



# Paths to Peace

MARCH 2024

March highlighted a month of celebrating women, investing in women for the betterment of society, reflections, advancing sustainable peace in academia, lessons from Sri Lanka's past ethnic conflicts and embracing diversity in the time of Lent.

## Inclusion Includes Women

WOICE sounds like voice, and the *w* stands for women. However, do women have a voice to articulate their difficulties and their needs? Do they have a voice to speak against the violence that goes on in their communities?

The Women Organised for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) Learning and Advocacy Symposium organized by NPC brought together more than 120 women leaders and activists from seven districts across the country. The symposium offered an opportunity for women leaders and activists from community level organizations to engage with national level women leaders.

It marked the final stage of the project, uniting the women who have been capacitated in core skills to become Super Group and Peer Group members in their communities and to be a networking opportunity for women.



Guest speakers included former MP Ferial Ashraff who brought attention to the linguistic barriers within the country and underscored the critical role of women, particularly mothers, in shaping the nation's future. "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world," she said. She advocated for a reflective approach to overcoming national challenges, emphasising the need for women to actively participate in decision making processes.

MP Dr. Sudharshani Fernandopulle pointed out that the lack of inclusivity silenced women's voices, making them passively wait for men to create solutions. She urged that in the context of forthcoming elections, the system of preferential voting should be used to ensure that at least one of the three preferential votes given to individual voters was used to vote for women candidates.

MP Thalatha Athukorala noted that women excelled in academics with many becoming university professors and lecturers yet they rarely voted for each other, became role models or fostered collaboration to shatter the glass ceiling together.

Former UN Under Secretary General and human rights advocate Radhika Coomaraswamy gave different examples of women being empowered and working towards reconciliation. In Somalia, a country that had five clans fighting and killing each other, women formed a sixth clan that became the Somali women's movement, which secured a 12% quota in the reconciliation process. She noted that the project could form the basis of women's organisation as a group. "Real change will only begin at the community level," she said.

US Ambassador Julie Chung encouraged the women to work towards a common goal. "Through this group the seeds are planted," she said, adding that it was important to revitalise civic space through women. "You are providing real life examples of leadership." She referred to the importance of inclusion especially during this time of transition in working out durable solutions. She pointed to the inclusion of women as an important part of an inclusive democracy in which the wellbeing of all sections of the people could be met.

During a panel discussion featuring academics Prof. Sumathy Sivamohan and Dr. Pavithra Jayawardhena and social activists Ms. Shanthi Dissanayake and Ms. Nirupa Serasinghe, the main challenges faced by women were analysed. These included how women organized themselves to talk about their community problems, how they were economically excluded from education and academia, how at an early age they were socialised in a culture of oppression, how women were victimised by men and how women sometimes treated other women poorly. To counter this, women had to become active and gather their own knowledge and information independently.

During the final session of the symposium representatives from the seven districts presented their activities and achievements.

One of the key observations related to the lack of knowledge of the laws on the part of citizens and implementation of them by the state. The women across all these districts were keen to learn - to have an improved conceptual understanding of governance and accountability processes and a practical understanding of relevant laws and policies and skills for effective community interventions.



# Navigating the Path to Pluralism

The Global Pluralism Monitor Workshop offered a platform for open dialogue on the state of pluralism in Sri Lanka. By bringing together 47 participants including religious leaders from Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity as well as men and women representing District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) from 17 districts, the workshop highlighted the challenges and opportunities faced in creating a more inclusive and equitable society. The discussion was guided by the Global Pluralism Monitor Framework.

“There is no national law in the country. When laws are proposed as national laws, they get changed when they are about to be implemented,” said Rev. Father Nirmal Suranjan, highlighting the inconsistencies in national law implementation. Ven. Dhamma Vimoksha Bikkuni said that although women's rights were spoken about, no equal rights were given and pointed out the disparities in women's rights and community recognition. The lack of equal access to jobs and professional opportunities for women and minority communities was discussed. Different treatment of communities based on ethnicity was identified as a core issue.

Participants highlighted the complexity in achieving diverse political representation. The development of policies often led to satisfying one group while making others suffer.

Barriers faced by individuals, especially women, attempting to enter politics were addressed. S.N.M. Zulfikar Moulavi stated, “After independence, Sri Lanka had only two political parties. Now there are several political parties created by minority groups in response to perceived inequalities.

“Politicians are not honest. They won't let the leaders from minority communities to emerge,” said R. Manoharan from Batticaloa.

During the discussions it was observed that there were biases inherent in most policies, that there was a neglect of minority voters that undermined the democratic principle of equal representation and that unequal resource allocation failed to address the needs of all communities equitably.



