



**The Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the
United Nations and other International Organizations in Geneva**

The Role of Women in Peace-building: a Sri Lankan Perspective

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege to have this opportunity to be with you today and to address the Ambassador's Luncheon Series. Building on the last session of the Geneva Peace Conference - 'Mobilizing Civil Society for Building Peace' held on 24 October 2014, where the focus was on the intermediary role played by civil society through advancing education, journalism and freedom of religion, today I have decided to focus on the specific role played by women.

Of all non-State actors, the role played by Women, as part of civil society, must be regarded as a particularly important catalyst in building peace. Given the large number of inter-state and intra-state armed conflicts and associated violence and ensuing violations of human rights, what we sadly hear and see are women and girls often being affected differently to their male counterparts. It is a sad reality that women are particularly vulnerable and are often 'victims' of these dire situations.

Discrimination, violence and inequality towards women reflects the imbalances and the wider non-sustainability of the societal and institutional structures of a country, which can easily trigger a relapse into conflict situations. It is in this context that I see the pertinence in empowering women to play a role in peace building, to become real owners of the process, and partners in building trust and confidence across the divide.

Not only is this topic timely and sensitive from a global perspective, I believe that Sri Lanka's experience as a country that has emerged from 30 years of protracted conflict, underlines both the challenges and opportunities that face States and civil society in peace building.

Normative Framework

The concept of 'Peace building', first came to global attention in the 1992 report 'An Agenda for Peace,' by former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, which characterized peace building as an "action to identify and support structures, which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict." The importance of generating the sense of 'national ownership' and 'capacity building' at all strata of society to manage conflicts was deemed important, as well as collective endeavor by both State and non-State stakeholders. It is to realize this aim that the UN General Assembly through its Resolution 60/80 and the simultaneous Security Council Resolution 1645 (2005), mandated a Peace Building Commission (PBC), "to bring together all relevant actors to marshal resources and to advise on and propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peace building and recovery". These Resolutions also highlighted the need to have women playing a role in these processes.

Permit me to single out a few landmark initiatives that enabled setting in motion our collective efforts at the global level to ensure peace and security in a gender sensitive manner. This year marks the 20th Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, that adopted the historic 'Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action' of 1995, where a global pledge to attain 'equality, development and peace for women' was further consolidated. We know that its 12 point agenda covered critical aspects towards the empowerment and equality of women. In 2000, the UN Security Council, unanimously adopted Resolution 1325, a historical, legal and political framework, on Women, Peace and Security. Further, I note that the UN Secretary-General has commissioned 'A Global Study on the Implementation of

UNSC Resolution 1325', which will be presented by mid-2015 by a team led by Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy, an eminent Sri Lankan human rights activist and former UN Under Secretary-General and Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, as well as the first UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women. Launching this project Dr. Coomaraswamy has alerted that attention needs to be paid to "emerging issues that were not part of the original resolution, including the rise of violent extremism, and the use of new technologies to inform and protect". In addition, there is an important link as to how all these endeavors have helped in shaping other important ongoing initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and it would be important to see how 'gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls' as a stand-alone goal, can be further pursued through the integration of a gender perspective into the forthcoming post-2015 Development Agenda. These endeavors must necessarily reinforce the important gains that countries have achieved through the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 2000-2015, that helped considerably in empowering women, improving their conditions and ensuring gender equality across the globe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite all these concerted efforts, the reality is that as we speak, millions of women suffer from unspeakable agony on a daily basis, due to the absence of peace.

Initially as a journalist, subsequently as a UN official and over the years as a diplomat, I have had the opportunity to speak to many mothers and sisters in villages and cities, affected by the three decade long period of conflict in my country. I have known brave mothers who despite their personal grief, fought and are still fighting courageously, to find truth and justice for their sons and loved ones. I believe, that despite their loss, suffering and impoverishment, the hope for peace and a better life for their children and others - is a commonality that resonates with all women, anywhere in the world.

