability of arms and the large numbers of deserters from the armed forces have enhanced opportunity for violence throughout the society.

Table No. 2

**Incidents of Violence against women- 1998**

Offence Type	Domestic	Other	Total
Rape-Minors	45	184	229
Murder - Non domestic	-	171	171
Rape - adult women	11	134	145
Murder-domestic	129	-	129
Assault-Non domestic	-	106	106
Assault-domestic	85	-	85
Rape attempted	5	64	69
Sexual- harassment	4	50	54
Rape- armed forces	1	36	37
Sexual-Molestation	3	26	29
Rape and murder	3	25	28
Murder attempted	5	9	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>291</b>	<b>805</b>	<b>1096</b>

Women's Rights watch - Breakdown violence against women reported in the print media monitored in the period of January to December 1998

International standards with regard to violence against women are gradually being introduced into the Sri Lankan regulatory framework but the mechanisms of implementation are still very weak. Women bureau is established and 'Women Desk' is opened in police stations at various locations in the island. However, these desks are limited to a few police stations and majority of complaints continued to be brought to police stations which are not equipped with special women's desks. The purpose of these desks is to encourage women to report violent crimes but these desks are not opened for 24 hours a day where most incidents of violence against women, particularly domestic violence takes place at night.

**Gender Empowerment**

The gender empowerment level in the country is low. Women only possess 31% of the level of economic and political decision making power enjoyed by men. This is below the average attainment levels in developing countries, 37%, and the rest of the world, 42%. (see Table 3) The reason for the low level of Gender Empowerment is gender stereotyping and the slow phase of transformation of traditional role models of women. The majority of women tend to see their role as that of a housewife. This situation is likely to change as the number and proportion of educated women in the labour market increased over time.

Women's income earning activities cannot be considered in isolation from their roles within households and communities since each affect the other. Within households women usually assume most of the responsibility for household management and childcare. Meeting their responsibilities for the childcare, household management and community action limits their

capacity to earn an income. Further, within low income households, it is often the women and older children who absorb the most severe economic shocks, for instance through women having to increase the time devoted to earning an income. Poor women are also most vulnerable to violence and substance abuse. The government has several support programmes to help the poor households in the country such as promoting employment and income opportunities, Entrepreneurship development programme for women.

Table No.3

**Gender Empowerment performance of Sri Lanka in International context (%women)**

	Sri Lanka	All developing Countries	Industrial Countries	World
Seats held in parliament	5.3	12.7	13.6	12.9
Administrators and Managers	16.9	10.0	27.4	14.3
Professional and Technical Workers	24.5	36.7	47.8	39.3
Earned Income Share	34.0	30.0	40.0	30.0
GEM Value	0.307	0.367	0.586	0.418

Source : Human Development Report, 1997

**The Impact of Conflict on Women in North and East Region**

The Tamils of Sri Lanka, especially in the north, experienced their land divided into cleared and uncleared area which was ruled by Sri Lankan Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) respectively. People of the North and East have been displaced internally and also to India and other countries and hardly anyone can be found who has not suffered from this displacement. The women suffered mostly by living as Internally Displaced persons (IDP) where even their basic rights have not been met especially at the welfare centres. They had been deprived of the essential security, comfort and privacy of their homes. Those in welfare Centres in particular endure a poor quality of life. They have no housing, water or sanitation and they are extremely poor. Nearly 50% of children born in 2001 were underweight or malnourished. 52% of the lactating mothers are anaemic. Their reproductive health is also very poor.

**(a) Female Headed Families**

Female headed families are the worst affected in the northern and eastern Sri Lanka. Disintegration of social fabric, family life and social values has increased pressure on these female headed households in this region.

At present, it is estimated that there are 30,000 female headed families in the north and east. The conflict has raised the proportion of female-headed households, not only in northeast, but also in many of the poorer rural areas and low-income communities of the south. Many young widows and children suffer from various degrees of psychological trauma

and are heavily dependent on dry rations given by the government or NGO assistance. There is no food security and such women do not have access to regular and sufficient quantity of food. Society is unable to help these families as the majority are in the same scenario. Malnutrition is evident among these families. They suffer not only from poverty but also various forms of social exclusion due to their widowhood.

Problems faced in obtaining death certificates for the males lost in war burden the women by difficulties in access to appropriate facilities available from the state institutions and NGOs as well. Few women organizations help them. They get assistance only in limited areas with limited assistance due to the lack of resources and funding available for the organizations involved in this field.

Displaced People started returning to their original places for resettlement immediately after the signing of the MOU in February, 2002. Women, particularly women without breadwinners find it extremely difficult to organize themselves in the resettling process. Villages are devastated; productive assets are lost or damaged. They have to rebuild their homes and find out a way to earn the income in the new environment. In addition, the non-displaced and returning IDPs find it difficult to share the limited resources available in their villages after the destruction, such as sharing common water sources.

