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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka



Paths To Peace

March 2026

A Call for Real Change on International Women's Day

International Women's Day, celebrated on March 8 each year, highlights the achievements of women while also addressing the challenges they continue to face. Women play a vital role in society, contributing significantly to the economy, politics and culture. However, despite progress, many issues still affect women's equality and empowerment in 2026.

Cultural traditions and social norms continue to shape women's lives. Deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes limit women's freedom and opportunities. Discriminatory laws and practices based on religion and culture affect women's rights. Issues such as gender-based violence, social expectations and unequal treatment in families and workplaces remain serious concerns. These cultural barriers prevent women from achieving full equality.

In the Badulla District Umadevi, a tea estate worker with over 20 years of experience, painted a stark picture of daily life that challenges her empowerment. "We have not received any real rights as women," she said. "People say women have rights now but that is not true for us."



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Her day begins before sunrise, balancing domestic responsibilities with demanding plantation work. Like many women in the estate sector, she prepares her children for school, arranges childcare and then heads to the fields where she is expected to pluck 20-22 kilograms of tea leaves daily. Meeting this target is often unrealistic. Most workers manage only around 10 kilograms per day, resulting in drastically reduced earnings, sometimes as low as Rs 6,000 to 7,000 a month. For many families, this income is not enough to meet basic living needs.

Even during working hours, caregiving responsibilities persist. “If a child is sick, the school always calls the mother,” Umadevi explains. “There is no real freedom for women.” Her words echo the harsh reality faced by many plantation workers. “We live like slaves.”

Beyond economic hardship, women also face barriers to political representation. Susana Nizam, a member of the Kandy Women Organised for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) group, highlights the gap between participation and influence. “Although more women are entering political spaces, their presence does not necessarily translate into power or recognition. Women remain underrepresented in Parliament and those who do participate often encounter systemic challenges, including a lack of respect and limited decision making authority.”

This environment discourages many capable women from pursuing leadership roles. Susana emphasises the need for change. “Women must be supported, respected and encouraged to lead. Their voices are essential in shaping the future.”

Prasangika Sudharshini Dharmawansa, Kandy District Coordinator for the WOICE Project, said, “The media continues to play a significant role in shaping public perception, not always positively. Women are often underrepresented or portrayed in ways that reinforce stereotypes.”

Programmes dedicated to women’s issues are limited and advertising frequently exploits women’s images, undermining their dignity and contributions. This imbalance is especially concerning in a country where women make up 52% of the population. The lack of fair and accurate representation raises broader questions about accountability and the role of media in promoting equality. Ensuring fair wages and safe working conditions is critical to restoring dignity and justice for women in labour intensive sectors. Equally important is advocating for meaningful representation in leadership and decision making spaces.

Challenging harmful stereotypes in the media is another essential step toward building a more inclusive society. At the same time, fostering solidarity among women and allies can create stronger support systems and drive collective progress.

Manori Anurudikka, Polonnaruwa District WOICE Project Coordinator, said, “The message is clear: progress must be measured not by promises, but by real change in people’s lives.”

International Women’s Day must serve as more than a moment of recognition - it should be a turning point, a moment to commit to action, amplify unheard voices and work toward a future where every woman and girl can live with dignity, equality and opportunity.

With stronger policies, education and social change, Sri Lanka can move toward a more inclusive and fair society for all women.



Empowering Youth Voices in Democratic Participation

Under the EU-funded Active Citizens for Elections and Democracy (ACED) project, four youth training programmes were conducted as part of the planned 35 trainings for NPC youth networks aimed at strengthening youth participation in elections and advocacy for youth quotas across all tiers of government. Altogether, 103 youth participants representing diverse backgrounds including NPC youth networks, youth parliament representatives, Youth Service Council members, community youth leaders, Youth Club members and university students took part in the programmes.