For purposes of organization, illustrating with experiences from my own country, I would like to highlight the role played by women, as part of civil society, in seeking to build peace during 4 time frames over the past century in Sri Lanka. I shall term these - the Pre-Conflict period, the Protracted Conflict period from 1980 till 2009, the Ceasefire/Inter-Conflict Period between 2002- mid 2006, and finally the Post-Conflict period where the focus is on ensuring sustainable peace and reconciliation.

1. Pre-conflict period

For Sri Lankans, the saying "the hand that rocks the cradle, is the hand that rules the world", is not merely metaphorical or rhetorical. It was very much a practical reality. We take pride in having produced the world's first woman Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike who served as Prime Minister for about 17 years in all, over 3 terms, and in 1976-77 also became the leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Her daughter, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga became Sri Lanka's first female President and the 4th Executive President in 1994 and held office for 11 years.

It is noteworthy that many decades before the election of these women to the highest political positions in the country, from the pre-independence era, women have been active in the Sri Lankan political arena. In 1931 Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) became one of the first Asian countries to be granted universal adult suffrage, for both women and men. Rappaport (2001) observes that this was achieved in part following the concerted advocacy led by the multi-ethnic and autonomous Women's Franchise Union in 1928. To put it in perspective, this was

only three years after the United Kingdom extended voting to all women over 21 years. Since then Sri Lankan women have been part of conventional politics and beyond being voters, campaigners and party workers, 2 women - Mrs Adline Molamure (Ruwanwella) and Mrs. Naysum Saravanamuttu (Colombo North), were also elected to the first State Council during 1931-1935.

From these pre-independence years when the concept of contemporary form of 'civil society' was yet unborn, Iwanga (2008) notes that Sri Lankan women engaged actively in social service activities such as '*Kulangana Samithi*' (societies of respected women) and '*Mahila Samithi*' (conventional female societies). These were regarded as the first stage of a women's social movement in Sri Lanka that provided a major entry route for women into public life and for advancing women's interests. It is noteworthy that well before becoming the first woman Prime Minister, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, played an active role in the '*Lanka Mahila Samithi*', which took her to all the villages of her husband's hometown electorate Attanagalla, where she helped form women's cooperative societies. Similarly, women led by Doreen Young (later Wicremasinghe) played a pivotal role in organizations such as the '*Sooriya Mal* (Portia tree) movement', which provided a rallying point for the anti-imperialist youth groups who launched a formidable campaign against the proceeds of Poppy sales on Armistice Day (11 November) being used for the benefit of the British ex-servicemen. Funds collected by selling the '*Sooriya*' flowers on the same day, were devoted to help needy Ceylonese ex-servicemen. This left-oriented organization which gained increasing influence within the socio-economic domain in the country was best known for its involvement in relief work during the Malaria epidemic of 1934-1935. Later, the movement was instrumental in projecting 'people's power', unifying all ethnic groups and enabling Sri Lanka's transition from colonialism to an independent democratic state.

The progressive momentum generated by activism of the women's organizations in Sri Lanka, were therefore an integral part of the country's struggle towards independence, and was to have far reaching implications that is felt to this day. The policy of Free Education since 1944, resulted in not only a high average literacy rate of 95.6 percent by 2012 with 96.8% for males and 94.6% for females, but also gender parity in access to education. Sri Lanka has achieved gender parity in primary schools and the gross completion rate in primary education is 89.9%. Sri Lanka's Human Development Index (HDI) value for 2013 was 0.750, positioning it at 73 out of 187 countries. Sri Lanka also shows impressive national health indicators especially for maternal and child health and in the prevention of HIV/AIDS, as a result of the country's well-networked health system. The country's village level health advocacy and curative system in particular, largely relying on midwives who strengthen the broader national level policies on family health and reproductive health concerns, maternal and child health and family planning. These non-discriminatory state policies have raised the quality of life for Sri Lankan Women.

