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- Institute for Inclusive Security (IIS)
- Center for Women's Global Leadership, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
- Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)
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**About ICAN:** Formed in 2006, the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) aims to strengthen women's participation and influence in conflict prevention, social justice, coexistence, and peacebuilding efforts, in situations of closed political space and conflict affected states. ICAN's MENA program seeks to elevate the voices and impact of women's civil society groups on issues of rights, security and peace in countries undergoing transitions, affected by rising militarism and extremism targeting women.

## What the Women Say

# Elusive Peace, Pervasive Violence: Sri Lankan Women's Struggle for Security and Justice

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Brief 8

Four years ago in May 2009, the Sri Lankan military routed the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE), destroyed its leadership and secured control of Tamil dominated areas in the country's north. Sri Lanka is lauded as the first country to eradicate terrorism on its own soil, but the 2009 victory came at significant human cost. An estimated 300,000 people were displaced. According to the U.N., some 40,000 civilians were killed in the first five months of 2009.

Families and communities were destroyed beyond recognition. In one survey of the war-torn areas, 80 percent of women were either widowed, unmarried, divorced or living separately from their husbands. Among them, 70 percent were heading households and the majority had no jobs.<sup>1</sup>

The devastation wrought against the civilian population has become the subject of investigative journalism and human rights organizations. In February 2013, Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued "*We Will Teach You a Lesson: Sexual Violence against Tamils by Sri Lankan Security Forces*," chronicling 75 cases of rape committed by security forces against Tamil women between 2006 and 2012.<sup>2</sup>

### Conflict Timeline

**1948:** Sri Lanka's independence from British rule. Tamils' citizenship denied through "Citizenship Act".

**1956:** Sinhala becomes the official language of Sri Lanka.

**1972:** New constitution preserves Sinhala as Sri Lanka's official language and makes Buddhism the country's official religion, further alienating Tamils and other minorities.

**1981:** Sinhala policemen accused of burning the Jaffna Public Library, causing resentment in Tamil community.

**1983:** First guerrilla-style ambush by Tamil fighters kills 13 soldiers. Rioting erupts, killing hundreds of people. Start of what Tigers call "First Eelam War".

**1985:** First attempt at peace talks between government and LTTE fails.

**1998-2002:** Track 2 mediation efforts led by civil society, including successful engagement by the Association of Parents of Missing Servicemen

**2002:** Norway-brokered ceasefire between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government comes into effect.

**2004:** The LTTE splits. Colonel Karuna breaks from the LTTE, forming a pro-government outfit.

**2005:** Mahinda Rajapaksa wins presidential elections.

**2006:** (April) - Attacks begin to escalate again.

**2008:** The Sri Lankan government formally withdraws from the ceasefire with the LTTE and renewed fighting erupts.

**2009:** After months of the military consistently advancing against the LTTE, the government declares victory.

<sup>1</sup>Survey conducted by the Jaffna-based Center for Women and Development, as cited by AWAW. (2012). "Sri Lankan Women's Agenda on Peace, Security and Development". Pages 8-9. Available at: <http://www.awawsl.org/pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Read more at: "Report: Sri Lankan forces raped Tamils to teach lessons." One India News, 22 Feb 2013. Available at: [www.news.oneindian.in](http://www.news.oneindian.in).

“Some youth [from outside our village] together with the youth of the village are involved in illegal activities such as trafficking of women, cattle slaughter and drinking. When we went to complain to the police to our shock we found out that outsider youth were in the police station.”

- Killinochi

Official UN investigations also concluded that while both the government and the LTTE committed atrocities in the final months of the war in 2009, the government was responsible for the majority of deaths and the allegations of war crimes were credible. In February 2013, the United States brought forward a resolution about Sri Lanka’s human rights abuses at the UN Human Rights Council, but the international community has not pressed for more state accountability. In part this is because the LTTE was also extremely violent. Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan government has no appetite for digging up the past and is refuting any allegations of abuse. Their emphasis is on recovery, reconstruction and the future. But the military victory after nearly 26 years of warfare has not resolved the long-standing ethnic, socio-economic and political causes of the conflict between the Sinhala-dominated state and the minority Tamil population. Nor has the end of war brought peace into the lives of

thousands of ordinary Sri Lankans in the war-torn northern areas of the country. Many of those who dare to criticize the government publicly, including journalists, are being ‘disappeared’ in both the south and the north.<sup>3</sup>