Participants noted varied experiences regarding minority representation and engagement in various sectors. For instance, Muslims received recognition and leadership opportunities in the civil society sector.

Pastor S. Ashok Kumar highlighted respect for religious leaders in Puttalam, pointing to areas where inclusive practices were observed.

The workshop concluded with a consensus on the need for all sectors of society including government bodies, civil society organizations and communities to engage in constructive dialogue and collaborative efforts to address issues of favouritism, under representation, biased policymaking and inequitable resource allocation.





# Investing in Women: From Equity to Equality

Under NPC's Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) project, the Dehiovita Divisional Secretariat conducted a social cohesion activity focussing on International Women's Day with the participation of over 130 women representing all ethnicities.

Speakers included Assistant Divisional Secretary M.N.S. Weerasinghe, Plantation Community Development Officer Shermila Jeenatha who shared information on Muslim culture and rituals and Regional Development Bank representative Samantha Bandara who introduced women's microfinance opportunities and shared information on how to obtain low interest loans for income generation activities.

Explaining equality and equity, NPC staff stressed that in order to work towards equality, society and women needed equity, which refers to fair treatment and access to opportunities for people considering their specific circumstances and needs to achieve equal outcomes. It involved addressing systemic inequalities and providing resources and chances to ensure that everyone could participate in society.

Senior Family Counsellor of the Avissawella Hospital Shantha Rathnasiri said that women were often not given the opportunity to go forward and called on women to claim their rights and raise issues. There were many women householders across the country and they must be given more power to make decisions, she pointed out.



Child Care Officer at Ruwanwella District Secretariat K.I. Swarna said there was a problem in communication issues and aggressive behaviour within families. The parent's behaviour affected how children learned their behaviour. If parents wanted to raise good children, they needed to model qualities such as respect and decision making in a positive way, she said.

The cultural events brought to life the roles and tasks women assumed in society and visualised the diversity among women.

## Advances in Transitional Justice Efforts

NPC's People Unite for Justice and Accountability (PUJA) project, aimed at promoting community development and wellbeing, held a partner orientation and self-care training session held for 37 participants from partner organizations such as the Center for Human Rights and Development, Peace and Community Action and Right to Life. The training programme familiarised partners with the project's goals and equipped them with skills to support vulnerable communities while enhancing their own mental wellbeing through interactive sessions on stress management, emotional regulation and trauma care.

Also under the PUJA project, an initiative to advance Transitional Justice (TJ) was launched with district level information sessions for state officers. The workshop, the first of 25, examined topics such as supporting the TJ process and the repeal of restrictive laws including the Prevention of Terrorism Act.



# Government-Youth Collaboration for Inclusive Public Services

Under NPC's project Sustainable Peace through Pluralism and Inclusive Service Delivery funded by Freedom House, a meeting was conducted in Ratnapura to draft a questionnaire for research aimed at identifying shortcomings in public services facing the community.

Ten government officials who are enrolled in the Inclusive Service Delivery advanced certificate course at Sabaragamuwa University met youth community facilitators and human rights defenders representing the Malaiyaha community. Facilitated by Senior Lecturer at the university, Ravindra Palliaguru, the session focused on research methodologies and ethical considerations for conducting the research.

Grama Niladaris and development officers were among the participants, fostering the collaboration essential for achieving positive change. The meeting served as a platform of opportunity for youth facilitators to share the challenges and issues the Malaiyaha community faces in accessing public services including the absence of estate hospitals or dispensaries near the estates, the lack of women/youth/elder societies to advocate for community rights and the inadequacy of the water supply system.

The youth facilitators contributed to developing the questionnaire based on their experiences with the Malaiyaha community and engaged with the government officials. Establishing a relationship with government officials was very important because the young people will serve as access points for the Malaiyaha community to access public services.

## Charter for New Policies and Laws on Religious Freedom

The Negombo Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) organized a meeting for religious leaders, civil society members and government officers under NPC's project Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) to highlight the potential of advocacy work.

Advocacy serves as a vehicle for influencing change and ensuring that marginalised voices are heard and considered in policy making and societal development. It contributes to advancing social justice, equality and human rights, bridging the gap between existing conditions and an equitable world.

At the meeting, the Religious Freedom Charter prepared under the Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project was handed over to MP Dr. Kavinda Jayawardena with the purpose of advocating to formulate new policies and laws on religious freedom at the national level.



The charter can be referred to by decision makers when policy and law making was taking place because it served as a connection between relevant issues on the ground and policymakers and the government.

There will be similar advocacy efforts across other districts.