In comparison with international standards, CENWOR (2008) makes clear that the number of women in the legislature in Sri Lanka remains low in proportion to men. However, women's participation in other professional bodies, public services and in public decision making processes in Sri Lanka remains high. Today, women in the Sri Lanka Administrative Service is 47.15 %, an increase from 17.1% in 1993. In the Sri Lanka Planning Service, the percentage of women is 47.63%, an increase from 28.8% in 1993. In the Sri Lanka Foreign Service, the percentage of women is 47.5%, an increase from 29.7% in 1993. It is to be noted that when it comes to professional services, participation of women is increasing, but is purely based on merit, not by quotas on the basis of gender. However, one must remain conscious that in Sri Lanka, as with many other patriarchal societies, the pace of change in some areas necessarily linked to socio-cultural aspects, such as practices and laws related to hereditary

rights and early marriages in certain local communities, does not undergo rapid change easily. That these may take longer, does not detract from the steady contribution by women to uphold and respect the values and norms of a strong family, which itself is a stepping stone to building peace and a stable society at the macro level.

The efforts in later years, including by women's organizations such as the Women and Media Collective, Muslim Women's Research and Action Forum played a vanguard role in pressing for mechanisms in legal and institutional terms to improve the status of women in Sri Lanka regarding equal opportunity for women and their empowerment. In pursuit of this goal Sri Lanka ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981, and several legal measures have been taken in respect to the Convention, including the establishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in 1982 and adoption of the Sri Lanka Women's Charter in 1993. These efforts, added value in the country's efforts to allow space for women to play a role in decision-making processes.

2. Protracted Conflict period

Notwithstanding the continuing positive trajectory of the empowerment of women in Sri Lanka, the period 1980-2009 during which the country experienced multiple internal conflicts in both the North-Eastern regions(GOSL-LTTE) and the rest of the country/South (GOSL-JVP), had a significant impact on women and has resulted in socio-cultural, economic challenges and brought physiological and psychological trauma as well.

As explained by de Mel (2003) there was no large scale female participation during the early youth insurrection in 1971 by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the Marxist party that led the insurgency. It was only in 1976 that the JVP Women's wing, 'the Samajavadi Kantha Sangamaya' was formed. However, many women and girls took part in the latter reformation of the Group in 1989, and a few women contested in the JVP list in subsequent Parliamentary elections, following the Group's democratic entrance.

Writing particularly with reference to the Northern separatist conflict, Coomaraswamy (2004) observes that, women were affected in five different ways - "they are often victims of direct violence, being raped, killed or maimed during the conflict. They also constitute a majority of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) who often live in welfare centres. They emerge as war widows with specialized needs and concerns once the war is over. Armed camps of military men are also sites for prostitution and trafficking, especially in conventional wars. And finally, women are increasingly becoming combatants, fighting for militaries and armed groups in frontline positions."

As for the latter, in contrast to the previous non-violent engagement of women in the Northern struggles, a complicating factor concerning the involvement of women, was that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) formed an all female military unit comprising young women and girls, who joined willingly or by conscription. A particularly disturbing trend by this terrorist group was the use of women and girls as suicide bombers. Many of these women who joined the LTTE for different motivations, according to Coomaraswamy (2004), were initially as used "as propagandists and service providers, then recruiters and fundraisers". Gradually female cadres, dubbed 'tigresses' were provided military training and used in the LTTE's combat operations. As combatants and suicide cadres, women played an important role within the LTTE. Delivering the Rajini Thiranagama Lecture in 1996, Coomaraswamy (1997) stated, "The recruitment of women into the fighting ranks signals the militarization of civil society - a militarization which in itself is inimical to anyone who believes in human rights". Thiranagama, a doctor in Jaffna, whose proactive contribution to

the 'University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna)' (UTHR-J) in revealing the violations of human rights in North, had led to her death at the hands of the LTTE in 1989.

The twin internal conflicts in Sri Lanka was to prompt a second wave of female civil society activism in the country, in seeking peace and reconciliation, while also providing assistance to the affected women in the conflict areas and looking into their needs. They also acted as a bridge among the combatants - the LTTE and JVP, and the Government authorities, in conveying their grievances and needs.

