



RECONCILING SRI LANKA: What the **WOMEN** Say

Introduction

'Reconciling Sri Lanka: What the Women Say' is a report that presents the voices of women in Sri Lanka on reconciliation through thirty case studies. Women's voices are rarely heard or incorporated in the reconciliation process at the policy and decision-making levels. This report records women's views on reconciliation with a view to ascertaining how the process of reconciliation could be positively impacted by the adoption of a gender sensitive and inclusive approach to reconciliation.

Reconciliation is understood differently by different individuals, communities, and the State. However, it could generally be defined as follows:

'Reconciliation is a complex set of processes that involves building or rebuilding relationships, often in the aftermath of massive and widespread human rights violations. It can occur at the individual, interpersonal, socio-political, and institutional levels and be described as "thin" if it is based on coexistence with little or no trust, respect, and shared values, or "thick" if it is based on the restoration of dignity, reversing structural causes of marginalization and discrimination, and restoring victims to their position as rights bearers and citizens'

Paul Seils, *'The Place of Reconciliation in Transitional Justice: Conceptions and Misconceptions'* ICTJ accessed at <https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Briefing-Paper-Reconciliation-TJ-2017.pdf>





'[M]any researchers and practitioners see reconciliation as a necessary requirement for lasting peace... coming to terms with the past is considered a precondition for building peace and future relationships'

Martina Fischer, *'Transitional Justice and Reconciliation: Theory and Practice'*

A 'bottom – up process' or a settlement arising from grassroots level is a necessary prerequisite to create an effective political solution concerning peacebuilding and reconciliation. A 'top – down' process, through which a political solution for conflict ridden societies are proposed and implemented by the upper echelons of society, fail to capture the lived realities at the grassroots level. A bottom – up process is therefore considered essential for reconciliation as such a process can also prevent recurrence of conflict. In this light, it is essential to consider the views of women who have been affected by the conflicts of the past and incorporate their views in attempts at reconciling communities and building lasting peace.

No arrangement could be considered lasting or successful if it ignores the perspectives of over half of a State's population. 'Reconciling Sri Lanka: What the Women Say' assesses views of women concerning the many facets of reconciliation. The report documents women's experiences of war and conflicts and their aftermath and is a useful tool for evidence based advocacy.

The report seeks to find answers to the following questions through women's perspectives:

- what is reconciliation?
- is there a link between reconciliation and peacebuilding?
- is there a link between reconciliation and religion?
- is there a link between reconciliation and transitional justice?

'To achieve this however, women's participation is vital; and I don't mean just those elite women sitting in air-conditioned offices in Colombo. I mean the women at the grassroots themselves – they need to be included in any measures on reconciliation. They were the ones most affected. Their contributions are necessary for us to learn and strategize on how best to take this forward.'

-Rajany Chandrasegaram,
Women's Rights Activist, Tamil-

The report of thirty case studies consists of recently conducted interviews carried out and compiled by FOKUS WOMEN. One objective of this study was to assess whether women can express their opinions of reconciliation freely and publicly and whether such opinions are considered and incorporated into policies of State.

Ensuring Diversity Amongst the Interviewees of the Case Studies

For the study, thirty women were selected randomly with a view to including a diverse range of women's voices. These women were selected randomly based

on ethnicity, age, educational background, and occupation. Diversity was maintained to ensure that the views captured in the report are representative of women from different backgrounds.

The study is made up of opinions expressed by:

- Sinhalese women
- Tamil women
- Muslim women
- Mixed race women
- Activists
- Academics
- A university student
- Politicians
- Journalists
- A representative from an international organization
- A representative from the corporate sector
- Government officials
- War-affected female heads of households
- Military widows and
- A female ex-combatant

‘The women collectively offer a comprehensive snapshot of how women across the demographic view their place in society, and their views on reconciliation as a whole. This is significant as men still remain the decision makers and policy makers across all levels of society, from a rural village all the way up to Parliament, and women tend to get sidelined in community processes.’

-Reconciling Sri Lanka: What the Women Say, at pg.1

Women’s Views on Reconciliation

‘The interviewees’ opinions on the reconciliation process [...] run the gamut from positive and hopeful, to negative and sceptical. Many of them stressed that they have high hopes in the present government in its work towards reconciliation. Yet they have also observed numerous setbacks over the years, which causes them to temper their optimism with ‘watchful wariness’.

How to Undertake a Process on Reconciliation?

