

Democratisation and Governance

Briefing Paper *Introduction*



“We were talking within ourselves last night, among us roommates. We may have jobs, we may be earning...but somehow, we are not yet developed. Ultimately, we wind up doing everything for the family and for the husband. There is no freedom for us yet.

But I hope there will be at least a small chance for us in the years to come.”

Young woman participating in NPC Exchange Visit

Since April 2014, National Peace Council of Sri Lanka (NPC) has been implementing the project Post Conflict Healing: A Women's Manifesto, supported by funding from Forum for Women and Development (FOKUS). It aims to support the process of Transitional Justice being led by the Government of Sri Lanka, and strengthen the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 by ensuring the protection of women's integrity and increasing their participation in social and political reform.

To this end, NPC has been working directly with extremely marginalised women in grassroots communities. Our activities aim to build a platform for their voice and to develop opportunities for their democratic participation, all of which is based more broadly on a holistic process of individual, community, and national healing. The project is working in 9 districts that have each faced distinct pressures from the violence of war: Vavuniya, Mannar, Trincomalee, Ampara, Galle, Hambantota, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, and Puttalam. Since we began, we have cultivated relationships in 900 war-affected communities in these districts, working with community-based organisations, religious clergy, community leaders, and local government officials. We have worked directly with more than 300 marginalised women, many of whom are widows and/or are women heads of households and therefore face specific issues of exclusion in the post-war context. 72 of these women have emerged as leaders of this project. Representing the concerns articulated by the women in their districts, these women have organised for collective action, initiating healing activities, protests, local reform, advocacy platforms, and education efforts in order to ensure a more representative process of justice, equality and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. These briefing papers will highlight the unique experiences of conflict shared by women during this project, examine continuing is-

ssues of violence, injustice, inequality, grievance, and marginalisation that any successful effort at transitional justice must address, and make recommendations based on the lessons learned during this project.

This briefing paper discusses the pervasiveness of traumatic encounters among women in Sri Lanka, and issues that remain critical to their psychosocial recovery.

Methodology

The core methodology of this project has been to support a steady progression from awareness to action, healing to empowerment. In each District, with the support of our local partners¹, NPC has implemented the following activities:

1. We wish to thank
Resources for Peace and Reconciliation, Mannar; SHAKTHI Organisation, Trincomalee; True Vision Rural Rehabilitation Organisation, Ampara; Women Organisation for Development, Equity, Peace and Temperance, Puttalam; Cultural and Environmental Society, Nuwara Eliya; Ruhunu Rural Women's Organisation,





1. District Level Orientations on the Gender Dimensions of Transitional Justice: Education of women and community leaders on the proposed Transitional Justice mechanisms and UNSCR 1325, which culminated in grassroots women discussing obstacles to peace and justice in their communities, collaboratively identifying specific grievances, and prioritising their own areas of concern under the proposed mechanism.

2. Women's Meetings to Plan Healing Activities: Marginalised women from each District discussed the issues that affect women most severely in their respective communities, and planned initiatives to address these concerns and strengthen individual, community, and national healing

3. Healing Activities: Women led initiatives in each District, with the support of civil society, local government, religious clergy, and community leaders, to address grievances, advocate for their rights, and increase dialogue on social and political concerns.

4. Exchange Visits: Learning, discussion and exchange between North-South, South-East, East-Central, and Central-North areas, which developed women's networks across regions, reinforced mutual empowerment through sharing stories, experiences and lessons learned, and strengthened understanding between groups divided by conflict towards healing and collaborative participation in reform.

These activities have created a much-needed opportunity for women's voices to emerge on a broad range of issues after decades of being si-

lenced through the everyday violence of war. They identify, from their personal experience, several challenges to peace, democracy and justice in this country, including the enforced disappearances of loved ones, restricted access to government services, exclusion based on ethnicity, religion, and language, numerous continuing rights-violations, exhausting poverty, predatory lending, gender based violence, child abuse, and social violence towards widows and women heads of households. While the lessons from this project are from nine districts only and need further study to be fully comprehensive, they remain an important narration of women's challenges and experiences in post-conflict Sri Lanka, and represent the demands of female citizens during the nation's Transitional Justice process.