According to Samuel (2001), since the early 1980s women's groups in Sri Lanka have been "increasingly challenged by issues of human rights, ethnic politics and the armed conflict, in particular their impact on women." In her view, the first significant formation of progressive women's groups was within the Women's Action Committee (WAC), established in 1982. Though based predominantly in the South, these groups were organized among women workers, peasant women, students and church denominations. They also had contact with Tamil women's groups in Jaffna and Tamil plantation workers in the central hills. Throughout the early stages of the conflict, particularly following the July 1983 ethnic tensions, the WAC "continued its call for a solution to the ethnic conflict, joining with other women's groups...It also linked the ethnic conflict and the politics of violence to the deterioration of democracy with its consequences for all ethnic communities of Sri Lanka."

In 1984, immediately ahead of the first all party conference seeking peace in 1984, in a critical coming together, women from all ethnic communities mobilized across class and regional barriers to form the alliance 'Women for Peace', launched with a petition of 10,000 signatures calling for a peaceful and negotiated solution to the ethnic conflict. The petition was initiated and signed by leading women from political, professional, academic and cultural spheres.

It is significant to observe that not only the women living in the South joined forces in calling for peace in the country, the women in the North too were increasingly vocal in protesting through organizations such as 'The (Northern) Mothers Front' formed in 1984, seeking truth and justice on disappearances. They were peaceful non-violent protests. Samuel (2006) also observes, 'The (Northern) Mothers Front' was arguably the first women's organization from the North that called for political negotiations to solve the ethnic crisis. They sent petitions and appeals to the state, political parties and concerned organizations....a Memorandum 'Appeal for Justice 1985' called on "citizens to work toward an end to the violence and to resolve the ethnic problem to enable all communities to live in peace and harmony".

The agony of the escalating conflict and the simultaneous insurgency left women in South and the North victims of similar circumstances. The (Southern) Mother's Front is an organization that emerged to protest the deaths and disappearance of young men and women due to the political violence that prevailed at the time between the security forces and the JVP. The case of the Mother's Front in the South is a clear example, of how a movement inspired by an aggrieved mother, Dr. Mrs. Manorani Sarvanamuttu, following the loss of her son, later was developed into a powerful opposition political force. Samuel (2001) notes that former President Kumaratunga who was subsequently elected to office in 1994 "made peace, the resolution of ethnic conflict, the re-institution of democracy and the protection of human rights the main planks of her election platform".

According to a compilation by Emmanuel et al (2009), one of the strategies used by some of the women's organizations in their activism for peace building was "international level lobbying and advocacy". This was done through the international networks that women's

groups were a part of.” Among these were: Association for War Affected Women (AWAW), established in Kandy in 2001, is linked at local level to organizations like 'Women's Peace Alliance' and to international links such as 'Women Waging Peace', 'Women Thrive World Wide', 'WISCOMP', 'SAFHR' and 'ICRC' ; 'Centre for Women and Development', established in 1988 in Jaffna, locally linked to 'CHA', 'Women's Peace Alliance' and 'National Peace Council' and internationally linked to 'South Asia Peace' and 'SAARC Committee' ; 'Suriya Women's Development Centre', established in Batticaloa in 1991, linked to 'SANGAT' and 'APWLD' ; 'Women and Media Collective', established in Colombo in 1984, linked domestically to 'Mothers and Daughters of Lanka', 'Sri Lanka Women for Peace and Democracy' and internationally linked to 'North East Network India', 'South Asians for Human Rights', 'International Women's Rights Action Watch' (IWRAW), 'Peace Women Across the Globe', 'International Women's Tribune Centre', 'Women's International League for Peace and Freedom', and 'DAWN South Asia'.

Dharmadasa (2010), notes that through a signature campaign carried out by the AWAW in 2001, they were able to enter the LTTE controlled areas. She claims “The connections we built with the LTTE helped in important ways to open the doors to greater understanding, and led, finally, to a ceasefire. We were seven women, and our work with the LTTE was the backbone of the effort to broker the ceasefire.”