The civil war also led to the systematic damage of infrastructure, land and property, as well as the destruction of the social fabric and family structures. Furthermore, the psychological trauma among men, women, and children has been immeasurable. While the majority of the 280,000 to 300,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned to their areas of origin, the population and the region remain fragile. This vulnerability is most evident among the women - especially the widowed, wives of the disappeared, and those heading households. The government claims to be addressing their needs, yet much of the assistance is not targeted adequately. Many of the most vulnerable are falling through the cracks. Those with capacity and tenacity to lead in their communities are facing an uphill battle against traditional structures and the lack of government enforcement of existing laws and policies.

**This brief focuses on women in Sri Lanka’s northern provinces in the aftermath of war. Drawing on a survey conducted in ten war-torn districts and discussions with over 450 women, it reflects on women’s legal gains and their activism for peace and human rights while also highlighting the critical security, economic and social risks that many women face.<sup>4</sup> The recommendations we offer to the Sri Lankan government and the international community reflect the survey findings and priorities outlined in the 2012 *Sri Lankan Women’s Agenda on Peace, Security and Development*.**

## **1. Lack of Security: The end of war, but not the end of violence**

The war may have ended but the presence of military and paramilitary groups continues to affect women’s security and mobility. Sri Lanka has not had a formal or systematic demobilization or disarmament process. Consequently, illegal small arms and light weapons are prevalent throughout society. Members of the Civil Defense Force who were armed during the war have used their weapons to settle minor family disputes. Some paramilitaries are still armed and protected by politicians. The general availability of weapons has escalated levels of public, domestic and sexual violence.

In Trincomalee, Anuradhapura and Vavuniya, women report a general improvement in security conditions. Police and Civil Security Committees are functioning in certain districts. However, crime levels - including robberies - are prevalent, compounded by the lack of electricity. Moreover, women in Mannar and other districts are fearful of the security forces, as they have been intimidating and attacking local civilians. In some instances, criminals posing as police have trespassed and attacked civilians. Harassment in public settings (e.g. buses) has also risen.

In general, civilians are still experiencing post-war trauma. Three decades of war has destroyed the fabric of society and the social safety networks that passed from one generation to the next. These structures protected women and handed down skills and social systems that sustained the wellbeing of the entire community. The war also eroded interpersonal

<sup>3</sup> Dietz, Bob. “Sandhya Eknelygoda speaks for Sri Lanka’s disappeared.” Committee to Protect Journalists, 4 Sep 2012. Available at [www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org).

<sup>4</sup> The survey was conducted by AWAW and its partners between February and July 2012 in Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Mannar, Jaffna, Mullativu, Killinochi, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Ampare.

relationships and social taboos that existed between and within families. The breakdown of social systems and mores is now posing very serious threats to girls from those who were traditionally their 'protectors'- their male relatives.

■ **Impunity prevails for the powerful as levels of rape, GBV and child abuse rise.** The escalation of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) has been particularly shocking. Cases are being reported throughout the country (including those involving foreign tourists), but the levels of violence are particularly high in the northern and eastern areas of the country. Crime records indicate that there are at least five reported rape incidents every day. Since most cases are not reported, the official figures may be indicative of a silent epidemic.<sup>5</sup>

Women's organizations active in the region also point to increasing numbers of women involved in sex work and the associated risks that have arisen since the arrival of construction workers. Many of the women involved in sex work are single parents who are under pressure to provide for their families but have little alternative means of earning a living. There are also reports of forced marriages.

### Women & Sri Lanka Police

**1952:** Women join the police force

**1976:** Rank of Women Police Sub Inspector introduced

**1979:** Bureau for the Prevention of Abuse of Children & Women established

**1988:** A woman is named Assistant Superintendent of Police

**2002:** Human Rights Division established

-[www.police.lk](http://www.police.lk)

"In our Police Station we have a women's desk but we have to first complain to the male police officers and they are the ones who will decide for us to go to the women's desk."