Democratisation and Governance

Three decades of civil war and years of autocratic governance have weakened the underpinnings of democracy in Sri Lanka. An integral part of the transitional justice mechanism will therefore be to reform systems of justice, strengthen human rights, reform state institutions, and ensure that all people are equally able to participate in democratic life. This is a process meant to rebuild a healthy relationship of mutual responsibility between the citizen and the state. Drawing from the grassroots communities that took part in this project, this briefing paper focuses on the attitudes, aspirations, practices, and challenges that reflect how marginalised women exercise their civic responsibilities during this incipient period of democratic reform, and the issues that affect how their inclusion in the state is restored.



Hambantota; Women's Chamber of Commerce, Kandy; Human Resources and Community Development Foundation, Galle; and Rural Women's Forum, Vavuniya.

1. Reviving Civic Life

When discussing their integration into public life, women affirmed an appreciation for the more peaceful environment that followed the war. Free movement, increased security, progress towards rule of law, and declining fearfulness and anxiety have drastically improved the ability of citizens to engage with civic life. Women also felt that government institutions are, overall, becoming more respectful of their responsibilities, allowing citizens to more easily pursue their rights. While minority communities expressed having doubts on whether a new regime will lead to real political or structural change, the fact that the current government is taking positive steps towards justice, inclusion and reform has increased the desire to engage meaningfully with this national process and make their own contributions towards this transition.

“Earlier, we were afraid of the military. Now, we are able to go to Colombo and search for our missing relatives. The CID is also accepting what we say; there are even CID officers who have scolded other officers who haven’t taken any action for us, or who have refused to take complaints.” – Tamil woman, Mannar

Many challenges, however, still remain. Structural issues of political discrimination (such as the continuing failure to implement the 13th Amendment), the vitiation of democratic institutions (ranging from the judiciary and police to local government offices), and the ongoing effects of experiencing conflict violence continue to destabilise the growth of democracy in Sri Lanka. Also affecting the freedom of citizens to participate in the development of their governance is the sheer pressure of everyday life. Among the communities that participated in this project, the foremost obstacle to engaging in public life was the cost of living. The disproportionate

cost of food, electricity, education supplies, and other basic needs creates a daily struggle to ensure the survival of one’s family. This is particularly difficult for



women heads of households, but it is not confined to them; it affects families across both the lower and middle classes. For many, the daily work to take care of oneself and one’s family completely consumes one’s energy, making it difficult to participate in public life beyond the pursuit of one’s immediate needs.

“When someone has personal problems that they cannot solve, then that person will not bother about social problems because they need that time to think about how to solve their own problems.” – Participant in Kandy

In our observations of women’s meetings during this project, we noted that Districts with high levels of poverty (Ampara, and Nuwara Eliya) were therefore least engaged in civic life. Their primary concern was to secure their survival, while their discussions centred on the demands of daily existence. They found it difficult to reflect on broader social or political issues, unless those issues somehow affected their immediate survival. Creativity, optimism, and confidence were low, even among younger members of the group. Even when prompted, therefore, it was difficult for women in these communities to come up with a vision



for their society, thereby hindering their ability to engage meaningfully towards this change.

Involvement in public life is further inhibited by attitudinal changes and psychosocial pressures resulting from marginalisation, violence, and conflict. After years of failed promises and majoritarian rule, minority communities have a valid distrust of the government and have come to doubt the viability of democratic participation. Women in Mannar, Vavuniya, and Trincomalee thus still express their pursuit of justice in terms of working against the efforts of the government, rather than with it. Minority communities have also had long practice in holding in anger, fear, frustration, sorrow and pain in order to ensure their survival; these disruptive emotions still linger as these communities live in a militarised environment and continue to face distress from lack of accountability for political violence. These experiences hinder the trust-building between minority communities and the government that is necessary for inclusive and productive governance. However, we noticed in our project that Tamil women from former conflict areas are disproportionately active in one area of democracy – the pursuit of justice. This is an immediate need among Tamil communities due to pressures such as militarisation, reconstruction and the search for missing persons. Aided by their long practice in seeking justice, as well as their community's collective experience in demanding a voice, these women are more informed about how to engage with the police, the judiciary, the Grama Sevaka, and other arms of government. It is precisely their experience with political marginalisation, therefore, that has prepared Tamil women to assert their citizenship and actively participate in democratic reform.