Their role during three decades of war and strife reveal that women were an an important catalyst in bringing about change within the Sri Lankan polity. Yet the failure of such movements to politically empower the women they represented or to mobilize them to be partners in the political decision-making process, deserves closer study.

3. Ceasefire/Inter-Conflict Period

Amidst the era of the thirty year terrorist conflict in Sri Lanka, from 2002 to mid-2006 the country experienced about 4 years of relative peace between the Sri Lankan Government forces and the LTTE. During this time, the need for a broad popular movement for peace was emphasized. Although it did not last long, a 'Gender Sub-Committee' was formed comprising of women selected by the government and those representing the LTTE. Writing on her experience as a delegate of the SGI representing the government and civil society, Samuel (2011) notes that the Sub Committee on Gender Issues was a unique mechanism created to advice the plenary of the peace process. It brought women into formal negotiations and allowed for a high degree of trust building and consensus. While there have been arguments about the limited space afforded to them in conflict resolution, the work of civil society in this period appears to have reached the affected communities on the ground.

As Kottegoda (2012) notes, in this inter-conflict period while peace negotiations took place between the LTTE and GOSL, women adopted a different approach to ensure their concerns were on the table. She mentions the example of an initiative called “An International Women's Peace Mission” facilitated by the Women and Media Collective and the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) to meet with women and men living in conflict affected areas in the country and learn of their concerns, needs and aspirations. The Mission comprised “internationally renowned women human rights activists and a group of women from all the conflict affected areas in the country. Data gathering teams visited Jaffna, Kayts, Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Mannar, the border villages of Polonnaruwa District and the Puttalam District.” She highlights that a comprehensive Report was compiled as a result of this initiative which became “the basis for lobbying with all parties to the conflict and was also presented to the international Donor Consortium that was part of the peace process in 2002.”

Moreover, a compilation which gathers information from men and women associated with 17 organizations that have been involved in peace building work in Sri Lanka over the years, Emmanuel (2009), observes that “when living in conflict contexts, women’s groups have had to use innovative means to address the consequences of war.” It gives as an example of the Suriya Women’s Development Centre in Batticaloa, which has been “working with women’s groups at the community level in promoting their livelihoods as a means of creating a space for women to come together, share experiences and create awareness about socio political concerns including responding to domestic violence, articulating women’s concerns about peace, and helping women who have had family members disappeared or killed to access help and legal assistance.” It is also highlighted that Suriya “raised awareness at the community and district level about the importance of not looking at women as only victims but as individuals with rights and agency.”

The same compilation mentions organizations such as the Muslim Women’s Research and Action Forum (created in 1990 in Kalmunai and Colombo) that have been working within Muslim communities and in line with Islamic principles to promote peace, respect and women’s empowerment. For example, this organization has helped women to come forward “to talk about their experience of the conflict and demand for an end to the war”, although “initially the men were much opposed to women talking in public (to men) about political topics such as the need for peace.”

Sarvodaya, which means in Sanskrit, "everybody wakes up" is the largest community development movement active in Sri Lanka. As a village based movement, Sarvodaya moved into high gear in the ceasefire period in driving its campaign for peace and aims to restore not only inter-ethnic harmony, but also the sources for economic empowerment. Over the past 50 years it has become a network of over 15,000 villages engaged in relief efforts in the war-affected North as well as ongoing development projects in the country. Nourished by its decades of experience in Sri Lanka and the confidence it has gained over the years, Sarvodaya stands out as an important stakeholder in peacemaking, community-building and ensuring a quality life for Sri Lankans. It is an excellent example of how civil society organizations can build on its work in community development to become one of the largest participatory organizations involved in reconciliation and peace building in Sri Lanka.

