

# Role of Women in Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka

**Ms. Vindhya WEERATUNGA (Sri Lanka)**

A woman's status in Sri Lanka, to a great extent, is influenced by patriarchal values of society, in which her status is dependent on that of her father or husband. However, lately the role of women has evolved to a state where spouses are joint decision-makers on household matters and the welfare of children. Overall, women are considered the nurturers and disseminators of tradition, culture, and community values.

Sri Lanka was plagued with a brutal armed conflict for 26-years that ended in 2009. There have also been uprisings of the anti-state groups during 1987-1989 and communal riots in 1977 and 1983. When looking back at Sri Lanka's history and especially the period when the country was in armed strife, there was a group of unsung heroes: women.

During these times of conflicts, women suffered the most while their sons, husbands or brothers were engaged in military activities. Women who were not economically active became destitute by the loss of their male breadwinners. These women went through psychological trauma, yet had to face the challenges and survive, especially for the sake of their children. They became the mother, the father, the breadwinner and the protector of the family. These made Sri Lankan women more resilient. The number of widows, single mothers and women-headed households increased as a result of the armed conflict. Our experience is that women and girls have been affected differently vis-à-vis their male counterparts by the armed conflicts and associated violence.

Now that the country has a peaceful environment, it is important to consider how women can play a significant role to prevent future conflicts. A peace process involves a number of steps and is deeply gendered. It is disappointing to see in many peace processes that it is mostly men who are in the decision-making positions. This is mainly due to the women's status in society in general, and especially in the political arena. Sri Lankan women have a struggle in the patriarchal culture of the country and a bigger struggle in the political sphere, where they are hardly represented.

Going forward, Sri Lanka needs more women in the political arena. Female representation in Sri Lankan Parliament is less than 6%, which is below average amongst other developing countries. The root causes of conflicts are often political in nature and require a political solution. Women can be instrumental in bringing about a process of building sustainable peace in the country, and this can be accelerated if there were more women in higher-level decision-making positions in the political sphere.

In order to have sustainable peace, it is vital that women are engaged in the process at every level. Women bring a different perspective to the peace building process as they have been at the receiving end of the armed conflict as 'victims'. Children raised by mothers who oppose violence and promote peace and ethnic harmony grow up to be adults who in turn promote peace. This is the starting point of the chain of peace-building.

In the year 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) formally acknowledged through the creation of Resolution 1325 the changing nature of warfare, in which civilians are increasingly targeted and women continue to be excluded from participation in peace processes. UNSCR 1325 addresses not only the inordinate impact of war on women, but also the pivotal role women should and do play in conflict management, conflict resolution and

sustainable peace. As women represent over 51% of Sri Lanka's population, it is crucial that they actively participate and be partners in the peace-building process.

In Summary, women have multiple roles in the peace-building process. First, women must have an equal say in matters that concern peace and harmony in the country. Second, as the primary caretakers of families, they are vital in guiding children from their tender ages to lead peaceful lives. Third, as advocates of peace, women have first-hand experience of repercussions of the war and can build trust and confidence in future generations. Sri Lanka needs to transform, so that women can participate in and contribute significantly to the prevention of future conflicts and sustainable peace-building in the country.

