

WOMEN'S MANIFESTO

In the last decades of the 20th century, important changes have occurred in the lives of Sri Lankan women, and progress was made in reforming laws, improving women's economic and social status, and increasing gender awareness among many sectors of the population. Women are nearly 90% literate and more than ever before visible in the public domain. Sri Lanka had the world's first elected woman head of state, and more recently the country had its first woman Vice-Chancellor, Supreme Court Judge, and Secretary to a Ministry. Women also play an important part in the state bureaucracies and private sector, in the medical and legal professions, in the arts, and in many other areas. The proportion of female workers in semi-skilled and unskilled jobs has also increased.

However, as well as bearing the burden of poverty, women still face many types of economic exploitation, political exclusion, legal discrimination, and social oppression. Moreover, violence against women, patriarchal practices and traditional attitudes towards women still prevail. Women also are confronted during elections with violence and intimidation, preventing free and full participation.

At election time, however, there is an increasing awareness of the voting power of women, who form half the electorate and are recognized as key factors in winning elections. Although women remain mainly electors – very few enter political office at the national or local level – consciousness can be raised during election campaigns in order to make the candidates and the general public aware of the needs of women and their demands for a better life. More women are needed in parliament and local bodies, especially at decision-making levels, to put forward the many issues affecting women, and to take gender-sensitive positions on matters of national and international interest.

POLITICS

Women's political participation is mainly sought at election time, when they are active organizers and canvassers. But few women have been given nomination. In the recently dissolved parliament there were only 10 women (less than 5%), very few in present local government bodies (1%), and only 1 woman in the National List of 29 nominated Members of Parliament. In the nominations for the October 2000 elections, the National List has only 3 women for the PA and none for the UNP. We, therefore, recommend:

1. a) A minimum 30% quota of women at local government level, i.e., in Pradeshiya Sabhas, Municipal and Urban Councils, and Provincial Councils.
b) A minimum 30% quota of women in Parliament, and 50% of those appointed to the National List should be women.
2. More women Ministers, Junior Ministers, and Cabinet Ministers, as well as Secretaries to Ministries, and heads of institutions and the judiciary.

3. A minimum of 30% in the nomination of women candidates at all levels by political parties.
4. Adequate training and other support for women candidates.
5. Research and other support services for women in Parliament and local bodies to enable them to function effectively.
6. Caucus of women in the law-making bodies cutting across party politics – in order to focus on women's issues.
7. A national campaign to promote more women in politics, and in decision-making positions.
8. Voting rights for migrant workers.

LAW REFORM

In 1995 significant changes were made to the criminal law. Sexual harassment was made a crime; penalties for rape were increased; the age of statutory rape was increased to 18; and the minimum age of marriage was raised from 12 to 18 (except for Muslims).

We recommend:

1. Removal or amendment of all discriminatory laws that are contrary to fundamental rights. Constitutional guarantees that women should not be discriminated against in the name of preserving identity.
2. A specific law on domestic violence, combining criminal and civil remedies and offering expedient relief and services such as counselling and shelters for victims.
3. Strengthening of the law on sexual harassment, including civil remedies, with compensation. All employers, including the private sector, should set up complaint investigation procedures and awareness programmes in relation to sexual harassment.
4. Raising the age of marriage for ALL to 18; campaigning for egalitarian personal laws.
5. Liberalization of laws to allow abortion in cases of rape, incest, and risk to the women's mental and/or physical health.
6. Decriminalization of homosexuality and lesbianism among consenting adults, in keeping with modern laws.
7. Amendment of the current fault-based divorce laws to incorporate the concept of "breakdown of marriage."
8. Non-discrimination against foreign male spouses of Sri Lankan women, to live and work in Sri Lanka without restrictions. A Sri Lankan woman should be able to pass on her nationality to children with a foreign father.
9. Non-discrimination in the State Land Settlement laws, which currently favour men – especially when the state grants land. Recognition of both wife and husband as "heads of household."
10. Changes in antiquated vagrancy laws oppressive to women, and introduction of legislation on child prostitution, forced prostitution and trafficking in keeping with international norms and principles.