- Pungadathiew,  
citing Kytes Police station

The lack of gender-disaggregated data combined with chronic under-reporting of cases – particularly where officials or family members are involved – obscures the extent of these violations. According to local NGOs that provide victims support, some families believe that reporting will bring shame and further harm to them. As a result, many cases are not reported. Even among victims who do report rape to the police, many refrain from following up with counselors or pursuing legal action.

Simple language barriers compound the problem. Typically when Tamil victims report to the police, the officers conduct the conversation in Tamil but record the statements in Sinhala, which the Tamil complainants often do not understand. Consequently, they do not wish to sign the statements. The continued impunity is in part because the perpetrators have authority and power over the victims. They

include family members, administrative officers who deliver services and salaries (known as Grama Niadari), law enforcement officials, priest and monks. Ruling party politicians have also been implicated in rape cases, including child rape, prompting activists to demand harsher penalties.<sup>6</sup>

■ **IDPs and returnees are especially vulnerable to SGBV and trafficking.** By September 2012, some 241,032 people had returned to their home districts among which 125,171 were women (51 percent), but return has not brought security. Despite their constitutional rights to protection, IDPs are often at the mercy of local authorities or private entities that managed their camps. A 2011 study by the Sri Lanka Medical Association of Colombo shed light on the extent of SGBV among the displaced populations.<sup>7</sup> The study took place in twelve localities, divided into areas dominated by the LTTE (Batticaloa, Vavuniya, Mullativu and Killinochchi), areas affected by the government and LTTE (Trincomalee, Jaffna, Ampara and Mannar), and the surrounding areas, (Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Moneragala and Puttalam). Findings drawn together from police reports, hospital records and welfare centers revealed the following:

### Language: An unnecessary barrier to the pursuit of justice

Often Tamil victims don't follow up on SGBV cases because their statements are recorded in Sinhala, which they do not understand. If they refuse to sign the statement (that they can't read), the case is not pursued.

<sup>5</sup> Weerasingha, Gayan Kumara, "Incidents of rape rise drastically in Sri Lanka". Lakkima News, 10 Jan 2013. Available at: [www.lakbimanews.lk](http://www.lakbimanews.lk).

<sup>6</sup> "Sri Lankan minister calls for death penalty for rapists." Colombo Page, 6 Jan 2013. Available at: [www.colombopage.com](http://www.colombopage.com).

<sup>7</sup> Perera, Jennifer, Nalika Gunawardane, and Vathsala Jayasuriya. "Review of Research Evidence on Gender Based Violence (GBV) in Sri Lanka" Second Edition, Sri Lanka Medical Association Colombo, 2011. Available at: <http://staff.sjp.ac.lk>.

- Most victims were aged 20-44 years old.
- Most perpetrators were men and related to victims.
- Violations mostly took place in domestic environments.
- The authorities did not have the capacity or resources to collect and maintain SGBV data, and were unable to recognize SGBV as a specific type of offence.

Human trafficking has also increased in the war-affected areas. The lack of livelihood options in addition to the burden of caring for their families has made many widows and single mothers vulnerable to the lure of jobs abroad. Too often, they are trafficked to the Middle East as housemaids who face exploitation and violence. Women and girls - particularly among the IDP communities - are prime targets for foreign and domestic trafficking. They often lack identification cards and are therefore far more difficult to track once they have been trafficked. According to the US Department of State, "Within the country, women and children are subjected to sex trafficking in brothels, especially in the Anuradhapura area, which was a major transit point for members of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces heading north."<sup>8</sup> The Anuradhapura region also has some of the highest rates of domestic violence.<sup>9</sup>

### Increased Risk of Trafficking for IDPs without ID Papers

The lack of identification cards is characteristic of IDPs. Although "most Sri Lankans have birth certificates and (after the age of 16) national identity cards, many of the 250,000 to 350,000 internally displaced people do not have these documents," making them harder to track and find once they have been trafficked.

-U.S. Department of State  
"Trafficking in Persons Report," 2010

- **NGOs are at the frontlines of caring for victims but face accusation of being anti-government.** There was no negotiated settlement to the war. Despite national reports on reintegration and recovery, the government's approach to post-conflict recovery has been overwhelmingly focused on the material reconstruction and infrastructure of the northern and eastern regions, paying little attention to the social issues and gendered dimensions of the problems facing local populations.

