

Our Voices Matter:

Strengthening Young Women Leaders in the University System



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Background

The Centre for Equality and Justice (CEJ) is a Women's organisation based in Colombo, working on the rights of women across the country. CEJ's mission is the achievement of gender justice so that men, women and gender minorities live in a society that is free, just and equal. Its objectives are the promotion of gender equality, and fostering partnerships with grassroot level women's networks.

CEJ has undertaken a new project titled 'Our Voices Matter: Strengthening Young Women Leaders in the University System' with the financial support of the National Democratic Institute (NDI). This project is implemented with the aim of encouraging university undergraduates (with an emphasis on female undergraduates) from the universities of Jaffna, Colombo, Peradeniya and the South Eastern University to engage in the discourse of democracy and governance. Accordingly, the project strives to meet the following objectives -

1. Raise awareness on democratic concepts, principles and norms among female university students;
2. Encourage female university students to take leadership roles within university unions, societies, and committees; and
3. Provide platforms whereby female university students can articulate their concerns with lawmakers and policymakers.

The university students have developed a lobby document highlighting the issues identified by them during discussions held with women from the communities in Anuradhapura, Batticaloa, Kandy and Jaffna. These discussions were intended to instil awareness about the difficulties faced by women living in the communities, and to use the knowledge gained to develop actionable recommendations aimed at addressing these issues.

The lobby document developed by the undergraduates is presented to selected members of the Sri Lanka Parliament, particularly the members of the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus of the Sri Lanka Parliament. The goal of this presentation is to encourage undergraduates, mostly female participants, to be active leaders in the process of democracy and to identify and develop their potential to become female law-makers in future.

The Forgotten: Plight of Women after the War

Summary

This document explores the plight of women across four locations in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the ethnic conflict, its effects on their status of living and their continued resilience despite challenges. It delineates their aspirations and the nature of support/relief/reparations they expect from the Government to resolve their livelihood crises. The document further looks at how victims hope the Government would ensure accountability for their grievances and meet their demands and needs. In conclusion, the paper presents policy implications and recommendations.

Introduction

Among the many ravages of the thirty-year war Sri Lanka endured, the plight of women in the post-2009 context is truly dismal. These women were left vulnerable, leaving them to become the heads of households with most of their families and relatives either injured, disappeared, or deceased. These women face many challenges at all levels, political, economic or social. The damages caused by the war extend beyond the mere loss of possessions and livelihoods. They lack basic necessities, access to employment, and financial stability. They exist in a state of isolation as they are left without a support system whilst shouldering the burden of sustaining their families and raising their children. This Document aims to bring to light some of the most urgent issues faced by war-affected women that need to be immediately addressed. It reflects on the key observations and identifies issues pursuant to consultations conducted in four locations.

Location	No. of Participants	Description
Anuradhapura	9	<p>The women were figures of authority such as teachers and members of the Pradeshiya Sabha as well as representatives of women organisations.</p> <p>The participants relayed information based on their individual observations and the experiences of others. Most of the issues identified were not personal experiences but were those prevalent in the area in general.</p>
Eastern Province	9	<p>The women were either unemployed or self-employed.</p> <p>They were either married or divorced and some lived in a state of isolation as their children had moved away. Almost all were affected by poverty, financial instability and economic hardships.</p>

Kilinochchi	10	<p>The women were previously affiliated with members of the LTTE, who used to live prosperous lives. They were financially stable with livelihoods and fulfilling family life.</p> <p>However, in the post-war context, they have become destitute. The women were subjected to prejudice due to their previous affiliations with the Liberation of Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE). They live in fear of retaliation.</p>
Central Province	15	<p>The women were estate workers whose main livelihood came from working in the tea plantations.</p> <p>They have spent their lives in 'line rooms'¹ for generations with no means of moving away from estate work primarily due to the incapacity to find or otherwise qualify for different employment opportunities and the lack of access to education.</p>

Key Observations

- Growing disenchantment with administrative structures and overall political leadership.
- Lack of democratic literacy and failure to hold public representatives accountable for dereliction of duty.
- Lack of awareness among the women on their rights and entitlements. Ignorance towards arrangements of Government relief and compensation.
- Corrupt administrative structures exploit the ignorance and vulnerability of the masses.
- The plight of women affected by war especially concerning their economic instability (female headed households)
- Party politics undermining meaningful democratic engagement.
- Access denied for benefits due to language barrier/ illiteracy /ignorance.
- Administrative procedures and the requirements are being desensitised to ground realities.
- Administrative structures are non-conducive to grassroots level issues being escalated to the centre.