It is necessary to understand the purpose of reconciliation. It could be stated that reconciliation seeks to create a society where everyone is treated equally with respect without regard to ethnicity or religion. The success of reconciliatory efforts are based on its ability to create lasting peace and to prevent recurrence of violence. Gender-sensitivity in decision-making as well as inclusivity is therefore essential in this respect. Those who are involved in reconciliation related work should strive to rid themselves of stereotypical attitudes concerning ethnicity and gender in order to genuinely contribute to the cause of reconciliation.

The society as a whole should be able to take ownership of the reconciliation process. It would only then be possible to create a lasting impact



through reconciliation. Therefore, the narrative of reconciliation should be one that comprises of views of all segments of the society. By increasing inclusivity and sensitivity of the reconciliation process, it is possible to introduce a national narrative on reconciliation that is positively received and acted on by all stakeholders in the society. A narrative of that nature should further be targeted at addressing the root causes of the conflict. Therefore, it should be prepared without underlying racist predispositions and strive to embed equality to all citizens of Sri Lanka.

‘There were many causes for the conflict and some of these causes remain unidentified even today. It began because of differences in how people were treated and disregard for humanness. Everyone should have the same rights (to life, movement, religion, language, politics, etc.). Everyone must be thought of as a Sri Lankan.’

-Female Ex-military Personnel, Sinhalese-

The national narrative should take into consideration the individual narratives as well as the community narratives to make everyone feel that their stories

were heard, included, and taken into consideration. In this respect, it is also necessary to work with religious leaders from all communities and incorporate their views.

‘In order to start a process of reconciliation we need to prepare a national narrative. It should be prepared by a few people with good heads and open hearts, who are committed to addressing the root causes and understand the importance of bringing the communities together; not because somebody is funding them, but because it is genuinely needed in the country.’

-Ferial Ashraff, Politician-

Women’s Reasons for Optimism on Reconciliation

Some of the women interviewed for this study expressed the view that there is a sense of optimism about the reconciliation process as the present government is perceived to be pro-reconciliation. The present administration of the country has also been commended for its involvement in halting ethnic and racial rivalry. Similarities that exist across

cultures have also been cited as a factor that could positively contribute towards the achieving of reconciliation.

The end of the armed conflict has also brought about a sense of relief that is enjoyed by all communities. This is regarded as a positive factor in facilitating reconciliation. Moreover, the post-war context has also ushered-in the people’s aspiration to promote peace across communities.



Women's Reasons for Scepticism on Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a term that I am uncomfortable with, especially in this post-war context in Sri Lanka. Given the historical context of structural inequalities for decades on certain communities of people, I am sceptical about how that terminology is being utilized. The term seems to be telling the affected people to forgive, to reconcile, to move on. Yet where is the justice and the accountability for all that has happened in the past, to go with it?

-Sarala Emmanuel, Development Practitioner, Batticaloa-

Women were concerned of the lack of transparency regarding the strategies adopted by the State to work towards reconciliation. The study reveals that women perceive the lack of transparency as an obstacle. This could be overcome by adopting State initiative to carry out reconciliation related activities in a manner that is easily accessible to and trackable by people as that would encourage the State to be more accountable in all their activities. Such accountability would further prevent arbitrary actions by the State and force the State to create reconciliatory mechanisms that respond to the lived realities of the people.

Political manoeuvring that continues to exist was cited by some women as a factor that creates negative perceptions about the existing reconciliation process. Some women interviewed for the study stated that political actors across ethnicities are guilty of such political manoeuvring. It was further noted that some ethnic issues amongst communities arise as a result of such political manoeuvring. The potential for such acts to continue despite the end of the armed conflict was a major cause for concern for women.

Women noted that there is a lack of meaningful engagement between the State and the society. Typically women, minorities, and the people at the grassroots level are excluded from decision-making processes thereby negatively impacting

the reconciliation process. Despite women making up 52% of the population of Sri Lanka, policy level decisions are mainly taken by men who are in decision-making positions from Village Council level to the Parliamentary level.

Gender-blind mandates and the lack of mainstreaming of gender concerns were regarded by women as having a negative impact on the reconciliation process as well.

Some interviewees stated that there is a general sense that the minority communities should bear the onus of reconciliation. Such attitudes contribute to lack of meaningful engagement and a culture of blame. This was regarded as a hindrance to the reconciliation process as reconciliation should be brought about by all parties in society, without its onus being imposed on one selected group. Therefore, it is also necessary for the majority community of the country to reach out to the minority communities and genuinely collaborate in the reconciliation process.