As for providing services to SGBV victims, the government's response has been inconsistent. The state has established One Stop Crisis Centers (OSCC) in government hospitals. Victims that are referred to the OSCCs – typically by state officials or the police - are eligible for government assistance. But in most cases victims prefer to report abuse cases to local civil society organizations (CSOs) and not the police. The military is also under strict orders to address SGBV and report cases to the women's desks. Yet as *Human Rights Watch* and local organizations reveals, the military and local officials are often implicated in these crimes.

In reality, CSOs are at the frontlines of caring for victims, providing services and speaking out against human rights violations. A variety of local civil society organizations including *Women in Need*, *Sevelanka*, *Women's Saradovya Collective* and the *Women's Development Center* are caring for rape victims and those affected by domestic violence nationwide.<sup>10</sup> With their limited financial resources they also strive to provide livelihood support and home and shelter renovation. They receive no financial support from the state. As CSOs and NGOs they also face additional pressures as their legitimacy is being challenged because the prevalent nationalist discourse paints human rights and pro-democracy organizations as being foreign attempts to delegitimize the Sri Lankan government.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Economic Responsibility but Limited Opportunities

The war thwarted economic development while accelerating socio-cultural changes. These changes particularly affected women's lives, but not necessarily to their advantage. Throughout the war years as men fled, joined the fighting, or were killed, women were forced into non-traditional roles, earning the family income, and migrating for work.

<sup>8</sup> "Trafficking Persons Report," U.S. Department of State. 23 June, 2012. Available at: <http://photos.state.gov>.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with *Women In Need*.

<sup>10</sup> Bandarage, Asoka. "Women, Armed Conflict, and Peacemaking in Sri Lanka: Toward a Political Economy Perspective." *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol2, No4, pp. 653-67.

<sup>11</sup> Herath, D. "Social reconstruction amidst material reconstruction." In D. Herath, K. Höglund, K. Schulz, Tudor Silva (Eds.) *Post-War Reconstruction in Sri Lanka: Prospects and Challenges*. Kandy, Sri Lanka: International Center of Ethnic Studies (ICES), 2010.

Today in Sri Lanka, women make up 53 percent of the population and one third of the labor force. Ninety percent of the female population is literate and women head 20 percent of households across the country. In the northern provinces where the effects of war are more evident, the percentage of female-headed households (FHH) is far higher.

■ **Women bear the burdens and stigma of widowhood, but get no support.** The government estimates that in the north and east “there are 90,000 widows, most of them below the age of 40.” A survey conducted by the Jaffna-based *Center for Women and Development* revealed that the Northern region had approximately 40,000 female-headed households, including more than 20,000 in the Jaffna District alone. Despite this, unemployment levels for women are double those of men.<sup>12</sup> Their exposure to poverty is correspondingly high. Moreover, many come from traditional families where their role was to manage the domestic affairs, leaving income generation to their husbands. Entering the public workforce is a significant challenge for them.

The stigma associated with widowhood is still strong in Hindu culture. It is a key obstacle that many Tamil women in particular face on a daily basis. In unregulated rural areas and in the non-unionized sectors for example, women receive lower wages because they are considered less skilled. They are also targets of exploitation, with limits on their right to own land (some practices dating back to the Victorian colonial era). Many have to donate labor in exchange for basic shelter and housing. The post-war reconstruction process is directed at traditional family units with the assumption that there is a male head of household and decision-maker. There is neither the attention to FHH nor to the fact that women’s and men’s needs, concerns and skills may vary significantly. Even though women in some districts are consulted in rehabilitation work, their views are often not reflected in the priorities set.

■ **Women are farming but lack state support and face competition from the army.** Across the northern and eastern districts, women are involved in agricultural activities ranging from fishing to rice-flour production, bottling fruit juice, sewing and petty trading. But they typically lack the capital and marketing facilities to generate more than a subsistence level income. Water shortage is a common and critical problem in many areas. The high cost of fuel and raw materials also affects their efforts. In a number of cases women are defaulting on their loan payments and falling into debt. Many women have lost their jobs as the military has taken over community farms where they worked. Those farms are now competing in markets where women are struggling to sell their home garden produce.