Overall, despite setbacks and challenges, our project shows there is potential for civic life to recover quickly because of the strong values of social service in Sri Lankan communities. In all Districts, women were willing to volunteer to better their communities and conduct advocacy to encourage positive social change. Thus, in Mannar, women began planning to organise themselves to document missing persons in their communities; in Vavuniya, they organised a protest to urge the government to look into concerns and promises made to families of missing per-

sons; in Hambantota, the community planned advocacy meetings with local government representatives to increase the number of Tamil language teachers in their schools; in Kandy, they volunteered to tutor each other in Sinhala and Tamil; and across all Districts, strangers came together to support each other through their own personal struggles. There is, therefore, a remarkable resilience to the democratic belief that citizens can improve their society, a stubborn faith in the power of citizen advocacy, and a heartening willingness to engage constructively with each other to overcome the divisions of the past.

“All people should publically and personally contribute to a good society. They should organize social activities that benefit all the people.” – Participant, Galle

“We are stronger as a group than when we are trying to make a change alone. And when we take initiative to create a positive social change then we are also creating a sense of community healing.” – Reflection, Kandy Healing Activity

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2. Access to the Rights of Citizenship

During our project, women mentioned a number of systemic institutional shortcomings that impeded their access to the rights of citizenship. These included a slow and ineffective justice system (such as the failure to prosecute criminals according to the law, cases getting dragged, and a compromised judiciary); nepotism and corruption within government institutions (such as partiality of the police, demanding of bribes for services, misallocation of development aid, and corrupt practices of local government officers charged with distributing Samurdhi, land assistance etc.); the slow process of finding missing persons; the lack of documentation (particularly prevalent in the estate sector); and the poor quality of government personnel (due to hiring people based on nepotism rather than qualifications, lack of training, and lack of sensitivity and awareness). These examples represent the immediate experience of citizenship at the grassroots, as the police, the judiciary, and local government officers are the face of the government in everyday life. The effectiveness of these arms of government is tied to broader policy change and institutional reform. Implementing the devolution of power, as well as institutional reform under the transitional justice mechanism, are important steps to restoring citizenship; and these should commit resources to creating clean, efficient, and sensitive service delivery for citizens through these local representatives of government.

“It takes so much courage to stand for justice. Being a woman, I once stood against the GS when he began charging 1000/- to release housing funds. As a result, I am isolated, labeled as a troublemaker and made helpless because he continues to remain in his powerful position and attack me. Most recently, he has rejected my application to get electricity for my house.” – Tamil woman, Vavuniya



“At times, we have felt that it is better to solve our own problems rather than going to the police. We feel vulnerable when we go there, especially if we go after 6pm when the women police officers are not present. We face a similar problem in the hospitals. We wish this government will take action to change these obstacles to women.” – Reflection, Galle Women’s Meeting

In addition to these institutional failings, our project also revealed that democratic participation is hindered by poor delivery of information. There is very little citizen engagement attempted by the government, even during this important national process of constitutional reform, institutional overhaul, and large-scale peace building. Women expressed concern about the silence surrounding these discussions: they stated that they do not know what to expect from truth commissions, do not feel government personnel are adequately informed about implementing policy changes, that the male-dominated political leadership may not represent their best interests, and that the nation as a whole still lacked a common understanding of the past. Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim communities alike therefore stressed the need to create a public platform for the transitional justice proceeding. Publicising truth commission proceedings in the media, having national discussions towards institutional and constitutional reform, public meetings, and better training on these changes for government representatives will thus be important to increase positive citizen involvement towards a sustainable change for Sri Lanka. In addition to this lack of public engagement on important policy

issues, there is also low access to practical information on accessing available services. Currently, information about these processes is largely acquired through civil society, by visiting local government offices, or through community networks; and while circulars and public notices do disseminate critical information, these were often noted to be published in Sinhala, thereby excluding Tamil-speaking minorities from informed decision-making. There was a demand among women for an official secretariat that provides practical information about accessing immediate needs. This, they felt, would allow them to be better equipped to enforce their rights, such as retrieving lost properties, have documentation issued, undertake legal action, or find missing persons, and will be particularly important as transitional justice processes such as compensation, truth-telling, and reform begin to take place.