#### **(b) Domestic Violence**

The economic and other pressures on the families have contributed to an increase in alcoholism, and consequently the incidence of domestic violence against the women has increased. Males express their distress on their wives as they assume that they have ownership over their wives and have the right to beat her and keep her under him. Women get frustrated through continued psychological and physical harassments such as scolding, beating, and negligence. Abject poverty in the war zone is the major reason for such violence. Women are expected to support men with daily earnings to cover the family expenditures. The burden of taking care of children and elderly completely falls on women without the co-operation of men. Compare to other violence such as rape, murder, etc domestic violence are reported high in the area. Sri Lankan security forces are involved in most of the rape cases.

Domestic violence is sometimes due to early marriages which took place in the war situation, very often in government welfare centres, in order for males to escape being arrested and tortured. In these cases there is no understanding between husband and wife as they did not know each other much before marriage.

Atmosphere in the Police stations is not 'women friendly'. It does not encourage women to go and complain of things of a very personal nature. It has also observed at the police stations in this region have only few women police personnel available and therefore men only often record the complain. Lack of privacy and authoritarian manner of police officers had often been cited as deterrents. In addition, the prevailing conflict situation also deters the women to go to police station as most of the police personnel are Sinhalese and do not understand Tamil. Further, Women complaining against their own family members is considered a social

stigma and when the women go to complain they are often advised by the police personnel to withdraw the complain. Many cases of domestic violence are not registered due to these reasons.

### **(c) Income and Poverty**

The majority of violence against women is linked with abject poverty in this region. Since the women are economically dependent on others, their position to challenge discrimination against them is weak in the society. It is very hard to understand that the hourly wage rate for women is almost half of what men receive for the same job performed. In most cases since the properties and resources are not owned by women they are unable to engage in economic activities, and women entrepreneurs are hardly available in this part of the region.

Even though there is a common understanding that the re-payment rate in revolving loan funds is much more higher when the loan is issued to women, this responsibility creates more psychological agony and burden on them as the woman is not the decision maker for her own activities and financial plans, but men. Women cannot even enjoy the benefits received out of the loan received, but are responsible for repayment.

The traditional village level saving system called 'Cheettu' is working well in this area though the women have lack of knowledge about other saving methods and commercial networks. The little savings are used for the expenditure for their economical needs, build up shelters, as dowries for their daughters' marriages and other purposes.

Women's economical rights including access to employment and appropriate working conditions has to be uplifted. There is a common understanding that the women involved in labour jobs are forced for prostitution by their bosses and co-workers but these cases are not reported publicly due to cultural barriers.

### **(d) Education**

The drop out rate of girls is high due to the war. Destruction of school buildings made them to travel far away for studies, and parents did not want to take risks as they are concerned about their girls' safety and security. Difficulties experienced in getting Birth Certificates for the children born in India - when they stayed as refugees- prevent these children from joining schools. 50% of women and 35% of men did not possess Birth certificate in this area - mainly due to repeated replacements. Girl children are neglected due to society's wrong beliefs, such as that too much education will prevent girls from having a happy marriage life.

### **(e) Health and Sanitation**

Appropriate health care and information is not available for the women in this area. Pregnant and lactating mothers have to travel far away by difficult mode of transport such as bullock carts or bicycles over bad conditioned roads in order to receive clinical advice and other

services. In the absence of ambulance and other medical facilities, patients cannot be transferred to better hospitals and death has occurred several times.

In the absence of toilets in rural villages, men as well as women go for open air toilets in the jungle and they face embarrassing and dangerous situations when women face men in the jungle. Now, with even more people returning, this situation has been aggravated.

Lack of knowledge of family planning and poverty leads to too many children. Mothers allocate food for the husband, male children and then to the girl-child, lastly taking the balance of food, if any, to feed her self: this leads to malnutrition among women. They are unable to get out of the 'poverty-malnutrition' vicious circle.

#### **(f) Social Problems**

Apart from the poverty, the hardship women face is aggravated by the social problems in these communities. I would like to submit some findings from a recent research made on these villages.

- There is not much difference in the public perception of rape victims of war and prostitutes.
- Women are thought to have too much leisure time, and they are perceived as gossipers.
- Women from rural communities are not willing and also not allowed by their relatives to be based in urban areas for education or for job opportunities due to the society's views about women living alone in urban areas.
- Certain jobs, such as driving, cannot be performed by women.
- Night duties are not performed by women except in the medical field.
- Traditional system of males' authority on decisionmaking at homes persists.

#### **(g) Women Empowerment**

Because of the present socio political situations women are reluctant to come forward in public services and there are no Tamil female elected officials found. Only one Tamil woman is working in the top level of the administrative sector and few are in the middle level. There is no support for women from the bottom to come up in this region, and it is almost the same at the national level.

There are not many efficient organizations working towards the issue of women's empowerment in northern Sri Lanka. Few organizations set up mechanism to empower women and women face lots of barriers towards their work in forming women groups.