With regard to linking peace work with development work, Orjuela (2005) observes that in terms of conflict resolution and peace building, “NGOs are believed to be more efficient and suitable to work for peace than State actors, as they are less visible, less expensive and more flexible.” She also notes that “apart from using civil society actors as tools for development and peace building, ‘supporting civil society’ has emerged as a goal in itself, in the quest for peace, democracy and economic development.” She observes that during the war period, “in war affected North and East of the island the military regimes of the government forces, the LTTE and other Tamil militants have not allowed for an independent civil society. “However she also notes that “local organizations do exist, for instance organizations linked to Church, temple societies, farmers’ organizations, cooperatives, trade association and organizations involved in relief and development.” With the peace process that began in 2002, she observes there were “possibilities to (re)build links between Northern and Southern civil society, and increased communication with and understanding of the ethnic ‘other’ and his/her war suffering.”

Orjuela importantly emphasizes that "when researching or supporting civil society peace work it is important not to confine the understanding of civil society to certain NGOs doing peace work or other work seen as useful by donors, but to also take into account the civic organizations and movements that mobilise against peace initiatives.” She identifies this as a

challenge for both donors and NGOs and encourages inviting "these vociferous groups to the discussion about their future society, to unveil the positive contributions they can make and see that they are not further alienated and increasingly frustrated in peace processes. It is important that those who strive to foster attitudes conducive to peace distinguish between ideas and people; that they marginalize parochial nationalist ideas, but not the groups and persons that tend to hold those ideas."

These words resonate particularly in the Sri Lankan context. During the conflict years, Sri Lankans - both Tamil and Sinhalese, migrated to foreign countries. These expatriate communities spread all over the world now constitute a formidable political entity, with women very much in the forefront. Unfortunately in some cases, ethnic divisions and dogmatic attitudes polarized these Sri Lankan overseas communities during the conflict years. Having lived away from home for so long, their approaches to peace-building and conflict resolution, indeed their approach to protracted conflict itself, differs vastly from the experience of Sri Lankans living through the violence and strife within the island. Newman and Richmond (2006) observe that during the years of the conflict, these overseas communities became sources of funding and propagators of extremist ideologies, and hence contributed to being 'spoilers' in Sri Lanka's peace process.

4. Post-conflict Period

As many in this audience will recall, in May 2009, as the conflict in Sri Lanka came to an end, an unprecedented influx of nearly 300,000 IDPs were left in Government maintained welfare centers. Addressing their specific needs was a challenge, to which notwithstanding some limitations, the Government of Sri Lanka responded successfully. In this regard, there were many local civil society organizations, INGOs and foreign states that volunteered in addressing issues and needs related to these Groups.

NHRAP

While civil society has played a useful catalyst role in consistently drawing attention to the issues related to women and the girl child, on the part of the Government as well, it has been mindful of the plight of women in a post conflict environment. During the Inter-Ministerial consultations in 2009-2011 in preparation of the National Action Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights (NHRAP) of 2011-2016, civil society was involved in formulating a dedicated chapter on Women. The NHRAP covers Health, Economic empowerment, Employment, Violence Against women, Political representation, Discrimination, Women affected by conflict, Internally Displaced Women, Women in the Informal sector, and Women Migrant Workers. In the specific focus areas concerning 'Women affected by conflict', two goals have been set - to ensure the effective reintegration of women ex-combatants into society and to ensure the development of policy and programmes for war widows.

LLRC

A domestic mechanism was established in 2010, known as the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), and tasked to "look ahead for an era of healing and peace building in the country", had many civil society organizations and individual human rights activists, making representations and providing suggestions. The LLRC met a wide range of representatives from civil society groups during its sittings. Notable was the representations facilitated by the Women's Coalition for Disaster Management (WCDM) in Batticaloa. Based on the years of experience of documenting and monitoring gender impacts

of the war, the WCDM presented a statement to the LLRC in October, 2010, highlighting the special concerns of women around the war and the lack of justice. Some of the recommendations of the LLRC of December 2011 highlighted the importance of working in cooperation with NGOs and civil society organizations, especially in areas regarding the rehabilitation of ex-LTTE cadres, child combatants, addressing concerns regarding vulnerable groups such as women, children, IDPs and disabled. It was acknowledged that these non-State groups and civil society organizations had “expertise and resources” to assist in certain tasks related to specific area of the reconciliation process. Also, Civil Society organizations engaged in mine action work, not only contributed to speedy resettlement of IDPs, but also provided employment for people in affected areas, including the deployment of female deminers drawn from local communities.