Grassroots activity around language rights is a telling example of how engaging the public on government-led efforts can encourage constructive and supportive citizen action. Language rights – through measures such as increased efforts to make sure all government documents, sign boards, and public notices were in all three languages, or through authorising the national anthem to be sung in Tamil – was one of the first



policy measures undertaken to begin the political inclusion of Tamil-speaking minorities. The government's consistent effort to promote language rights in the public sphere has led to a high level of citizen involvement on this issue. In our project, language rights was the most common issue that was identified for citizen action by local communities in all Districts. Women had a highly developed understanding of what constituted a language rights violation and therefore felt confident about voicing their experiences of injustice in this area. In Ampara, for example, they spoke about police telling them to "go away" if they did not understand Sinhalese; in Kandy, Sinhalese women asserted the need for public circulars to be published in Tamil; in Nuwara Eliya, women spoke about medical malpractices that took place because of the lack of Tamil-speaking personnel.

"Several pregnant women have been victimised due to the language barrier in the hospitals and in labour rooms. At a time of helplessness they have gotten verbally abused by the caregivers in the hospitals as the patient could not respond correctly to commands given to them in a language they do not know. What kind of trauma is this for a mother giving birth to go through?!"
– Muslim woman, Ampara

By reframing the conflict through language, rather than the more laden lens of ethnicity, the government's efforts to implement language rights has also created a space for divided communities to understand each other and work with each other to overcome the past. In Galle, Kandy, and Hambantota, therefore, Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim communities began working together to address divisions caused by language: they volunteered to tutor each other in their respective languages, made proposals to increase Tamil language instruction in local schools, and worked together to educate local government officers on the implementation of language rights.

The public engagement on language rights has also created an informed citizenry that has important practical understanding on how to engage with the government to ensure these rights. In our project, communities were much more conscious of the specific measure they could undertake to assert their language rights than they were in other areas of justice, advocacy, and reform. In Puttalam, for example, the community participants came up with multi-step plan to ensure that all government services were conducted equally



in all languages: identifying government institutions that do not conduct services in all languages; taking this issue to the district level coordinator of social solidarity; simultaneously informing the National Language Commission; informing the Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration via telephone conversation by dialling 1956; requesting the Ministry to conduct awareness training for government officers on the national language policy; and raising awareness on government services through community level organisations.

The broad public support for the equal status of each group's language, and the strong public awareness on enforcing language rights, as demonstrated among the grassroots communities participating in our project, bears an important lesson for the success of transitional justice in Sri Lanka. If the government is willing to educate the public, publicise proceedings, create a national discourse, and establish institutional access points for the engage-



ment of citizens, then the transitional justice process is more likely to flourish through the informed participation of citizens, and bring divided communities together.

“Women do not enter politics because often we see it to be dominantly masculine.”
– Muslim woman, Galle

Sri Lanka’s progress towards democratisation is dependent on the free and active participation of all citizens. Women, however, have consistently remained a minority in political life in Sri Lanka. Despite having elected the



world’s first female Prime Minister, which is widely quoted as a sign of Sri Lanka’s progressive status on women, the representation of women in Parliament has never exceeded 5.8% in the eight decades that women have had the right to political participation. This number is even lower in elected local assemblies, such as the provincial councils (4.1%) and pradeshiya sabhas (2.03%)². The Inter-Parliamentary Union has therefore ranked Sri Lanka as 130th out of 139 countries for female representation; correspondingly, the global Social Institutions and Gender Index finds that Sri Lanka has high levels of discriminatory laws and practices, low levels of social protection for women, restricted resources and assets for women, and negative attitudes towards women as public figures or leaders, thus significantly restricting women’s civil liberties³. Of course women’s access to political participation cannot be separated from other social indicators; thus, women’s freedom to participate is also affected by the state of women’s rights in Sri Lanka, poverty, gender-based violence, physical and psychological health, higher education, economic participation, ethnic discrimination of their communities, and the pace of post-conflict recovery.