Common problems faced by the organizations in forming women groups are;

- Lack of awareness by women of their rights

- Lack of initiative due to the cultural influences against coming forward
- Too much home responsibilities
- Adult women are not allowed to participate in women's groups by their parents due to the fear of breakdown of their marriage.
- Men's attitude towards educated ladies is negative.
- Influence of village level control system towards women
- Males force women to ask for economical loans, as the only reason for allowing them to participate in meetings of groups of women.
- Traditional male control of community based organizations de-motivates women joining a newly-formed group.
- Women are not allowed to express themselves freely.

The rural women community based organizations formed in the recent past complain that;

- They are not given enough considerations by men in sharing the only available common building at their village to conduct meetings.
- Members find it difficult to take initiatives to solve the family violence reported to them as the women who try to solve the problems are harassed by drunkards, and threatened by other male dominated authorities.
- They grieve that only the women know the root cause of the problems but they are not allowed to make any decision to solve the problems common for their village.
- Members are reluctant to come to meetings due to family burden and cultural barriers.
- Society has the wrong opinion about women working for women's empowerment.
- Lack of capacity to participate in decision-making and lack of leadership skills prevent them from active participation.

### **Needs to be Addressed**

#### **1. Support for Female headed households**

Priority to be given to identify female headed households in conflict areas and support programmes to be developed to assist women in resettlement, income earning opportunities and independence. eg. In Vavuniya District a local NGO with the assistance of UNHCR and Danish Refugee Council constructed houses for 64 women headed resettled families.

#### **2. Women Empowerment**

Promoting socio economic status of women through income generation opportunities: provision of credit facilities, training on entrepreneur skill and also promoting marketing facilities could be considered. eg: WUSC is already involved in providing skill training in conflict areas in limited way.

Mobilizing women at grass-roots level is considered a strategy to empower women with leadership and organizing skills. These women are encouraged to form societies among themselves and to undertake various activities related to

their development. For this purpose social mobilization programmes could be considered.

### 3. Health Programmes

Maternal nutrition and health needs of adolescent girls need attention.

### 4. Gender sensitization programme

Gender sensitization programme to be introduced to create awareness of gender concerns among community leaders and civil servants.

### 5. Support for victims of violence against women.

Violence victims need assistance in guidance and counselling, legal support, easy access to law enforcement authorities and protective shelter. Awareness programme on violence against women for community leaders, police officers and school children would help much.

### 6. Involving women in peace building and conflict resolution

The ethnic conflict has completely destroyed, trust and sense of common goals among the communities. In such situation only third party interveners can play a role promoting peace building and reconciliation. Women can attend through a process of dialogue in support of peace building effort at community level.

### 7. Community Organizations

Community Organizations can play an important role in sensitizing poor women, raising awareness, overturning prejudice, addressing special problems such as alcoholism, violence in the home, transforming attitudes and lobbying for change. NGOs joining with government in this regard can assist women groups at community level.

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## Our Project : **CORDAID - Resources for Peace Project**

Intended outcomes of our peace building work are;

- (i) More harmonious relations between village groups from different ethnic /religious backgrounds.
- (ii) Improvements or resolutions to priority community-level problems common to different ethnic/religious groups.

The issues are those which have been articulated by village members themselves of Mannar District, Sri Lanka encompassing economy, infrastructure, education, health, psycho-social, culture, resettlement, security, religion and human rights sectors. Running through all those threads, we have a concern for the full participation of women and other marginalized groups.

Our activities focus on;

- (i) Collection of Information relevant to resolving/improving conditions of common problems
- (ii) Sharing information with groups of community members from diverse backgrounds
- (iii) Facilitating meetings with groups from diverse backgrounds to decide on common action to resolve/improve common problems
- (iv) Support for implementation of action plans
- (v) Gradual formation of networks of local/regional community help groups.

We plan to work by; identifying issues; inviting groups who have articulated the problems to meet together; providing meeting spaces, and facilitating meetings to better define the problems and consider possible solutions; providing information (people-to-people as much as possible) to inform the decision making process; facilitating the formation of action plans and celebrating the successes; asking the groups to share their knowledge with others.

Impact of our work; This specific project is only 8 months old. To date we have built trust in the intentions and supportive roles of the project. Meetings to date have indeed focussed on building trust across conflict divides. Our initial work indicates that we are succeeding.

We expect to expand the scope of the project to national level within the next 18 months.

Challenges in our work; Lack of financial resources

Traditional view of "women's place is in the home" extends to community leaders forbidding the formal formation of women's groups.

Drawing women into the mainstream of discussions on common problems. When men are present, women remain quiet: if they try to speak they are scorned or shouted down in mixed gender groups.

We would like to recommend donors to allow time (and funding) for the process of building trust: and to separate this process from the delivery of material items (emergency/rehabilitation programmes).