It was also noted that policy makers who are mostly based in urban areas of the country, mainly in Colombo, lack understanding of the lived realities existing at the grassroots levels. Some of the interviewees stated that insufficient effort was being made by policy makers to liaise with people at the grassroots levels. Women who participated in the study emphasised the necessity of comprehensive policies in order to create lasting peace.

Due to the concerns mentioned above, some of the women were of the opinion that there is a lack of genuine effort at all levels of society to achieve reconciliation.

'As a district level women's group leader with access to counterparts in Colombo, I am still not aware of what it is the government is doing – how they are going about reconciliation work, what it is they are planning to achieve etc. This is not ideal. The government must develop a transparent mechanism in which the people are consulted and can also track the process as it moves along.'

-Vasuki Jeyasankar, Activist from Batticaloa-

Link between Reconciliation and Transitional Justice and Peace-building

All the respondents participating in the study agreed that reconciliation was directly linked with transitional justice and peace building.

‘Only if transitional justice is achieved would true reconciliation be viable. We can’t expect people still mourning the dead or anguishing over the missing to move forward without addressing what happened to them first.’

-Udayani Navaratnam, Women Development Officer, Jaffna-

Twenty-nine of the thirty female respondents noted that peace building would be the natural consequence of reconciliation and transitional justice. It was also noted that peace-building activities that are being currently conducted might prove meaningless if such activities are not preceded by meaningful efforts at creating reconciliation.

The study also explores the challenges that have to be faced in drawing connections between reconciliation, transitional justice and peacebuilding. Following are the dilemmas that have to be addressed:

- i) What is the nature of the reconciliation process that ought to be chosen for Sri Lanka in order to make it compatible with the demands made by all communities of Sri Lanka?

‘The link between reconciliation and peace building has been difficult to establish because of the deliberate efforts made time and again at inciting racism. Inter-communal cooperation is vital for peace-building.’

-A female politician-

- ii) How to address the lack of inter-communal cooperation and prevent deliberate efforts made at inciting hatred that affect peacebuilding?

How to reconcile conflicting views on the necessity of prosecuting alleged perpetrators?

‘Transitional justice is good but not necessarily vital in my opinion. As a member of the Muslim community evicted by the LTTE, who returned to Mannar only after the LTTE had been destroyed, I can say that we Northern Muslims have no expectation of transitional justice for what we went through. We are not even seeking it. From my community’s point of view, transitional justice is a sham. Who is going to be responsible? Who is going to deliver it? What could they do?’

-Janooriya Begum, Development Practitioner, Mannar-

- iii) How to resolve issues regarding the exclusion of the Muslim community of the North and the East from the reconciliation process although the Muslim community faced atrocities committed against them by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)?

‘In Sri Lanka, the tension between the Sinhala and Tamil communities has been the focal point of the discourse on reconciliation, and at times, this has taken away from the tensions between and among other communities, significantly, the Muslim community.’

-Law Student, Muslim, Colombo-

- iv) How to provide justice for families of the military personnel and military widows?

‘Looking back at what we have lost, it is questionable whether we have received any justice. There are instances where military personnel and military widows are talked about and felicitated. However, if not for these ceremonies, people do not remember military personnel or widows. The Sinhala newspapers only remember us for one week; whereas for us, this is a lifetime’s experience. I doubt if there will ever be any reparations or justice for those who have suffered, died or have become widows.’

-A military widow, Kurunegala-

‘When a woman becomes a widow, she loses everything. The rights of a widow have to be guaranteed and her self-confidence boosted. Also, counselling is needed for dealing with psychological needs. They have experienced tremendous loss and their lives need to be brought back to normal.’

-Sheela Ratnayake, Executive Director – Rajarata Praja Kendraya-

Link between Reconciliation and Development

The respondents were not certain as to whether development had a direct link with reconciliation. Those who drew links between reconciliation and development chose to emphasize that development transcends mere development of infrastructure. It was highlighted that development requires the changing of people’s ability to face circumstances and that development also requires attitudinal changes.

‘When development professionals talk about development, they stress on what they term the ‘soft components’ the most: survival, stability, sustainability, tolerance, resilience, accountability and so on. All these are essential for development in its true sense. This is the mistake that the previous government made. They thought simply constructing roads and schools could heal a war-wounded people. It couldn’t.’

-A Senior Government Official, Batticaloa-

‘As a person who has been engaging in community development and continues to do so, I feel if we all come together, we can make a change, even in attitudes.’