11. Legal literacy programmes to increase women's awareness of their legal rights.

VIOLENCE

It is well known that many women and girls in Sri Lanka have to face forms of violence ranging from harassment, assault, rape and incest, to 'disappearance' and killings. Many are subject to all types of physical and verbal abuse at home, in the workplace, and on public transport. Suicide rates of Sri Lankan young women are also among the highest in the world. Women also bear the consequences of social problems like alcoholism and drug addiction. Violence seems to have increased with the general brutalization of society caused by war, political thuggery, and criminal activity. We recommend:

1. More resources and publicity for campaigns to reduce all forms of violence against women.
2. Legal and other deterrents – such as informing the employer, refusal of recruitment into police or armed forces – as well as counselling and rehabilitation, for those convicted of assaults on women and girls.
3. Increased and free legal aid facilities for women affected by violence.
4. State-sponsored shelters and other facilities island-wide for battered women.
5. Partnership between the state agencies and women's groups providing shelters as well as legal and psychological counselling.
6. Police training to include section on domestic violence, rape investigation, sexual harassment, and other gender-based violence; provision of women's desks with trained personnel and adequate infrastructure.
7. Increase in the sensitizing courses for judges and prosecutors on issues of violence against women.
8. Methods to ensure that drivers and conductors of buses are equipped to deal with those who harass women.
9. Clear recognition in the Constitution of the right of a woman to be free from all forms of violence. A woman should be able to petition a court for a breach of fundamental rights when she has been subject to violence, private or public.

ECONOMY

Women form an important part of the labour force, and their struggles have ended discrimination in pay, compared with men, in many sectors. But, especially in rural, unregulated or non-unionized sectors, women receive very low wages and are considered less skilled. Cheap female labour in plantations, factories and foreign employment accounts for the bulk of the country's foreign exchange earnings. While particular attention has to be paid to working women's wages, hours of work, conditions of work and living – their right to organize, their right to health facilities and crèches and other benefits must also be addressed by politicians and employers. Women form the majority of the unemployed. The exploitation and harsh treatment of migrant women workers, mainly in the Middle East, has been exposed, but more needs to be done. Domestic servants and women in the informal sector have no organizations or

laws to protect them. Women's wide range of unpaid work in the home has also been ignored. We recommend:

1. A nationally enforced Minimum Wage.
2. Equal Pay, especially for women working in agriculture.
3. Strengthening of the rights of women workers to unionize and bargain collectively, especially in sectors where organizing is discouraged.
4. The provision for women of 14 weeks of paid maternity leave, in accordance with the recent ILO Convention on Maternity Leave (June 2000), with the same benefits in both the public and private sector.
5. Accepting of the principle of parental leave, including paternal leave.
6. Provision in workplaces – especially plantations, factories and offices – of adequate crèche and child-minding facilities.
7. Improved conditions in Export Processing Zones and other such factories: of work and pay, the right to unionize and bargain collectively, voluntary overtime, proper transport and lodgings, and more buses at night.
8. Migrant Women Workers: bilateral agreements between the state and recipient countries, for enforcement of standardized contracts with minimum standards or recruitment, working conditions, and repatriation; more Labour and Welfare Offices as well as free legal assistance and counselling for migrant workers in recipient countries.
9. Improved conditions and protections for Domestic Workers: minimum and equal wages; monthly and annual holidays; health-care provisions; employees provident funds (EPF).
10. Extension of labour legislation, and ratification of ILO Convention, to protect the rights of women working in home-based industries and the self-employed.
11. Increase of compulsory retirement age for women from 55 to 65.
12. Extension of "Widows and Orphans" pension fund to other female dependents.
13. Special provisions and skills training for single and for elderly women who are needy, unemployed, and without family support.
14. Recognition of female headed households and the formulation of affirmative policies to deal with their specific concerns.

MEDIA

Patriarchal structures and attitudes demeaning women persist in Sri Lanka. This is clearly seen in the media. Yet one of the most potent weapons to promote positive images of women could be newspapers, journals, radio, and TV. But unfortunately, sexism in advertisements, cartoons, articles and editorials still prevails. Many TV series depict violence against women and display sexist attitudes, as well as portray women only as wives and mothers, or as sex objects. Women are underrepresented in media production, especially at decision-making levels. We recommend:

1. More training and employment of women in the media, especially in production and editing.
2. The use of the Code of Conduct (prepared by WERC) for media personnel, to promote positive attitudes to women as well as to combat sexism and stereotyping of women.
3. Gender-sensitizing programmes for media personnel.
4. A continuous media-watch in 3 languages to monitor and expose sexism in newspapers, advertisements, and teledramas.
5. Campaigns to persuade newspaper owners, editors, advertising agencies and the Press Council to pay more attention to combating sexism in the media.