¹ Linearly attached houses with limited space occupied by several household members

- Lack of monitoring by the centre regarding the actions carried out by the periphery.
- Lack of sustainable solutions to the repercussions of war.
- Lack of responses and reactions from Government Officials to the requests proposed by women affected by war.
- Lack of political will.

Key issues identified

A recurrent issue during the discussion was the women's lack of awareness as to their rights/entitlements, and benefits they ought to receive from the State. The women had shared their experiences when meeting the Grama Sevaka officer and staff at the Divisional Secretariat when they sought redress. The women were repeatedly "deceived", their vulnerabilities and ignorance exploited. Even when some part of the benefits is given, most is withheld.

The language barrier is crucial since the authorities primarily function in Sinhala or English. Women who are only conversant in Tamil and/or illiterate cannot articulate their grievances. When filing applications to be eligible for certain services, most are rejected due to the language barrier. Apart from that, administrative procedures do not accommodate ground realities. For example, some women were internally displaced and relocated to Batticaloa from Jaffna. Consequent to such migration, they have lost access to the proper documentation required to access certain official services. Alternatively, most were unable to receive the death certificates of their loved ones, further compounding the issue.

It was further contended that these women were unable to make themselves aware of the benefits they were eligible for by the State, due to having multiple responsibilities. The war has hampered their education. The aftermath of the war saw them forced to become heads of households. With it, they were entrusted to take care of disabled relatives, be responsible for financial stability, take care of their children, struggle for employment and overall sustain their families. In terms of livelihood, the women had to resort to unskilled work. Some were manufacturing products using coconuts, but stated how they lack a good market to return profits.

The women expressed instances where they were subjected to mental torture. One such occurrence was when the women approached officials for redress; the officials would ask the women to "remarry" as a means of seeking financial stability. Officials would often use derogatory language and dismiss the grievances of the women. Some women were even unaware of whether they were widowed or not, as their husbands disappeared during the war, and they were yet to receive death certificates.

These women did not have sustainable means of employment. They cannot repay loans or be eligible for loan schemes, as labourers live from paycheck to paycheck. They do not have anyone to pay off the loan if they pass away. Women who have been isolated are often declined any Government support. The lack of dependents is the main factor

in disregarding them. However, they have no means of sustaining themselves.

Women undergo sexual and gender-based violence daily. Sexual bribery is a common occurrence, especially concerning microfinance schemes and when women approach state officials to voice their grievances. Especially in the estate sector, domestic violence is widespread. If women do find the courage to report to the Police, in the absence of the father or husband upon them being taken into custody, the family cannot sustain themselves.

1. Lack of security

- a. Sexual and gender-based violence run rampant. Sexual bribery and domestic violence are common occurrences.
- b. Denial of property rights leaves women most vulnerable.
- c. Access denied to benefits and other support mechanisms offered by the State. Government officials subject women to mental torture and deceive them by exploiting their ignorance and vulnerabilities.
- d. Human elephant conflict leaves them in a constant state of fear and uncertainty.

2. Access to public services

a. Health

- Chronic kidney disease of unknown aetiology
- Inherent psychological conditioning (Eg: We don't need to study because we are poor, we inherit the job of our parents)

b. Education

- Lack of physical and human resources in schools.
- Lack of opportunities given to continue higher education.
- Child labourers due to having no sufficient support from parents.
- Access denied by parents who expect older children to look after younger children as parents leave for work.

c. Water and Sanitation

- Need to walk long distances to have access to clean drinking water.

- Forced to drink impure water.
- Lack of distribution of water supply.