■ **Migrant laborers, bonded labor and abject poverty prevent peace building.** Among the IDPs, there are many women working as daily laborers or in bonded labor. Migration is also prevalent with women leaving families to work in Colombo’s garment industry or travelling to the Middle East to work as domestic servants. Meanwhile, construction companies are importing even cheaper labor into the districts.

The destruction of traditional ways of life combined with the lack of skills and support systems are profound obstacles to women’s employment. As a result, the majority of women and FHH live in absolute poverty. Their income generation activities are ad hoc and they are excluded from much of the official planning and resource allocation efforts.

### **3. Progressive Policies, Regressive Practices: The paradoxical situation of women**

The war prompted many women to take on public roles in civic organizations. Some became grassroots peacemakers, actively involved in mediating violence and seeking peaceful solutions. Others such as the *Mothers and Daughters of Lanka* have been active for years promoting women’s rights. The *Parents of Missing Servicemen*, comprised of mothers of missing servicemen, traveled to Vanni in LTTE-held territory to meet LTTE leaders and help broker a ceasefire in 2001. Across the country, women’s groups also emerged calling for justice, women’s rights, equal wages, and the protection of rights of underserved populations including migrant and plantation workers.<sup>13</sup> Attention and demand for gender equality issues contributed to the increased visibility of the multiple roles played by women. In turn, new laws were adopted to improve women’s access to justice. Nevertheless, the paradox prevails. Women remain largely absent from official decision-making structures, and male dominated political parties have at times co-opted the women’s campaigns without delivering on their demands.

<sup>12</sup> Women’s Manifesto. (2011), Social Scientists Association. Printed by Karunaratne & Sons (Pvt.) Ltd.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Visaka Dharmadasa, Chair of the Association of War Affected Women.

■ **Neither women presidents nor bureaucratic developments have had traction.** In many ways Sri Lanka has been at the vanguard of gender equality in the world with the first female prime minister in 1960 and women police officers appointed in the 1950s. The 1978 constitution clearly states the Right to Equality (Chapter 3, Article 12), under which

#### **Women's Participation in Governance (2012/3)**

Patronage politics and elections related violence keeps many women out of political structures.

- 2 women in senior positions in cabinet/ministers and departments (3%)
- 13 women in the parliament (6%)
- 17 women in provincial councils (4%)
- 85 women in senior positions in local governance structures (1.90%)

“No citizen shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, place of birth or any such ground.”<sup>14</sup> Sri Lanka's legislation has no impediment on the participation of women in the public or private spheres and they have equal rights in civil, national and criminal law. The majority also has equal access to free education (13 years of schooling). Moreover, women have been present and powerful in the country's political landscape for decades. But their political ascent was based on family ties. It was neither indicative of a strong women's political movement nor did it prompt openings for women in the political sphere. Although women's groups have campaigned to introduce a quota, they have had little traction.

■ **Political culture and related violence keep women locked out of politics.** The obstacles to women's political representation are rooted in the Sri Lankan political system. The public's involvement in the democratic process is largely limited to casting votes during election season. The system is centralized and hierarchical, and as a result state officials and politicians make little effort to be responsive or accountable to citizens. Reform attempts to devolve and decentralize power and control over resources to the local level have failed to bring change. Patronage tends to dominate local, municipal and central government, usually reinforcing existing tensions between parties and ethnic or religious populations. In addition, the general lack of capacity and poor infrastructure hinder the delivery of public services. This reinforces competition for resources and lack of democratic practices, which in turn produce the violence and instability that Sri Lankans witness and experience.

Women face an even bigger challenge in this system. The male dominated political parties rarely select women to run for office, either because they are not part of the party patronage system (i.e. they are seeking office for other reasons) or they are sidelined in favor of other candidates that are more aligned with the party culture. Those who do run for local office face an aggressive election system where violence is often used to intimidate candidates and shape voting patterns. As studies show, women in Sri Lankan politics tend to face more abuse than men in the political sphere. This ranges from character assassinations, to public insults or threats, to demands to walk away from the race. In a society where basic needs are satisfied through connections to people in power, the patronage system reinforces violence since many people have major stakes in every election. Families, husbands and fathers, witnessing such political violence, often stand in the way of women seeking to run for office out of fear for their safety.

