

“Sri Lanka - Gender Equality and Empowering Women”

Remarks by Ambassador H.E. Dr. Palitha T.B. Kohona
Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the United Nations

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Coming from the country that produced the world’s first elected woman Prime Minister, Sri Lanka, I am particularly proud to be with you today. Sri Lanka elected a woman Prime Minister in 1960, long before Golda Meir, Margaret Thatcher, and Julia Gillard. Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike was a first in her own right and played a pivotal role in the politics of Sri Lanka and on the regional and global arena. Mrs. Bandaranaike was a major force in the then emerging Non Aligned Movement. Her contribution was vital in ensuring peace among competing powers in the region. Mrs. Bandaranaike was a pioneer among women politicians and a flag bearer. Today the Attorney General and the Chief Justice of Sri Lanka are both women. The Chief Justice came from a rural area and worked her way up the ranks. Although the women’s movement has scored many victories over the last few decades,

both internationally and in my country, there is still a long way to go before global gender parity can be achieved.

Sri Lanka has enjoyed universal adult suffrage since 1931 and this has been a major factor in women occupying prominence in public life over the years. Some were proactive in the independence movement. In the past six decades, since independence, they have been effectively integrated as equal partners in shaping the economic, political and social life of the country. Even in the first post independence cabinet there were women. Following independence in 1948, successive Governments have been seeking to ensure that the laws in the statute books and rights and freedoms enshrined in the Constitution are proactively translated into equality and justice for women in their everyday lives. The Constitution acknowledges that civil and political rights are interlinked with social, cultural and economic rights and that these reinforce each other. The Constitution of Sri Lanka not only forbids any gender based discrimination but it also sanctions the use of affirmative policies for women.

The introduction of the Women's Charter, a document that codifies the rights of women and their specific concerns, was another initiative through which Sri Lanka has sought to achieve gender equity. The Women's Charter was a commitment by the state to remove all forms of discrimination against women in six broad areas. Namely, politics and civic life, family, education and training, economic activity and benefits, health care and nutrition and protection from gender based violence. The National Committee on Women was set up to oversee the implementation of the Charter. A bill, seeking to establish a National Women's Commission, is currently being considered in Parliament. The National Women's Commission would be equipped with a more expansive mandate and broader powers to improve the position of women in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka has ratified four major international instruments, which have relevance to ensuring equity for women. These are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Optional Protocol, the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Sri Lanka

ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as far back as 1981, long before many European countries and acceded to the Optional Protocol in 2002.

Sri Lanka signed the Vienna Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women in 1993 and reaffirmed its commitment at the international level to address the issue of gender-based violence. In 2005 Sri Lanka introduced the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act to address the grievances of victims of domestic violence. These victims can now seek protection orders against perpetrators, who can also be prosecuted under the penal code. Measures such as establishing Women's and Children's Desks in Police Stations and providing training for key stakeholders like judges and primary health care workers, have helped in the effective implementation of the provisions of this Act.

Successive Sri Lankan governments have provided appropriate space for Sri Lanka's civil society to tackle the issue of gender based violence. This has resulted in the emergence of much needed innovative strategies to address this menace. Last year a

private media corporation launched a program that sought to involve boys and men in preventing gender based violence by engaging them to rethink and redefine the concept of masculinity. Many important stakeholders in Sri Lankan civil society also play a key role in financing support networks such as shelters for victims of domestic violence.

The economic sphere is another area in which women may face discrimination. At a time when the realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) has become an urgent imperative, Sri Lanka has integrated the MDGs into the national development agenda. Sri Lanka is on track to reach most of the MDGs. Some have been achieved already. Among the notable achievements are those relating to equal primary education. The universal primary education net enrolment rate has reached 99 per cent in 2009 for both males and females. The proportion of students starting Grade 1 and reaching Grade 5 has reached almost 100 per cent. The child mortality rate is 9.7 infant deaths per 1,000 live births and maternal mortality is 39.3 deaths per 100,000 live births. These are the lowest in South Asia and compare well with most developing countries. Access to safe drinking water has reached

nearly 85 per cent of all households. Literacy levels are high with female adult literacy rate at 97% and male adult literacy at 98% in 2010. It is significant that there is no gender disparity in most of these achievements. In secondary and tertiary education, the proportion of girls to boys exceeds 100 per cent. The result of all these is that in certain professions in Sri Lanka, the proportion of women now exceeds that of men. I can think of medicine, teaching, nursing, the law, etc. We are still lagging behind in the area of politics.

In the post conflict phase, the State has invested in an ambitious development programme in the former conflict affected areas focusing on infrastructure and livelihood development. Many women lost their husbands in the conflict. Many girls were recruited as child combatants by the Tamil Tigers. Women who dared to speak out against the views and policies of the Tamil Tigers were persecuted viciously. Women were trained as suicide bombers. Female suicide bombers were idolized by the Tamil Tigers. Women of the Tamil minority were not the only minority women to be negatively impacted by the actions of the LTTE. The Tamil Tigers carried out ethnic cleansing in the North and the East of the

country chasing out the minority Muslim population from these lands. Women were disproportionately affected by this process of ethnic cleansing. Also many women lost their husbands. Thousands of women poured into the internally displaced camps at the end of the conflict.

Sri Lanka set up special Women's Protection Units with female Police officers and Women's Centres in the internally displaced persons camps and are continuing to provide counselling services for conflict affected women. The Government has given special consideration to uplifting the social and economic status of war widows. Already bilateral assistance has been channelled to initiate a self employment programme for war widows in the East in collaboration with the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of India. The protection of war affected women and children is a priority for the Government and every effort is being made to ensure that their lives are returned to normalcy as soon as possible.

Today over 95% of the 300,000 displaced by the conflict are now back in their villages and towns. All of the former child combatants

who surrendered have been provided with appropriate rehabilitation and returned to their families. They are back at school preparing for their exams. This development was applauded by the French Human Rights Minister. Over 10,000 former LTTE combatants have been released from custody after being provided with adequate language and vocational skills. Even a mass marriage ceremony was organized to facilitate the legal marriage of 54 former LTTE combatants, who had earlier only made verbal commitments to each other.

Sri Lanka has achieved much in ensuring equality of opportunity for girls and women. But we will not rest on our laurels. We will continue to strive to achieve higher levels, including in politics.

Thank you.

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