The first programme was held in Monaragala and was facilitated by Manjula Gajanayake from Institute for Democratic Reforms and Electoral Studies. Youth participants highlighted significant challenges affecting their political engagement, including unemployment, financial difficulties and limited access to educational opportunities. Despite these barriers, many participants expressed strong interest in contesting the upcoming local government elections, with several indicating their intention to enter politics as independent candidates due to limited opportunities within major political parties.

The second programme took place in Matara and was also facilitated by Mr. Gajanayake. Participants discussed several issues affecting their communities, including youth unemployment, drug addiction, limited access to land for livelihoods and waste disposal management. They emphasised recurring natural disaster risks, particularly annual flooding, which continue to affect their communities. They pointed out that if they were provided with greater opportunities and decision making power within governance structures, they would be able to contribute meaningfully to addressing these challenges and support the development of their district. The discussion encouraged participants to strengthen their engagement in democratic processes and youth leadership initiatives at the local level.

The third programme was conducted in Kurunegala and facilitated by Dr. Crisni Silva, a senior lecturer in the Department of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Colombo and engaged 25 participants representing youth parliament members and community youth leaders who demonstrated strong interest in learning about voter education, the Right to Information (RTI) and the current political context. They said that opportunities to engage in politics were often limited unless individuals had party connections or family links to political actors, motivating some to consider entering politics independently.

The fourth programme was held in Kandy and was also facilitated by Dr. Silva. Participants engaged in discussions on youth political participation, electoral processes and the importance of increasing youth representation within governance structures. Participants highlighted structural barriers that limit their access to political platforms while expressing enthusiasm to take part more actively in future political processes. The programmes demonstrated the strong interest and commitment of young people to participate in democratic processes and highlighted the continued importance of creating enabling spaces to support greater youth representation in politics at all levels.



Bringing Truth and Reconciliation to Centre Stage

A seminar to advance the reconciliation process through inclusive dialogue and collective action was held in Kandy, bringing together over 100 civil society representatives from diverse sectors alongside partners including the Kandy District Inter Religious Committee, Kandy Civil Society Coalition, Youth Democracy Congress, Social Solidarity Foundation, Lanka Teachers' Union and the Association of LGA members.

NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera provided an overview of transitional justice frameworks, emphasising the urgent need for an active and credible truth seeking commission to address past injustices and build public trust; Prof. Deepika Udagama, former Commissioner of the Human Rights Commission, shed light on the mechanisms required to ensure justice for missing persons while discussing procedural and institutional challenges; and Prof. Nirmal Ranjith Devasiri from the University of Colombo examined the current landscape of civil society activism, highlighting the pressing need to strengthen civic engagement and enhance the effectiveness of reconciliation initiatives in a complex socio-political environment.

Kandy Local Government Authority Members' Forum representative, V. G. Mangalika, stressed that people had forgotten about disappeared people and their families and that programmes like this were important to create public awareness, adding that society must openly discuss those who were killed, questioning why perpetrators whether in 1971, 1989 or otherwise were not being identified and punished.

S.A.S. Senanayake of the Kandy Mantharana Sabhawa noted that people did not speak enough about ensuring justice for victims and questioned whether the institutions appointed to investigate disappearances were effective.

A memorandum was submitted to the Central Provincial Governor as an initial step towards strengthening the national approach to reconciliation while a leaflet distribution campaign across Kandy city raised public awareness and encouraged community engagement. This initiative reaffirmed the role of civil society as a driving force in the journey toward sustainable peace and social justice.

Special Needs in the Central Hills

NPC, in collaboration with its partner organization Future in Our Hands Development Fund, conducted an actualisation activity in Passara in the Badulla District focussing on supporting women affected by cyclone Ditwah who were residing in temporary camps. The women, most of whom were from the Malaiyaha Tamil community, were facing economic hardship and have been physically and emotionally affected by the losses, which caused significant disruption to their livelihoods. Through a series of focus group discussions facilitated by Local Government Authority leaders, participants highlighted the urgent need for sustainable economic empowerment opportunities.