UN/Civil Society organizations/activists

International Women's Missions with prominent international women's rights actors have also continued to document developments in Sri Lanka. While providing recommendations for the Sri Lankan government, they have also made submissions to the Universal Periodic Review Process of the UN, on women's concerns on peace building, and doing the alternative reports for the CEDAW committee meetings and incorporating a section on women and conflict in the alternative report to CEDAW.

In this challenging task, civil society and several prominent feminist activists have kept the attention both locally and internationally on post conflict violence, especially related to violence against women, gender based violence and discrimination. Public attention was drawn to these issues, with a view to seeking redress for victims. From bringing issues to the Human Rights Council and other international fora together with international NGOs, to leading campaigns and protests against disappearances. Both Mrs. Sandhya Ekneligoda and Mrs. Balendran Jeyakumari, from the south and north of the island respectively, each still searching for a missing family member, stand out in this respect. The end of the conflict also enabled individuals like Mrs. Ananthi Sasitharan, the wife of a former LTTE commander, to play prominent roles in conflict affected areas of the North, both as an activist, and a members of the Northern Provincial Council.

The Report of former High Commissioner for Human Rights Navanetham Pillay to the 25th Session of the Human Rights Council in March 2014 was to observe that there had been allegations of sexual harassment and sexual violence against women, which needed to be addressed immediately. The report in particular drew "attention to concerns that women are vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence when there is a heavy military presence".

Report of the Leader of the Opposition's Commission on the Prevention of Violence against women and the Girl Child

Some of the recommendations regarding addressing sexual violence in Sri Lanka by the Report of the Leader of the Opposition's Commission on the Prevention of Violence against women and the Girl Child (2014) are important steps to consider. The report brings out several critical elements that need urgent attention such as immediate action on inquires, collecting evidence, establishing special courts, enacting laws to the criminal code, etc. It would be noteworthy to highlight the recently adopted Victim and Witness Protection Bill in the Parliament. Among others, interim safety measures, ensuring education for child victims and helping them to regain life are crucial steps. A key focus area under this theme is reducing violence against women. A number of activities are identified to achieve this goal along with key performance indicators, responsible agencies and time-frames. They include

strengthening Police Women and Children's Bureau Desks, preventing sexual harassment in the work place, and implementation of the Plan of Action supporting the PDVA of 2005'.

Future Challenges: The Vision of the New Government

Notwithstanding efforts made in upholding the human rights and in particular reinforcing the role of women, it should be noted that there are still considerable challenges in achieving the desired levels in minimizing affront to women and maximizing the involvement of women in high level policy making and peace building.

It may be noted that in President Maitripala Sirisena's Manifesto (p.16) it is stated that "maximum action will be taken to prevent the abuse of women and children that has grown to unbelievable proportions in the country due to the wrong actions of people of all walks of life. I will provide facilities to speed up and end in a short span of time the trials related to these offences. Thereby I will act to completely stop the abuse of Women and children." Any specific action towards securing Women's rights are undoubtedly placed within the larger goal of achieving durable peace and reconciliation in the country.

It was significant to note that in line with an LLRC recommendation, through a 'Declaration of Peace', the new Government acknowledged at the 'Independence Day Commemoration' on 4 February 2015, past tragedies that had taken place in the country and emphasized the urgent need for healing and unity, by paying respect to the citizens of the country of all ethnicities and religions who lost their lives due to the tragic conflict that affected the country for over three decades and to all the victims of violence since independence. A commitment was made to ensure that never again will the country be allowed to be traumatized by the shedding of blood of her citizens.