When asked about their own experience participating in political decision-making in this restricted environment, women involved in our project most often mentioned their right to vote. They understood the vote as an opportunity for women to influence the course of the nation, and felt that women’s votes have been instrumental in creating the recent regime change:

“A time comes when you feel that enough is enough. That is how we lived in the past. In such a feeling, we women longed for a positive change in the country, and took our own initiative to vote on our preference. In that way, we all feel proud that our vote this time has helped us to secure a correct leader for our country. Hence it has encouraged us to participate in the public sphere.” – Tamil woman, Puttalam

Men in their communities echoed this belief:

“Unlike other years almost all women used their vote this January; therefore we believe that our women also contributed to creating this new change.” – Muslim man, Puttalam

2. Asian Development Bank. Country Gender Assessment Sri Lanka: An Update. 2015, p.6
<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/172710/sri-lanka-country-gender-assessment-update.pdf>

3. Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development. Social Institutions and Gender Index: Sri Lanka.
<http://www.genderindex.org/country/sri-lanka>





Women stressed the need for voter education for women -information about voting procedures, the proposed candidates, and effects on policy is not always available to women, which can lead to women casting their vote in accordance with their husbands. Women also felt the lack of female candidates, who they believe will be better positioned to understand the daily challenges they face in society and carry through changes which would advance women's human development. In discussions on sexual violence, child abuse, lack of livelihoods for women, the stigma of widows, and obstacles to their children's education, women felt that no progress is being made on overcoming these problems because there is no female political leadership to instigate political will.

During exchange visits, we arranged a mock debate on women's suitability for politics that revealed the social attitudes that prevent women from taking leadership in the public sphere. One of the most significant barriers was the expectation that women's primary responsibility was being available to take care of their families. "How can a woman, leaving the pots and pans dirty, and the children unattended, go to the parliament?" one side argued, continuing to ask, "If women went to do politics, who would take care of their husbands, who would protect their children from abuses?" They repeated concerns that women do not have the knowledge or experience to be politicians, and would not be able to fulfil the responsibilities of leadership: "How can they attend to a problem if they have to go out at night? If they went they will only be stigmatised and labelled as bad characters." They also recognised that women do not have the financial resources or social networks needed to enter become candidates. They feared the violence and volatility of Sri Lankan politics, and expressed fears that women will be exposed to "abuse, misuse, and oppression" if they try to be leaders. Instead, society seems to say, women should be content with the political value

of motherhood. "Making your child a king matters more than you wanting to be a queen," they argued in the mock debate, and stated that being a mother means that you are able to do politics by taking care of your husband and children and nurturing them into good citizenship. Women who strayed outside these prescribed roles, on the other hand, invited a breakdown of family and society. They would "enter politics in sari and come back in jeans",

(reflecting the perception that women's leadership was part of Westernisation), begin making test-tube babies (echoing fears about the elimination of men's natural roles), and ultimately, that their husbands would begin to "approach other women for their needs." While those who were arguing for women's suitability for politics declared that "it is not enough just to be enjoying married life with the husband", overall, the arguments from this side were fewer, and predominantly focused on arguing against restrictive social norms rather than proposing positive arguments, indicating the sheer weight of opposition that burdens the possibility of women partaking in political life.

While women are thus often held back from political leadership by these social considerations, they feel more confident about their ability to create changes in their immediate community. Civic life for women seems to be focused within their social networks, engaging on issues that affect children, family and community more often than on broader political reform. Given the restrictions women face as public beings, it is also not surprising that civic engagement is largely organised through domestic life and relates to their identities as mothers and wives. Women who disrupt the national narrative therefore tend to do so in areas where there is the strongest overlap – mothers in search of their missing children, for example – while the most successful female candidates tend to be widows of well-known male leaders.



“When a man initiates something it is considered normal. If that is a success he is considered as the hero because he is a man. But when a woman does the same things she is tormented and isolated, saying it is not appropriate for a woman, and that it is her illicit masculinity power that is enabling her to do these things. It becomes worse when she attempts and fails. She becomes a joke, not only among men, but sadly among women as well.” – Tamil woman, Mannar

Women’s civic contributions therefore tend to be strongest at the community level and legitimised through motherhood. In Mannar, for example, mother’s unions organised the Kesa Forum, a grassroots collective that addresses issues of child abuse and women’s rights. Initially introduced in five villages, it is now thriving and gradually spreading to other areas of the District. This group was a source of inspiration to women in our project, demonstrating the power of women to initiate meaningful change on the issues that affected them.

“Willingly or unwillingly women in our communities have had to overcome the traditional, cultural and social norms [against them] and get involved in social activities.”