Women's rights groups demanding a minimum quota of women in public office recognize that this measure could generate wider reform in the country's political culture and institutions. But they are the first to admit that the quota is just one step. Much more needs to be done to address public attitudes towards women. Female candidates also need more support to develop and run effective campaigns.

■ **Customary practices and lack of legal awareness curtail women.** Women's legal gains are also constrained by the social mores and customary laws that religious and ethnic groups uphold, particularly with regard to their personal lives. Marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance rights are key examples. The law states that the minimum age of marriage is eighteen. Yet in some Muslim communities, customary practices prevail allowing girls to be married at puberty. The war exacerbated this, as girls were married off at an earlier age to avoid their recruitment into the LTTE.

<sup>14</sup> “The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.” Available at: <http://www.priu.gov.lk>.

Besides customary practices, the law itself has gaps. The law protects women's right to equal opportunities in the public sector, but provides no such protection in the private sector. Since most women are employed in the informal and private sector, they are often underpaid and locked into lower-level positions. Even where laws exist, the police and judiciary officials may not know about them and as a result, enforcement is weak.

■ **There is plenty of rhetoric, but paucity of action.** Small steps have been taken to address war affected women. For example, the state 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 discuss and address livelihood issues and housing needs. But the national development planning processes have paid scant attention to the issues of women. This is highlighted in the 2011 report of the *Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC)*<sup>15</sup> that identified the needs of war-affected women and FHH as a critical and urgent challenge. The needs are reiterated in the action plans of the *National Framework Proposal for Reintegration of Ex-combatants into the Civilian Life in Sri Lanka* and the *Protection and Promotion of Human Rights* framework, but the reconstruction programs do not sufficiently reflect these priorities.

#### **Sri Lankan Women's Agenda on Peace, Security and Development**

This report was prepared by the *Association of War Affected Women* and presented to the government of Sri Lanka on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of August, 2012. According to survey in the war affected districts, the following are the areas of major concern:

1. Women's security and safety
2. Women and development
3. Women in decision-making
4. Rebuilding, recovery and reconciliation

#### **4. What Women Do: Sri Lankans for peace, rights and security**

Despite the security threats and cultural barriers, Sri Lankan women became active in peacemaking efforts early in the war. The *Mothers' Front* in the northeast and south protested against disappearances, abductions, arbitrary arrests and the killing of their sons in the 1990s. Moving beyond years of ethnic tensions, these Tamil and Sinhala mothers were willing to work together for the sake of their disappeared children. They inspired many others to form groups and take action.

Since the war's end, many organizations have shifted their attention to the protection of women. The *Association of War Affected Women (AWAW)*, for example, is engaging police and local authorities in the north and eastern provinces to build capacities for prevention and protection against sexual and gender based violence. In small group consultations, AWAW found that local police often identified violence against women as their primary concern.<sup>16</sup> As a result of the workshops provided by AWAW, the police devised strategies to tackle GBV in a number of communities. One tactic has been to participate in voluntary efforts to clean up communities. Through their interactions, they have been able to build a degree of trust which enabled women to come forward with complaints of violence. As a result, not only have the levels of domestic violence dropped, but the level of community trust in the uniformed personnel has increased. Despite the limited political spaces, national and international NGOs continue to advocate for more inclusive post-conflict recovery processes and adherence to human rights standards in the treatment of minorities.

■ **Effective advocacy: Women officers serve among the IDP communities.** Women's groups have also protested the military's abuse of female IDPs and advocated for the deployment of military and policewomen to provide security in and around IDP communities. They made the case that greater female participation could aid reconciliation, diversify the armed services, and strengthen law enforcement on violence against women. The advocacy efforts paid off in

<sup>15</sup> This landmark report tackles critical issues confronting Sri Lanka, including the re-establishment the civil administration in the North, disarmament of illegal armed groups, protections of vulnerable groups and the involvement of the security forces in civilian activities. But it has been criticized for failing to address accountability for human rights violations particularly those committed in the last stages of the war. It is also criticized for failing address the root causes of the ethnic conflict. For more information see the EU Declaration on Sri Lanka's Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission available at: <http://www.eu-un.europa.eu>.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Visaka Dharmadasa, AWAW Director. 21 March 2013. Available at [www.theglobalobservatory.org](http://www.theglobalobservatory.org).