In this context, the Government has appointed former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaranatunga to head the Presidential Task Force on Reconciliation (PTFR), aimed at reconciliation and fostering ethnic harmony. The PTFR will identify urgent reconciliation needs of communities that require immediate solutions and will consider proposals from the public on issues.

Additionally, in January this year a stand-alone Ministry which focuses solely on women's issues was established. Sri Lanka also has Women Development Officers (WDOs) who serve as nerve endings at the little Local Government units or Pradeshiya Sabhas throughout the country. They function as focal points for the area. The WDOs could be approached by any victim of Gender-Based Violence anywhere in the country.

Minister of Women's Affairs Chandrani Bandara has stated that GoSL is committed to strengthening the Parliamentary Women's Caucus which was established with the technical assistance of the UNDP under their Parliament Modernization Project. Far reaching proposals for increasing women's representation through affirmative action have been submitted to the Parliamentary Women's Caucus on the 9th of March 2015.Sri Lanka also has a very vibrant and proactive Civil Society including Community-based Organizations and INGOS involved in providing specialized services, counseling, and granting material assistance, in a diverse array of areas, such as reproductive rights, education, rights of garment workers, estate-sector women, migrant-workers etc. The Sri Lankan Constitution guarantees equal rights to all citizens in Article 12. However, under article 12 (4) it also states that "Nothing in this Article shall prevent special provision being made, by law, subordinate legislation or executive action, for the advancement of women, children or disabled persons". This would enable Women's NGOs to file Public Interest Litigation and assist violence-stricken women

of indigent circumstances to get judicial relief”. In this context, it is important to ensure the implementation of the ‘Prevention of Domestic Violence Act’ that was enacted a decade ago. The proper implementation of this piece of legislation requires strong support structures in the form of an efficacious Law enforcement machinery, access to justice and active civil society participation.

Furthermore, an amendment has been brought to the Penal Code by Act No 22 of 1995, bringing in new offences pertaining to Gender Based Violence and enhanced punishment in respect of all offences involving Violence Against Women and Children. Therefore, we see a Gender-Friendly legal framework in place in terms of prosecuting and punishing perpetrators of Gender Based Violence in Sri Lanka.

Combined with these legislative reforms, Sri Lanka’s Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's recent pledge to increase the political participation of women by 25% at the local, provincial and national levels through reforms to the electoral system, can create further space to strengthen Sri Lanka’s commitment to UNSC Resolution 1325, as well as to meet its commitments under CEDAW, particularly its General Recommendation 30 which deals with ‘women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations’ adopted in October 2013. Also, there is expectation that Sri Lanka could enhance its contribution to UN peacekeeping, and if the current composition of female contribution can be enhanced, it would be a service to the international community as well, which is envisaged in the Peace Building Commission (PBC).

The current Sri Lankan Government has also recognized the significant role that expatriate Sri Lankans can play in peace-building, and as a result an opportunity has opened up for expatriate communities to constructively engage and be a positive force for change within the Sri Lanka. Today, it is realistic for them to consider bringing back their wealth, knowledge and expertise to contribute to the economic empowerment of the former conflict affected regions and beyond, to heal the age-old wounds and start conversations about Sri Lanka's post-conflict future.

Conclusion

In the Sri Lankan context, civil society and women in particular, have played key roles throughout the country's contemporary history. Through decades of brutal violence, women have borne the greatest burdens of the conflict. After suffering tragedy and loss of children, husbands, fathers and brothers throughout the conflict, it is women now who have been most left behind. Worst affected by the conflict, women are also heavily committed to seek avenues to prevent the recurrence of violence. That Sri Lanka's vibrant civil society includes women activists of stature, who are leading on key issues of reconciliation, provides great hope for restoring peace in the post-conflict phase of our history. Hence, empowering women to take the lead in a national reconciliation drive, in peace-building efforts and political transformation, could prove the key to achieving Sri Lanka's elusive peace.

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