

Leadership Initiatives of Women in Post-War Development in Sri Lanka

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Sri Lanka spent a very difficult period due to the armed conflict prevailed in the country for nearly three decades until 2009. Actually it turned the country into one of the most dangerous places in the world. It caused the loss of lives of a large number of people including civilians and also enormous damages were caused to the country's infrastructure.

Women and children suffered the most during the war. A large number of civilians including women and children were internally displaced and were forced to live in refugee camps. Women underwent enormous hardships to nourish their children and take care of disabled and injured siblings with the limited resources available in those camps. In addition, they had to struggle against sexual harassments and violence too.

The biggest challenge faced by the Government during the post-war development period is the provision of housing and other facilities for the Internally Displaced People (IDP). These people were not able to go to their own places immediately as their properties were damaged by the war and even the land was not safe due to land mines.

Women played a big role in resettlement programmes as they suffered a lot in refugee camps, and were eager to go back to their villages and start normal lives. They participated in resettlement activities in many ways. Some women even took part in the land clearance and putting up temporary huts for living. Older women engaged in cooking and child caring work. While engaging in these work, they gradually began to form groups to discuss their problems and identify their problems to be forwarded to the authorities concerned. This process facilitated the emergence of women leaders who were instrumental of obtaining assistance to re-build their livelihoods.

By this time many women have become 'war widows', single parents and heads of households in all communities across the island. Disabilities and injuries resulting from war and exposure to land mines made large numbers of young men ineligible for employment, marriage and the ability to support families. Because of this situation women began to face many challenges not only for their own survival but also for the survival of their families. This caused the redefining of gender roles and women were to take on traditional male roles and behaviours to support their families. Many women engaged in non-traditional economic activities such as farming and fishing to support their families.

Although many organizations were willing to offer credit facilities for self-employment, majority of women lack confidence to accept money as they didn't have land ownership and technical knowhow to initiate income generating activities. In view of this situation the Government agencies and NGOs tried to use capable women in those areas to support these activities. It paved the way to identify number of women community leaders who possess skills to advocate potential women to come forward and obtain the benefit of available support services. They helped to organize training and provide credit support to the needy women.

During the post-war development period, gender concerns were focused in almost all projects and there was a heavy flow of aid packages which were aimed at the promotion of women's leadership. The Government also has employed women as rural development officers to liaise with women's

groups and establish women's committees to provide a space and means for them to discuss and address livelihood issues and housing needs.

Despite the security threats and cultural barriers, Sri Lankan women also became active in peacemaking efforts even early in the war. The organizations such as Mother's Front in the northeast and south which protested against disappearances, abductions and killings of their sons emerged during this period.

Women's groups have also protested the military's abuse of female IDPs and advocated for the deployment of women officers in the police and armed services to provide security in these communities. They advocated for greater female participation in reconciliation processes and strengthening law enforcement on violence against women.

Women community leaders and women - led organizations not only provide support and enormous services for needy women but also strive in filling the gaps that exist in the current reconciliation and reconstruction processes. The government also has to place more emphasis on gender sensitive processes and should take key steps to provide targeted assistance to women. In addition international donor agencies also must adopt a gender sensitive approach and provide direct assistance to much needy women such as war widows and female heads of households to rebuild their livelihoods and gain economic independence.