March 2013, when 95 Tamil women joined the Sri Lanka Army – the largest such group to join at once. The women who were previously members of the women’s wing of the LTTE and will be deployed as civil affairs coordinators to Tamil majority areas in the north.<sup>17</sup>

- **Sri Lankan Women’s Vision and Agenda for Peace:** In 2012, following a two-year consultative period involving gender experts, focus group discussions and interactions with women leaders and community members throughout the war-affected regions, AWAW published the ‘*Sri Lankan Women’s Agenda on Peace, Security and Development*’. The document covers women’s experiences and concerns in four key areas and was presented to the government at a formal launch involving key Sri Lankan leaders and international peace and rights activists, notably the Liberian Nobel Laureate Mrs. Leymah Gbowee.

Women’s groups advocated for the deployment of female officers to the IDP communities. In March 2013, the Sri Lankan army deployed female officers formerly in the women’s wing of the LTTE to the region.

The Agenda, says one leading Sri Lankan peace activist, provides timely, viable and concrete recommendations to address and alleviate the vulnerabilities in women’s lives. It is rooted in the voices and concerns of women, and it can be used to monitor the government and the international community’s actions and responses.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Women-led CSOs have been the primary drivers in drawing attention and giving voice to women in Sri Lanka’s conflict affected regions. They are also providing support and services, seeking to fill the gaps that exist in the current reconstruction process. They cannot do it alone. The government must develop its capacities and place greater emphasis on more gender sensitive processes. It must also take key steps to provide targeted assistance to women, especially widows and those heading households. A coordinated and collaborative approach that draws on the strengths of the state as well as non-state organizations is essential and urgent. International development agencies must integrate gender perspectives across all areas of work and provide direct assistance to Sri Lankan civil society organizations as well.

- **To the Government of Sri Lanka**

### **Security and Justice**

1. Immediately stop all human rights abuses including sexualized violence against Sri Lankan citizens, especially those in the north and eastern provinces.
2. Tackle the pervasive impunity that is undermining the justice system and sowing deeper mistrust by investigating and prosecuting those accused of perpetrating sexual and gender based crimes against women and children, irrespective of their social standing or political affiliations.
3. Take all necessary steps to return the military to barracks and demilitarize society.
4. Deploy women police officers to areas populated by returning IDPs and where high levels of violence against women have been reported.
5. Expand and further strengthen the services of the women’s desks in police stations to handle gender-based violence more effectively, including through language proficiency (i.e. in Tamil dominated areas, the police officers should be literate in Tamil).
6. Criminalize all forms of violence against women including domestic violence, forced marriages (with particular attention to young girls and widows) and trafficking.
7. Establish a publicly accessible central repository where information about the missing and the disappeared can be recorded and sought out.
8. Establish means of contact and ensure the safety of Sri Lankans migrating for work.
9. Provide a space for women-led CSOs and human rights defenders to do their work.

<sup>17</sup> “Tamil Women Soldiers Recruited to Sri Lankan Army.” The Indian Express, 25 March 2013. Available at [www.indianexpress.com](http://www.indianexpress.com).

### ***Governance and Representation***

1. Introduce a minimum quota for women in governance (national, provincial and local) as recommended by women's groups to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Electoral Reforms.
2. Ensure that women are fully included in provincial mediation and decision-making structures.
3. Draw on the Women's Agenda and further consult with women's CSOs including all sectors of society (ethnic and religious minorities, regional representation etc.) to develop a National Action Plan for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Sri Lanka. The process should include all ministries and integrate CSOs as partners in the development, implementation and monitoring of the actions related to the plan.