–Tamil woman, Mannar

The success of initiatives such as the Kesa Forum indicate that female leadership is both needed and valued, and that women-led civic efforts fill an important role in strengthening women’s political life. While many barriers continue to exist for women’s political participation, community-based efforts can therefore function as a springboard for women’s political leadership. This was integral to the ideas the women’s group in Galle put forward for increasing women’s political representation:

Plan to Increase Women’s Political Representation Galle Women’s Group

1. Organise into small groups
2. Improve economic capacity within groups
3. Develop trust between all members of the group
4. Establish organisations (associations, unions etc.) and provide training
5. Solicit and receive support from government institutions
6. Organise inter-religious and cultural diversity education workshops
7. Women who carry out the above activities to

be put forward locally and nationally as political leaders

8. Women’s representation at community, district, and national level to increase

9. Women’s groups and female representatives to work with mixed groups (village leaders, government employees, religious leaders, civil society organisations, the elderly etc.) to address issues in the community

This plan demonstrates that with the correct resources, participating in community-based efforts is seen to provide women with the experience, networks, and support to position themselves in public leadership. It reflects the resources that will be needed – financial stability, trust-building, capacity-building, and institutional support – which in turn will allow women to ably address the issues affecting their communities, form constructive working relationships with official institutions, strengthen peace and reconciliation within the country, and work with a wide variety of actors to create a mutually reinforcing effort. Although women’s civic life may therefore currently be limited to community efforts, the democratic value of these efforts should not be discounted; instead it strengthens women’s networks, experience, confidence, and civic engagement, cultivating a nascent site of political activity through which women can prove their capacity for leadership and take on politically decisive roles.

“We women are all-rounders and we are capable of taking any role or responsibility in society.”
– Sinhala woman, Galle

Recommendations

1.Improve accessibility of government services

Effective democratisation and governance will require that the rights of citizenship are freely available to all citizens. To this end, government offices must follow rule of law, become more efficient, and ensure that government services are accessible to all citizens with no bar presented by ethnicity, religion, gender, class, literacy, or association. While this will require intensive institutional reform and can take many years to enact, the transitional justice process will be instrumental in beginning this change. The culture

of corruption and nepotism is one of the most common barriers to accessing services; hiring based on merit, incentivising clean practices for government institutions and personnel, and taking strict action on charges of corruption are therefore urgent to reform. The government should also continue to enforce the implementation of language policy, which is beginning to demonstrate positive effect in reducing marginalisation and healing the divisions of conflict. Similarly, demarcating prayer rooms for Muslims in government offices and authorising freedom to dress in accordance with one's religion will effectuate religious inclusion, which is sorely felt by this community but has yet to be addressed by the national discourse. Building the capacity of the existing cohort of personnel directed at providing services for women (i.e., female police officers, legal aid officers, women development officers), increasing their sensitivity to gender-based barriers to accessing government services, justice, economic development, and healthcare, and increasing access to these officers (through broader distribution, availability in evening hours etc.) will increase social protection for women and provide them with support to access their rights. Currently, documentation is another issue that must be urgently addressed. Lack of documentation is particularly prevalent in the estate sector, where generations have existed without these certifications of citizenship, and is also a problem in former conflict areas where official documents were lost or destroyed. Since birth certificates, National Identity Cards, and legal documents forms the basis of access, ensuring that citizens are provided with the necessary documentation is the first step towards ensuring their inclusion and securing their democratic rights.

2. Public engagement and information

Democratisation is dependent on an informed and engaged citizenry. There is an urgent need to develop systems of information, through which information collected by the government, government policies and plans, and information about institutional processes, are clearly defined and made easily accessible to the public. This will be particularly needed during the transitional justice process, a time which has the possibility to effect great change, but in its unfamiliarity and layers of deliberation, is also beginning to create confusion. Involving the public in national decision-making, creating an official secretariat for public access, outlining procedures, and undertaking public education campaigns will allow citizens to make an informed choice to support these proceedings. Sri Lanka's past history shows that when the political elite take over the decision-making without making the effort to inform and engage the public, this provides space for those with nationalistic or factional agendas to command the debate. Democratisation will require a cultural shift towards a willingness to educate and

engage citizens in decision-making, and invest resources in developing their informed support towards peace and reform.