A needs assessment was carried out to understand the women's existing skills and identify viable livelihood options, leading to the selection of three key training areas aligned with local market demands: candle making, slipper designing and hand embroidery. A total of 70 women took part in the programme, gaining hands on training from experienced resource people who provided practical guidance and skill development support.

"Even after more than 200 years, people of the hills continue to suffer due to poverty and lack of economic facilities. While many have supported communities with basic needs, empowering women through programmes like this is essential. The voices reflect a broader transformation where women are moving beyond survival toward self-reliance, and by equipping them with practical skills and confidence, the initiative has laid the foundation for sustainable income generation and resilience," said the Chairman of the Passara Municipal Council.



"Through the programme, we learnt how to make candles and improve our livelihoods. I would like to thank the trainers and the organizations that made this possible," said K. Malar, a beneficiary.

An actualisation activity was conducted at the Kandy District to address the systemic exclusion of Malaiyaha Tamil elders from essential government services. Panwila is one of the most underserved regions in the district where a lack of National Identity Cards (NICs) has barred vulnerable community members from accessing critical social protection schemes like the Elderly Allowance and Aswesuma benefits.

In response to these barriers compounded by mobility limitations, low awareness and literacy challenges, a specialised mobile clinic was organized to facilitate NIC issuance for 150 elders. By bringing government officers directly to the community, the initiative streamlined the documentation process, removing the hurdles that have hindered the Malaiyaha Tamil community's engagement with public services. This targeted intervention not only secured eligibility for state welfare programmes but also fostered a sense of social inclusion and dignity, demonstrating a successful model for addressing service delivery gaps in Sri Lanka's most remote areas.

"I came from Kalabokka. Living without an identity card is very difficult. I cannot read or write so I cannot fill out forms. Without an identity card, it is hard to receive benefits like Aswesuma. Providing this kind of service and inviting people like this is a very good initiative. An identity card is an essential document for us," said Thangamma, a community member.



Women, Youth and Faith Leaders Shape an Inclusive Nation

Several meetings and actualisation activities were held under NPC's Plural Action for Inclusion, Reconciliation, and Social Justice (PAIRS) project funded by Misereor and co-funded by CAFOD in collaboration with partner organizations.

For nearly 50 years, families living in estate areas of Nuwara Eliya have been invisible to the state. Without birth certificates, national identity cards or marriage certificates, they could not access entitled services or even prove their existence while government offices remained out of reach due to travel costs, loss of daily wages and the need for multiple visits.

Nuwara Eliya District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) members organized a one stop service programme at the Ambagamuwa Divisional Secretariat, bringing together service providers from multiple government institutions in one place. Over 1,000 beneficiaries from more than 32 estate divisions attended, and with the official authorization of the Registrar General, birth certificates were issued on the spot. More than 50 individuals over the age of 50 received while families who had been deprived of services for decades could begin the process of obtaining national identity cards and accessing the benefits they had long been denied.

In Vavuniya District, women aspiring to local government leadership have long faced structural and cultural barriers, fewer opportunities within political parties, lack of financial and institutional support and persistent gender stereotyping that question their leadership abilities. The gap between the 25 percent women's quota in law and its implementation on the ground has limited fair representation.

Under the leadership of the District Election Commissioner, 40 women Local Government Authority (LGA) members and women civil society leaders participated in an actualisation activity organized by NPC in collaboration with the Federation of Institutions for Rural Management.

The session focused on the high number of rejected nominations submitted by female candidates, with the Election Commissioner providing clear instructions and practical advice on how to correctly prepare nomination papers to avoid technical errors. Participants explored strategies to increase women's political participation, including strengthening leadership skills, building support networks and ensuring the proper implementation of the 25 percent quota. "The District Election Commissioner clearly explained the main reasons behind the high number of rejections of women's nominations. The practical suggestions provided to overcome these issues were especially valuable. It created awareness and hope that, with better preparation and cooperation, this target can be successfully and systematically achieved in the future," said U. Yogeswary, TNA Vavuniya Municipal Council.