-Neerthi Thanuja, Community Development Activist, Hambantota-

The Role of Religion in Reconciliation

‘Any role religion plays has to be based on the essentials of religion. This does not always happen. It is the fundamentalists that seem to be vociferous, which is damaging to the process of reconciliation.’

Professor Sharya Scharenguivel, University of Colombo-

Few of the respondents were of the view that religion has a role to play in relation to reconciliation. However, most were opposed to it and emphasized the need to exercise caution if religion was to be used in relation to reconciliation.

Some respondents were wary of hardcore religious sentiments being given prominence. This was identified as contributing to mistrust and antagonism between communities. Whereas the correct use of religion in reconciliation efforts ought to have contributed to highlighting the similarities between different groups thereby aiding the process of reconciliation, in practicality, religious differences have given rise to conflicts in the post-war context as well.

Women also said that the use of religion could indicate that a particular religion bears a more superior position than the others. Such approaches may contribute to religious division and negatively affect the country, which is struggling to rebuild after the war.

‘As for religion’s role in this process; that is a tricky one to navigate. It might help. But alternatively it might hamper the whole process too. Sensitivity is key. If quite sensitively handled, it certainly has the potential to be a force for good.’

- Vasuki Jeysankar, Activist, Batticaloa

Common understanding concerning religion was that it should be left to be determined by the individual and private sphere, rather than being given State sanction and prominence. However, women also stated that:

‘Religion cannot be abandoned as we move forward. Sri Lankans have strong cultural roots, and religion is part of the lifestyles of most. Moreover, ensuring religious freedom and equality is vital to reconciliation. Religion is an oft-overlooked dimension, perhaps due to the emphasis placed on language and ethnicity.’

-Politician-

Some have emphasized the necessity of religion and yet stated that the government should not use religion in its official attempts at reconciliation. A view that was emphasized was that politicisation of religion that is used as a tool of creating societal disharmony should be criminalised.

‘Religion is important but it should also be a private matter, not a public one. I wouldn’t recommend that it be prioritized in reconciliation measures therefore. Attention should be paid to religious sensitivities, however, so that they might not inadvertently be stepped on, thereby causing offence to people, which could in turn set back the reconciliation process. Be sensitive and aware therefore, but do not overly bring religion as a concept into reconciliation.’

- **Jannooriya Begum** –Development Practitioner, Mannar -

Some respondents have also expressed the opinion that the choice available to follow a religion could be used to frame a peaceful life as religions give people a foundation of moral and ethical guidance. Some are therefore of the view that individual and collective peace will lead to the gradual establishment of peace within the entire society.

‘As the different ethnicities and communities intermix with each other via the reconciliation process, their understanding of each other would help break each other’s stereotypes – fuelled often by religion amongst other societal constructs – and this might help them overcome the brainwashing they had been subjected to.’

-**Udayani Navaratnam**, Women Development Officer, Jaffna-

There were also instances where communities had used religious festivals to reach out to each other thereby building harmonious relationships. One such example relates to the Muslim community in Batticaloa being invited to raise flags at Hindu temples on certain selected days. However, these practices have waned due to armed conflict related antagonisms between the two communities as well as due to increasingly strict religious interpretations being disseminated amongst the Muslim community that prevent them from liberally intermixing with other communities.

Some women stated that religion could be used for reconciliation if it is initiated through community efforts rather than it being imposed through a top-down State led initiative.

‘Personally I do not think very high of religious leaders. However, I also recognize that many people who have undergone trauma depend on their faiths for fortitude and healing. This should be acknowledged and thus religion be given its due place in reconciliation measures, if the people themselves desire it.’

-**Shreen Saroor**, Activist-

Role of Women in Reconciliation

All the respondents of the study agreed that women have to play a vital role in relation to reconciliation. While some respondents highlighted the nurturing capacities of women as the significant contribution that women can make towards reconciliation, some respondents pointed out that it is necessary to have women’s involvement as the right to be so involved, is an equal right that the women possess as equals in population density.

‘Women have the capacity to bear immense pain and to rise above it. They are also a group who can take on leadership roles. Every second of their lives women are playing different roles within their society. Similarly, she can play a role in a reconciliation process.’

-**Mallawarachchige Chathurani Rasika**, Director, Shakthi Kantha Organization-

Women have to be involved in the reconciliation process also because conflict contexts affect women differently resulting in women becoming both breadwinners and household nurturers. The study reveals that '[t]here is a large number of female heads of households across all ethnicities battling these challenges on a daily basis, and this requires the reconciliation process to take their needs and views into account'.