3. Support women-led community efforts

Women-led community efforts provide important opportunities for grassroots women to participate in civic life and develop their capacity, experience, and social networks to take on increasing public leadership. They also fill a gap in post-conflict recovery efforts by directing attention to women's rights and addressing women's concerns such as gender based violence, children's welfare, or livelihoods for widows which have not yet gained prominence in policy and are inadequately addressed by local government service. Increasing support from government and civil society for community-based women's groups will therefore increase social protection for women, strengthen women's rights, and increase women's access to political leadership. This support can be through providing funding for women-led community-based actions, providing capacity-building for women, strengthening relationships between local government offices and women's groups, strengthening relationships between women's groups across the different regions of the country, including women's groups in consultations, involving women's groups during decision-making or programme design, and defining clear roles for their participation in transitional justice processes. Despite several obstacles, grassroots women have been able to organise themselves to provide essential services, improve their communities, and foster reconciliation. Recognising women's groups as a powerful resource and investing in their development will therefore support women's leadership and harness the energy of female citizens towards the recovery of the country.

4. Support women's political leadership

Women's participation in political leadership is essential to a healthy democracy; Sri Lanka, however, lags far behind in female representation in public life. The 25% women's quota established at the local level earlier

this year is a welcome step. Similarly, a women's quota for Parliament will also be welcome, as it allows women to take part in national-level decision making and policy transformations. Studies show that including women in political leadership does not benefit women only, but has positive effects for all citizens, with improvements seen in economic competitiveness, education, infrastructure, and health, and increased indicators of trust in the government.⁴ Increasing women's leadership therefore coincides with the larger national goals of post-war recovery and development, and is an effective strategy during this period of transition. Establishing quotas should go hand in hand with building the capacity of women to enter politics. This means finding solutions for the financial barriers to women's political campaigns, preparing women to meet the masculinised culture of politics, strengthening their skills in strategizing, public speaking and debate, networking and increasing their social capital, and ensuring that political parties choose qualified women candidates over less qualified men for their nomination lists.

"The 19th Amendment is a good example for change, which proposes to allocate 25% seats reserved in Parliament for women candidates. However for us, the increase in numbers will be useless if those women cannot represent us or speak on our behalf. Therefore our suggestion is that those who contest for such positions should be given proper awareness on how to represent women and their struggles." – Sinhalese woman, Trincomalee

As the mock debate on women's suitability for politics showed, another significant obstacle to women's political participation is the gendered sociocultural attitudes that keep women in the home and deny their capacity for leadership. This requires large-scale sensitisation efforts which target male family members, community members, and the current male political leadership, who in their different capacities function as gatekeepers to women's political life. The internalisation of oppressive beliefs means that sensitisation and confidence-building is also needed among women. Our project showed that local women who have successfully taken on political leadership are the most effective resource persons to take on this task. Having gone through similar experiences of poverty, widowhood, or discrimination, having a shared understanding of the cultural norms which structure grassroots women's lives, having similar concerns and priorities, and having charted their own course

of change, local female politicians are valuable assets to strengthening women's leadership. They are uniquely positioned to provide a relatable example where none otherwise exists, increase confidence in women that they too have the potential for similar accomplishments, sensitively challenge oppressive beliefs, give practical advice, and guide women towards exploring their interests and building their capacities in leadership.

“Life is like a river, it keeps on flowing. On the river there is a boat. You have to drive the boat, not just let it drift. Women are very strong and should help the nation progress. One should have a will, a motivation, an aim to do something. Giving your ideas is very important. All of us have some problems. I’m the wife of a soldier like you. I have gone through the streams of life and been in politics. Now I am in the Provincial Council. Women should be given leadership. Our domestic life is like an election, the woman is in command. So you should be able to do these things without your husband.

The child needs to become a useful citizen. If parents don’t give their children proper education, they will be stranded in society. When a man is out in war and comes home on leave, he is in the mindset of war and so he makes war at home. All these issues should be carefully thought about and solved. You have to save, not only rely on the government pension because one day it will end. You need to speak out – that is important. Even though we face all these issues, we have to keep going and keep in contact with other people in society.

Women need to be an example for others. You need to maintain your dignity. We have to do something for society before we die, it is very important. You have to go on with your freedom and your proper life. You can live your life very freely, doing good and proper things. You have to listen to the problems of others, not just be concerned with your own problems. Maybe you will solve your own problems by listening to others. It is important to face your problems and speak out about the issues you have inside you, to compel yourself to resolve them. Some of these problems you all have in common. Sit down together and solve it together. Your leadership is very important.”

Upulangani Malagamuwa
Deputy Chair Ranaviruseva Authority
Speaking to Military Widows
Hambantota Healing Activity

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