Through a study conducted by DIRC youth groups, it was found that Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim students at the Eastern University experienced poor understanding and weak relationships with cultural differences, language barriers and limited interaction reducing harmony among them. NPC, in collaboration with the Eastern University and partner organization Human Rights Civil Committee (HRCC), brought together 60 students from the three communities for a youth actualisation activity. For the first time in a structured setting, students had the opportunity to directly discuss the issues that prevented them from working together effectively, sharing personal experiences, understanding each other's perspectives and collectively exploring practical solutions.

"The workshop provided a valuable platform to learn from one another and appreciate our differences. It created a friendly and respectful environment where students from diverse backgrounds could come together and share their thoughts openly. One of the most important aspects was the opportunity it gave us to directly discuss our problems and concerns with fellow students. This helped strengthen mutual understanding and encouraged unity among us," said N. Diviya, a student from the Faculty of Arts.



Refugee Return and Ditwah Recovery Require Improved Partnerships

The call by Minister Bimal Rathnayake for Sri Lankan refugees in India to return home, with assurances of reintegration support, is a welcome and positive step. Encouraging refugee return is an important signal that the past is not being ignored. Nearly 90,000 Sri Lankan refugees remain in India, many of whom have lived there for 30 years or more. Their return cannot be treated as a routine administrative process. The government has a special responsibility to ensure that those who choose to return are received into a safe, supportive, and well-prepared environment. They must not be left stranded or pushed into already strained communities without adequate housing, livelihoods, and social support. The younger generation who may be part of the group returning home needs more assurances and inducements to live in a country which may be for the first time in their life.

The ongoing gaps in post-disaster recovery following Cyclone Ditwah highlight the need for stronger planning, partnerships and delivery by the government when it comes to resettling the returnees from India. Four months after the cyclone, over 153,000 people remain displaced, with many still living in temporary shelters, with host families, or in "emerging informal" settlements. This includes a significant number of hill country Malayaha Tamil families in temporary camps, schools, and unsafe structures. Relief and reconstruction in plantation areas lag far behind the rest of the country. A key reason is the absence of clear policy direction, especially on land allocation, housing responsibility, and institutional coordination.

The National Peace Council deems three immediate steps to be essential. First, the government should establish a high-level state authority to oversee both Ditwah recovery and refugee return, with overriding authority to resolve bottlenecks, ensure equitable distribution of assistance, and publish transparent timelines and progress updates. This mechanism should ensure that land allocation, housing, compensation, and infrastructure repair are handled in a timely and consistent manner across all affected areas. A model to follow may be the Mahaweli Authority created in 1979 under a special Act to implement the Mahaweli River Diversion, which was the largest integrated development project in Sri Lanka's history. Because of the scale and urgency of the programme, the Authority was given exceptionally wide powers that cut across normal ministerial boundaries with the president taking special interest in it.

Second, the government should prioritise immediate relief alongside long-term resettlement by ensuring that all displaced families have access to safe transitional shelter with basic services, while fast-tracking permanent housing with secure land tenure, fair compensation, and functioning local infrastructure. Accessible grievance mechanisms and communication in local languages should be part of this effort to ensure accountability and inclusion.

Third, the government should form structured partnerships with non-governmental organisations and community groups, including experienced organisations such as Sarvodaya and Organisation for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OfERR) in the case of Indian returnees. These partnerships should be formalised and task-oriented, enabling rapid delivery of transitional shelter, permanent housing support, livelihoods, and psychosocial services. Civil society brings field experience, community trust, and operational capacity that can significantly strengthen state efforts. We urge the government to mobilise the support of non-governmental organisations in particular for this purpose. Their involvement will strengthen and extend the reach of government efforts. With careful planning and strong partnerships, this effort can support reconciliation and help build a more stable future for all.

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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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