Even though women can and should play an important role with regard to reconciliation, there are failures associated with the enabling mechanisms that should allow women to participate. For instance, the legal system of Sri Lanka, and the socio-economic, and political settings ought to be more inclusive and gender sensitive in order to facilitate women's involvement in reconciliation as well as in other decision-making roles. Without structural, legal, policy, political, and societal changes, it will be impossible to create genuine inclusivity that forms the bedrock of reconciliation in any society.

'First of all, people should be informed about what is reconciliation and how it is being done. I do not know enough about reconciliation or transitional justice. I don't know what government does to bring about the change. I don't know how we can participate. When there are a lot of people like me who don't know about these terms and concepts, it is not realistic to expect reconciliation from people like us. In order to bring reconciliation and national unity, people in grassroots should be informed about these concepts and process.'

-Female Ex-LTTE cadre, Tamil, Northern Province-

'Get people to tell their stories. People, especially the affected women, really want to tell their stories and to be heard. Make the spaces available for all these stories to be heard and documented. Not only via counselling but also via art, singing, safe spaces and so on.'

-Vasuki Jeyasankar, Activist, Batticaloa-

'A reconciliation process needs to factor in the gender facets and perspectives, such as the views and specific needs of female heads of households across the country who have lost their husbands to war and have taken on added responsibilities for their families.'

-Sonali Dayaratne, Development Practitioner,
Colombo-

Patriarchal impacts on the society and the lack of opportunities available for women to be involved in positions of leadership were highlighted in the study as causes that lead to less involvement of women in reconciliation processes. Women's involvement in decision-making at all levels, and especially at the national level was identified in the study as a factor that contributes to reconciliation. Therefore, archaic patriarchal views that obstruct women's engagement in matters of public policy should be addressed in order to create the inclusive process essential for reconciliation.

'Due to patriarchal structural norms in the Northern Province in general, women have traditionally depended on men to be the breadwinners, as well as to do work like masonry or carpentry. That is still very much the case in many areas. War however, and the loss of a disproportionate number of men have caused chaos in women's lives by blurring the lines between what they can do, should do and are equipped to do. Not taking all these churning sociological considerations into account is a mistake.'

-Mahaluxmy Kurushanthan, District Coordinator,
Tamil, Mannar-

Some respondents noted that historically women have been regarded as playing the role of peacemakers and that this is a heavy burden to be shouldered in a reconciliation context. Emphasis was also placed on the necessity of men to understand that they have to play an equally important role with regard to peacebuilding.

'Women have a big role to play in reconciliation. Sri Lanka is an example of how the war resulted in women from all communities suffering. As such, it is important to include women in the process of reconciliation.'

-Dr. Fazeeha Azmi, Senior Lecturer, University of Peradeniya -

Women's Issues that Need to be Resolved for Reconciliation to be Achieved / Challenges

It is necessary to address issues of gender-based violence and sexual abuse against women swiftly. The justice mechanism should be made efficient. Accordingly, it is necessary to study all the different ways women's dignity and rights are abused and address them. Such structural and societal changes are prerequisites of peace and reconciliation. Moreover, women should be involved in making policy decisions that affect women and males should be prevented from being the majority stakeholders in policy decisions that exclusively or predominantly affect women.

The law reform process should also be applicable to the personal laws of Sri Lanka which contain many provisions that affect women in a discriminatory manner. Therefore, it is necessary to amend discriminatory provisions found in personal laws such as Thesavalamai and Muslim Law. The State should discourage males of these communities from preventing reform attempts, as males would not want reforms that alter the status quo that is beneficial to them.

'Many women are now alone because of the disappearances. They do not have ownership of anything, whether land or rights. Some (Tamil) women cannot even obtain loans. Unlike in the Sinhala community, Tamil women do not have access to and ownership of land because of the special features of the law governing them.'

-Ranaweera Mudiyansele Thakshala, Women Development Officer-

State should provide redress that is sought by mothers and wives of the war disappeared through transitional justice mechanisms. Women should be consulted to ascertain the nature of reparations that they require. Especially in situations where families cannot be reunited, adequate compensation should be provided.

Media can be used to disseminate information and to raise awareness about women's issues that hinder the reconciliation process. Media can also be used to change public perceptions and to introduce a public change in consciousness. This can contribute to positive civil movements towards change.

It is essential and imperative that women's representation be increased at all levels of decision-making. To this end, it is also necessary to make leaders aware of and expose them to women's issues.