### ***Livelihood Issues***

1. Increase and facilitate women's access to credit, skills and extension services.
2. Introduce laws to ensure a gender sensitive wage policy for women working in the informal sector, including domestic workers.
3. Amend gender discriminatory laws and practices that prevent women's equal access to land, and inheritance with particular reference to widows and women heading households. Ensure and expedite their access to inheritance, pensions, land and justice. Initiate targeted outreach programs to inform and enable them to benefit from farming and agricultural assistance, credit, markets etc.
4. Ensure facilities such as housing and water are accessible to all those who are resettled. Consult with women (especially widows and FHH) to determine and address the obstacles they face in accessing housing and water.
5. Develop women's entrepreneurship programs with access to credit and marketing, as well as child support provisions to enable widows and women household heads to participate.
6. Provide infrastructure such as electricity, education and health, as well as transportation for all the resettled people, with attention to the specific challenges facing women.
7. Encourage the private sector to set up industries in the affected areas for employment creation, especially for young women.
8. Set up local level grievance committees (and do outreach to affected populations) including a balance of men and women members to assess the needs and problems of those who were affected by war for a speedy recovery.
9. Include gender-sensitive peace education and non-violent dispute resolution mechanisms in school curricula.

### **■ To Civil Society Organizations working in Sri Lanka (National and International)**

#### ***Promoting understanding and social cohesion***

1. Facilitate dialogue between women's groups from the north, east and other districts to bring women's concerns into the reintegration and reconciliation process.
2. Create a public platform using local media and other means for women affected by war to discuss issues pertaining to their lives.
3. Monitor the effective reintegration of female ex-combatants and organize community level programs to address their needs and concerns.
4. Support or establish programs encouraging men to act against gender-based violence.

#### ***Providing support to victims of violence***

1. Establish or improve support networks for women affected by violence including counseling, legal aid, shelter, skills and income opportunities and mental health services.
2. Provide legal counseling for women subjected to family separation and trauma.
3. Organize community awareness-raising campaigns address the stigmatization of victims of sexual violence.
4. Organize gender sensitive awareness raising programs for law enforcement officers, attorneys and the Mediation Boards to bring about attitudinal changes.

#### ***Supporting women's livelihoods***

1. Promote women's roles in agriculture and animal husbandry through provision of training, inputs and establishing community farms.
2. Support women's home production capacities, including for traditional crafts.

3. Consult with women to determine the range of skills- including non-traditional skills - in which they have an interest and for which there is demand (e.g. construction related skills, service delivery etc); design and deliver related training and employment programs.

### ***Supporting women's inclusion in governance and leadership***

1. Build capacities and skills of women interested in leadership positions in community-based organizations and subsequently in political bodies.
2. Empower women to face challenges in accessing positions of governance and strengthen their negotiation skills.
3. Support the development of grassroots constituencies and strengthen a national women's movement building on the Sri Lankan Women's Agenda.
4. Facilitate and support advocacy for increased representation of women in political and institutional structures from the village level up.
5. Develop mechanisms to monitor the implementation of existing laws and policies and to bring greater accountability to the government.

### ■ **Recommendations to the International Community**

#### ***Human Rights, Security and Justice***

1. Raise the issue of human rights abuses by the GoSL at international venues including the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Security Council.
2. Grant asylum to Sri Lankans who are at risk of torture and rape if they are repatriated.
3. Encourage the GoSL to ensure that its security and law enforcement officers at all levels are aware of the provisions in UN Security Council Resolutions 1325, 1820, 1888/1889 and 1960 as well as domestic laws and regulations related to violence against women.
4. Organize gender sensitive awareness raising programs for Sri Lankan police and attorneys.
5. Provide support for psychosocial care to war victims with particular attention to victims of sexualized violence (male and female).

#### ***Recovery and Reconstruction***

1. Ensure that all internationally led or funded reconstruction efforts are derived from a gendered analysis of the context and adhere to the issues and recommendations raised by the Women's Agenda.
2. Ensure that all international recovery and development assistance efforts have established mechanisms for systematic and structured engagement with women in the target communities.
3. Ensure women's full inclusion (determined if needed through a minimum quota Where decision-making structures are being created or rehabilitated).
4. Encourage the private sector to set up industries in the affected areas for employment creation, especially for young women.
5. Support women in agriculture and animal husbandry by assessing and addressing the critical barriers they face.
6. Strengthen local CSO capacities for legal advocacy, public awareness raising, networking and service delivery, through funding, technical assistance and ensuring systematic and structured engagement with state and international counterparts.
7. Quantify women's contribution to the economy, especially those working in the plantations, factories and in foreign employment.

All *What the Women Say* publications are available at:

**[www.icanpeacework.org](http://www.icanpeacework.org)**

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