3. Economy

- a. Micro finance schemes that exploit women
- b. Lack of sustainable livelihoods, especially in female headed households, resulting in complete dependence on Government funds
- c. Discrimination and lack of access to Samurdhi Allowances, Elderly Allowances etc.
- d. The exploitation of labour and discrimination among men and women concerning wages (wage gap)

4. Housing

- a. Discrimination in identifying beneficiaries.
- b. Housing plans that do not have liveable conditions, or proper infrastructure.
- c. Dismal conditions of 'line rooms' where the recent COVID pandemic posed many challenges.
- d. Re-settled land being uninhabitable (wetlands being water clogged).

5. Corruption

- a. Inequality in dispensing public services.
- b. Bribery and corruption among Government Officials.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

- **Providing livelihood assistance:** Providing medical facilities, drinking water facilities, educational facilities for their children to study and transport facilities for affected women in remote areas. They face a multitude of problems due to the lack of above factors, and they should be educated to overcome these issues and speak to the authorities concerned.
- **Provision of suitable lands other than wetlands:** Housing given to affected people is often found to be waterlogged. They are found to be unsuitable for settlement. They should be provided with accommodation and sanitary facilities.
- **Providing self-employment skills and training to affected women:** Many affected women have lost their husbands, fathers and brothers who were their daily source of income. Such women should be given incentives and motives to become self-employed.
- **Training on self-employment:** To provide self-employment, the Government can initiate workshops with war-affected women and give them training on establishing their own self-employment initiatives. The Government can also establish links with factories to offer employment. Alternatively, the Government could also engage with private factories to provide jobs as per their capacity and skills.
- **Forming a special team:** Forming a special team to look after women affected by war, and to monitor and conduct follow-ups on whether their allowances and compensations are distributed properly. Government Officials should genuinely report on the issues regarding corruption and bribery (sexual bribery), and make remedial steps available to women.
- **Special attention should be paid to specific groups of people:** It is the Government's responsibility to provide compensation without prejudice towards those affected by the conflict. In doing so, the elderly pregnant women, widows and female-headed households should be given special attention. The Government should put in place monitoring measures to ensure that it is being used for its intended purpose.
- **Application forms must be made available in all three languages:** Compensation should be arranged for those who do not have the proper documents to claim compensation. As compensation applications are inaccessible since they are only available in one language, the relevant application forms should be made available in all three languages (English, Tamil, and Sinhala).
- **Due administration of justice:** The bribery cases should be handled with rich resources and technical expertise, without the participation of any political elites. The women stated that many Government Officials were corrupt, and that bribery, and malpractice of justice is rampant in their areas.
- **Raise awareness:** People should be made aware of their benefits, aid, assistance, and funds available to them from the Government. Since people are often ignorant

of the multiple procedures they must follow to obtain assistance, and have other priorities such as maintenance of their families, they work laboriously for a long time. They are not aware of the assistance provided to them by the Government. The public should be made aware of whom to approach, apart from the immediate institutions, to access their rights and benefits when the authorities concerned neglect their duties or fail to facilitate it.

- **Closure:** Providing assurances to women about the death, or otherwise, of their loved ones. Many war-affected women still believe that their husbands are alive since they were arrested for affiliations with the LTTE. Therefore, the Government should prove their existence, or the lack thereof, and provide meaningful justice and suitable reparations. Sustainable solutions should be given in order for these women to move on.

Call to Action

On the basis that the people who have been affected by war are continually being marginalised and their rights and entitlements denied, we urge the law makers and policy makers of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, to implement the following actionable recommendations:

- i Conduct a thorough research analysis on the ground realities of the war affected women spread across Sri Lanka;
- ii Amend and adapt existing administrative procedures and requirements to the realities of the grassroots level;
- iii Put in place complaint mechanisms and accountability structures as forms of redress for the inaction and omissions of officials;
- iv Address the critical conditions elucidated by the demands put forward by the affected people;
- v Take immediate measures to secure the welfare and basic standards of living in the affected areas;
- vi Hold accountable the rogue authoritative figures who deny access to the benefits and exploit the vulnerable; and
- vii Understand the dire need to address these issues in order to implement sustainable solutions for the repercussions of war thereby ensuring the self determination of these people.

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