It is also essential to provide food security and create sustainability with respect to employment and livelihoods, as the inability to secure satisfaction of basic human requirements negatively affects reconciliation.

It is also necessary to provide access to networking and contacts with a wide network of people such as government officials, community based organizations and civil society activists. The connectivity between these entities will determine whether the realities at the grassroot levels are understood by policy makers and will subsequently ensure that the benefits of policy level decisions will practically be implemented at the grassroot levels. The development and improvement of such links are essential to ensure that the benefits of policy decisions taken at upper levels of governance trickle down to bottom levels of governance and people.

Village based organizations such as Rural Development Societies and Women's Rural Development Societies should function with transparency and provide ease of access to women who require the services of such entities. Even though Rural Development Societies were not set up to solely cater to male requirements, demands, and grievances, in actual practice, such societies exclude

women's participation. This has necessitated the establishment of separate Women's Rural Development Societies. This must be addressed and women and men should be able to participate equally in the same forum as fragmented fora will prevent opportunities of sharing and understanding views with a larger and more diverse audience.

Women should be given access to local politicians to directly represent their grievances.

Women should be able to enjoy a sense of safety and security.

Female Leadership in Reconciliation

It is necessary to ensure that there is female leadership at all levels of society. Female leadership in employment unions is essential to ensure that women receive an equal payment for work of equal value. Equal opportunities in employment and gender sensitivity are also necessary to enhance female leadership. Improvements in these areas can contribute to the role that women play in promoting reconciliation.

Respondents of the study expressed their concern that Sri Lanka's thinking is patriarchal and male-oriented, despite the country having had the world's first female Prime-Minister.

'Historically, women have been deprived of opportunities in leadership capacities. Likewise, it has also been established that when given the chance, women make exceptional leaders. There is a common accusation that women are reluctant to take-up leadership positions. I think it is easy to empower women and convince them into taking up leadership. What is difficult is to sustain women leaders in essentially patriarchal systems. How open are people, including women, to accept a woman leader? When joint leaders, i.e., a man and a woman speak to officials, I find the male leader being addressed and spoken to. Training, opportunities and an enabling environment are essential to foster female leadership.'

-Menaha Kandasamy, Trade Unionist, Worker's and Women's Rights Advocate-

Respondents also noted that women play important roles in leadership by heading their households and managing the villages in the post-war context. Some noted that these initiatives by women are indicative of women's capacity to lead.

Some also highlighted that more female representation at the Parliamentary level is required for female leadership to be further enhanced. Female leadership should also be increased at the Local Government Level and at all other decision-making levels of the society.

'Certain concepts that are detrimental to a woman's wellbeing restrict their access to services and rights by advising society to look at her in a different way. The concept of "woman" is a societal one. A woman must be given equal rights, without relegating her to a secondary position in society. We must be free of these misconceptions and cast away the shackles.'

-Neerthi Thanuja, Community Development Activist-

The respondents of the study also suggested that women require more training and capacity building in order to make their involvement in reconciliation more effective.

Some also noted that households that are under female leadership require permanent solutions to address their many needs. Aiding female-headed households is necessary to enhance women's leadership roles in reconciliation.

Women are able to perform leadership roles in relation to reconciliation in many different ways. Women's involvement in reconciliation through the work they do in and on behalf of their families, at the community level, village level, and at the national level, bear evidence of women's leadership in reconciliation.

'For the past two to three years I have been a stakeholder of the National Peace Council. I have organized many mediation programs for women living in war-affected regions. In addition to this, I have selected women with exceptional leadership skills from Trincomalee district and formed a network for furthering reconciliation activities.'

-Mallawarachchige Chathurani Rasika, Director,
Shakthi Kantha Organization-

What the Women Want: Recommendations to Government and Civil Society

The respondents of the study emphasised the necessity of a common narrative. The common narrative is expected to portray the story of the impact of the conflicts and explore how each community has been affected by such conflicts. Such a narrative should also be able to highlight the similarity in the experiences and the grief felt by all communities. Such an approach paves way for viewing reconciliation through a lens of 'similarity than with differences'.

The common narrative should comprise of both individual and collective narratives. Some respondents expressed favourable views about the inclusion of religious ideologies supporting reconciliation into the common narrative of reconciliation.

Women who participated in the study highlighted the necessity of having unbiased and an efficient public sector / services. It was noted that the public service should be reformed and that all public mechanisms should be representative of the socio-political strata of society at large.