# Adam's Peak Peace Initiative

For the first time, Adam's Peak stood as a testament to unity and peace, decorated with messages in both Sinhala and Tamil, marking a historic moment of collective commitment towards bridging gaps between communities.

This event not only celebrates a shared dedication to understanding and harmony but also shines a light on the underlying tensions around the historical site. The different name boards at the entrance symbolise a place of pilgrimage and a crossroads of cultural and religious identities, highlighting the ongoing effort to find common ground despite differences.

NPC, in collaboration with Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project, District Inter Religious Youth Group Nuwara Eliya and the Cultural and Environmental Society, joined the event to initiate actions for positive change.

Through planning and discussions, 40 peace messages were proposed of which 10 received approval from the Maskeliya Municipal Council. A total of 30 messages were placed at Adam's Peak to sow seeds of peace and harmony.

The messages served as a visual metaphor for the path to walk together to build an inclusive society; it embodied a shared commitment where each step is a step towards understanding, acceptance and collective growth.



## Embracing Diversity: NPC Observes Lent

NPC's Welfare Society organised a Lenten event for staff as part of a broader approach to promote understanding and tolerance among its staff members of different faiths.

NPC invited Bishop Asiri Perera to explain about the season of lent and receive his sermon and blessings. He said that the reason Lent was 46 days long was because it included 40 days of fasting representing the time Jesus spent fasting in the wilderness plus six Sundays on which fasting was not practiced. These Sundays are considered mini Easters celebrating the resurrection of Jesus and were not counted in the 40 days of fasting.

Bishop Perera emphasised the spiritual component of fasting that contributed to faith.

By recognising and celebrating such religious observances, NPC not only fosters a culture of mutual respect but also enhances its team's ability to work effectively for a plural society in Sri Lanka.





# Symposium Calls for Inclusion of Women at All Levels of Decision Making

A major problem in Sri Lanka is the gap between aspirations and reality, words and deeds, laws and their implementation. Gender relations is no exception. The Women Organised for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) Learning and Advocacy Symposium organized by the National Peace Council (NPC) brought together more than 120 women leaders and activists from seven districts across the country. One of the key observations related to the lack of knowledge of the laws on the part of citizens and implementation of them by the state.

Hon. Sudarshini Fernandopulle, MP, who was one of the speakers at this event urged that in the context of forthcoming elections that the system of preferential voting could be used to ensure that at least one of the three preferential votes given to individual voters is used to vote for women candidates. Hon. Thalatha Athukorale, MP, pointed to the solidarity in parliament among the elected women parliamentarians who, with few exceptions, stood together on issues of human rights and specifically women's rights. Former UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Dr Radhika Coomaraswamy gave the example of Somalia where five tribes were fighting and killing each other; women formed a 6th tribe which became the Somali women's movement and secured a 12 percent quota in parliament.

The women community leaders handed over a report to the national level political representatives present on the occasion. This report summarizes the work carried out by women leaders of the WOICE project across the seven districts and the problems that they brought out through discussion and dialogue that need to be solved and the recommendations proposed for solving the identified issues that have become issues not only for women but also for society as a whole.

Although more than 56 percent of the Sri Lankan electorate consists of women, less than six percent of those elected to parliament are women. It is unfortunate that the law implemented at the local government elections of 2018 to ensure 25 percent representation at the local government level for women has been in abeyance for over a year due to the failure of the government to hold local government elections in a timely manner. US Ambassador to Sri Lanka, H.E. Julie Chung who also spoke at the symposium referred to the importance of inclusion especially during this time of transition in working out durable solutions. She pointed to the inclusion of women as an important part of an inclusive democracy in which the wellbeing of all sections of the people could be met.

According to President Ranil Wickremesinghe in the past 14 months the government has passed 42 new laws and 62 more are in the pipeline to ensure the economic transformation of the country. Among these are two draft laws pertaining to women's rights, including the establishment of a national women's commission. NPC urges the government to take measures to ensure that the laws it passes are implemented.

It is particularly appalling that despite the high level of education of women in Sri Lanka, the country was ranked 180 out of 187 countries in the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) ranking of female representation in parliament as of August 2023. Participation by women in decision making at the national level is of utmost importance to ensure genuine implementation of laws that are passed. We call on all political parties to voluntarily adopt quotas when selecting candidates to ensure adequate representation of women and other marginalised groups in the next parliament.

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National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

*Our Vision:*

*A just and peaceful Sri Lanka, in which the freedom, human rights and democratic rights of all peoples are assured.*

*Our Mission:*

*To work in partnership with different target groups with an aim to educate, mobilize and advocate the building of a rights conscious society of people that work towards a political solution to the ethnic conflict, reconciliation and equal opportunities for all.*

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