It was also stated that structural reforms should be introduced to the government. The following were regarded as necessary to ensure structural reforms:

i. greater checks and balances between the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary;

- ii. establishing a framework of human rights and the rule of law;
- iii. greater citizen engagement in the public sphere;
- iv. enhancing civic responsibility;
- v. incentivizing political actors to be mindful of the long-term interests of the country;
- vi. transforming the society by moving away from privilege and patronage based systems to a society which is based on values, mutual respect, social justice and dignity for all.

Interviewees also noted that 'devolution of power' that seeks to ensure a balance between the powers shared by the government and the Provincial Councils should be achieved genuinely in order to aid the reconciliation process.

Women's involvement at all decision-making levels has repeatedly been regarded by the interviewees as a factor contributing to reconciliation. Quotas for increased representation of women at least up to 25% at Local Authorities, Provincial Councils, and the Parliament were listed as primary necessities affecting the process of reconciliation. In this regard, it was also noted that it is necessary to remove barriers obstructing women in becoming active and remaining in politics.

Women constitute over 50% of the Sri Lankan population. Therefore, 50% of all processes should consist of women at both decision-making and representative levels. The same level of representation of women should be made available through transitional justice processes and the constitution reform process.

At present, the legal mechanisms available for reconciliation remain fragmented while inclusivity of women in decision-making levels of society remains scarce. Therefore, it is necessary to streamline legal mechanisms. Accordingly, law should be reformed and the State should adopt steps to implement the reformed laws effectively. The implementation of such reformed laws should positively and meaningfully impact the whole of society including grassroots level.

All processes of the society should be inclusive in all aspects if reconciliation is to be ensured. Therefore, representation should be guaranteed to minorities and underprivileged communities. It is necessary to hear the voices of such groups and to incorporate their concerns into the process of reconciliation.

It is necessary to raise awareness amongst all communities in Sri Lankan society regarding reconciliation. To this end, it is necessary to facilitate interaction between communities. One of the mechanisms suggested during the study was to create links between diverse student populations within universities as an initiative mechanism to promote harmonious relationships amongst members of different communities. Inter-ethnic harmony could be further enhanced by regulating that all schools are multi-ethnic thereby providing an opportunity for the younger generation to intermingle with one another more effectively from their formative years.

'It is equally important to start unification with the next generation. The children and youth must be brought up to be race-blind and oblivious to ethnic differences. Our common identity as Sri Lankans is our strength. Though important, it is sadly lacking today, that people are able to take pride in their differences, without drowning in a sense of superiority.'

-Anusha Alles, Lawyer-

Furthermore, government officials should be deployed into different areas with a view to removing people from the echo chambers of their communities and giving them an opportunity of understanding people bearing different racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, socio-political and educational backgrounds. In this respect, it is also necessary to train such officers and to sensitise them to the needs of the people.

'I have doubts about the phrase "national unity". What I envisage is people living in diversity, accepting other communities and languages, and finding their own way to live instead of needing to assimilate into one another's cultures.'

-Prof. Sitralaga Maunaguru, Retired University Lecturer-

The number of female government officers in the public sector should be increased especially with the intention of providing accessible services to female victims and survivors who seek redress from government initiatives.

The State should also adopt measures to acknowledge past wrongs and provide compensation where necessary.



'As the children grew older, not just keeping them alive but protecting them from being forcibly conscripted by the militants or getting arbitrarily arrested by the army, became a frightening concern. I watched over my children like a tigress yet lost one to forcible conscription by the LTTE. They are all thankfully alive today, although severely traumatized still, especially the one who was conscripted. This son has lost part of his foot and walks with a limp. All of them (two daughters and four sons) still carry shrapnel in their bodies, which has given rise to various physiological complications for them over the years.'

-Margaret Croos, Former IDP / Volunteer Social Worker, Mannar-

Some of the women taking part in the study noted that it will be useful to direct victims of conflict contexts to therapy. It has also been suggested that the stories of those who were affected by the conflict could be documented through art and other forms of expression.

Acknowledging the reality of the past is an important aspect of reconciliation. Accordingly, the respondents of the study were of the view that in the Sri Lankan context, memorialization through a national day to mourn, remember, and honour the war-dead could prove useful in achieving reconciliation.

Some respondents also noted that a complete and genuine narrative of what happened during the war should be shared with the majority population of the South to enable them to fully comprehend the experiences of people from the North and the East. On the other hand, it is also necessary for the people of the North and the East of Sri Lanka to become aware of the tragic atrocities that were committed against and experienced by the people in the South. Through such mechanisms, there arises the possibility of highlighting the similarities of experiences as opposed to the dissimilarities.



The respondents of the study further emphasised that it is necessary to establish transitional justice mechanisms such as truth, justice, reparations, and guarantee of non-recurrence. These guarantees are required for the successful achievement of reconciliation.

'Reconciliation is essentially a hearts and mind exercise and I think gender has little to do with it. What needs to be acknowledged and celebrated is the idea of being Sri Lankan. This great commonality has to be celebrated more than our differences. In Sri Lanka I would consider the reconciliation process to comprise building trust between the North and the South. The warped perceptions that have developed overtime and have become compounded with the war have to be changed. Interaction and dialogue are crucial to this. Making an effort to connect with people who are different will help us realize that we are all essentially human with more similarities than differences.'

-Dharisha Bastians, Journalist-

The society, decision-makers, and political actors should in general be devoid of corruption and discrimination.

The study also revealed that some women are of the opinion that the forming and establishing of an Independent Women's Commission would be useful in promoting reconciliation.

For successful reconciliation, it is necessary to recognize and compensate

women's contributions. In this, it is necessary to attribute value to women's unpaid labour as well. A social security structure needs to be set-up for women (with an immediate prioritization for war-affected women), to ensure sustainable and a dignified life for them.

The State should adopt measures to promote inter-ethnic harmony. Separate laws should be adopted for enhancing peace. This could be achieved through the incorporating of best practices from countries that have dealt successfully with post-conflict contexts.

Launching and maintaining a government website dedicated to the reconciliation process was also regarded as necessary. Such a measure also contributes to the maintenance of transparency that is essential in achieving lasting peace and is essential in preventing a relapse into corrupt systems that trigger violence in the society.

Youth outreach, delivering justice, and State-facilitated mechanisms that enable people to study both official languages and the link language are also viewed by many women as factors that aid the reconciliation process.

'I do think reconciliation is possible in Sri Lanka. However, it is a long and difficult road. Language is a massive obstacle and has always been so. A lot of damage has been done to inter-communal relations, especially Sinhala-Tamil interactions, because of language differences.'

-Juwairiya Mohideen, Executive Director, Muslim Women Development Trust-

The study further revealed that ensuring equal rights for all citizens of Sri Lanka effectively contributes to the cause of reconciliation.



What Can the State do to Promote Reconciliation?

The State should effectively address the outstanding issues of transitional justice. In this respect, the State is required to find out how women from all communities suffered in different ways and to provide redress accordingly. In this respect, special attention should be paid to ensuring the safety of women and children.

The State should ensure that its entities are independent, effective, impartial, and transparent. By strengthening the State entities in this manner, it is possible to ensure responsiveness and accountability to citizens and prevent the recurrence of violence.

'A key component of peace building involves strengthening the capacities of State institutions in the executive, legislative, and judicial arms of government to be responsive and accountable to all its citizens. Effective and non-discriminatory institutions instill confidence in citizens across all segments of society to trust in the State's ability to resolve issues that affect their day-to-day lives and meet their aspirations.'

-**Sonali Dayaratne**, Development Practitioner, Colombo -

The State should facilitate the income stability of women. It is also necessary to remove discrimination at the workplace and provide stable livelihoods for women. Women should be provided with food security and sustainability with regard to employment and livelihood with a view to addressing general challenges faced by women due to socially constructed vulnerabilities.

'Women are adversely affected by conflict. Their vulnerabilities multiply and create intersectional ways in which these vulnerabilities may be exploited.'

-**Psychiatric Counselor**, Muslim-

The State should adopt measures to return grabbed lands, houses, and properties to their owners as it would contribute to sustainability of peace and would enhance attempts at reconciliation.

Extremist attitudes of the State and its officials should be altered and reconciliation should be made a part of State policy. Accordingly, long-term solutions should be developed to address the existing problems.

The State should prevent exploitative agencies, such as foreign employment agencies and microfinance companies from manipulating women. The State should proactively address these challenges that have arisen in the post-war context of Sri Lanka.

The State should organize the reconciliation process in a manner that enables the policy makers in Colombo to have access to and have other interactive sessions with women at grassroots level in order to facilitate the understanding of grassroots level realities to which such policies should cater.

It is also essential for the State to adopt measures to involve women in the reconciliation process in a more strategic way. Women's participation in reconciliation efforts should be increased. Women's views should sincerely be incorporated into government strategic planning.

The views and opinions expressed in the published interviews do not represent the views of the Centre for Equality and Justice.

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