HEALTH

The pressure and cutbacks on health services severely affect women and girls in Sri Lanka. The burden of ill-health weighs heavily on rural and low-income women, and especially working women, who face the double burden of tasks at work and in the home. We urge:

1. Reduction of maternal and infant mortality as well as morbidity rates, anaemia and malnutrition, especially among women and girls on plantations, in poor rural and urban areas, and camps for the displaced.
2. Expansion of 'Well-Women Clinics' to all parts of the country, and increased regular check-up screening facilities for forms of cancer and other diseases affecting women.
3. Extension of the responsibility for women's health to employers to provide proper first aid, canteen and toilet facilities for women workers, as well as to strictly follow occupational health and safety regulations.
4. Campaign for reproductive rights for all women, and ensuring of more accessible and informed choice in the selection of family-planning methods.
5. Strengthening of HIV/AIDS prevention among women.
6. Concessions in health facilities, transport, purchase of clothes and food to poor single-parent households and the elderly.
7. Counselling programmes for women in stress/crisis situations. More research and action on mental health problems, including the high rates of suicides among youth.
8. To look at violence against women as a health issue and integrate remedial and preventive measures into health policy.

EDUCATION

The level of women's and girls' education and literacy is a positive factor in Sri Lanka, but there are still areas where literacy is low, especially among women on plantations and in low-income rural and urban areas. Negative attitudes to women are also often promoted in schools and in textbooks. We urge:

1. Improvement of primary and secondary education levels, and removal of gender disparities in provision of facilities, especially among girls from plantations, as well as the rural and urban poor.
2. Enforcement of compulsory education for girls up to 16 years throughout the country.

3. Elimination of sexism and racism, and incorporation of gender-sensitive material in textbooks and curricula.
4. Reduction of gender imbalance in enrolment in vocational, technical, scientific, new technology, and management training programmes.
5. Establishment of adult educational, functional literacy and training programmes targeted at women who have lost their jobs, as well as older and unemployed single women.
6. Sensitization of teachers, school children and university students on issues of gender equity.
7. Incorporation of gender issues in school curricula, and expansion of Gender Studies programmes in universities.

CULTURE & SOCIETY

Women are often affected by oppressive social practices associated with culture and ethnicity. These include many remnants of feudal social structures and attitudes of the past, such as the caste system based on hierarchy and inequality, and the practice of dowries which makes daughters a liability. The prevalence of patriarchy in the home, in society, and in the law, has led to various types of discrimination against women, and to male domination and son preference. There also still exist numerous taboos, superstitions, and negative attitudes towards women. We urge:

1. Addressing social practices harmful to women and girls (e.g. virginity tests, attitudes to widows, female genital mutilation), and promotion of change.
2. Amending customary laws to eliminate negative impact on women.
3. Equal inheritance for sons and daughters, and the discouraging of dowries.
4. National campaign to combat sexist social practices through education and the media.

CONFLICT

Women are the victims of war, and women strongly desire a negotiated peace. Action is needed in the interest of women who are victims of the conflict on both sides of the battle lines. We particularly stress the need for:

1. Access for displaced women and girls to employment, education, and protection from all forms of harassment.
2. Welfare schemes, as well as employment and skills-training for women affected by conflict, including war widows.
3. The right of all displaced women and girls to safe and secure resettlement.
4. Protection at police stations and checkpoints for women and girls.
5. Trauma counselling for women and girls from war-torn areas.
6. Involvement of more women in the process of conflict resolution.

SUPPORTIVE MEASURES

1. Sufficient resources and budget allocations for all recommendations and reforms, and increased expenditure on education and health.
2. National Commission on Women to be set up as an independent body, with the power to investigate discrimination complaints, conduct education programmes, engage in litigation, as well as initiate and pursue research.
3. Ministry of Women's Affairs: The appointment of a Minister who is familiar with women's issues and the need for gender equity. Ministry officials should be further trained in all gender issues.
4. Gender Impact Assessment Committee in Department of National Planning to appraise how policies and programmes affect women of all communities. Gender awareness and equity need to be integrated into all levels of government policy planning and implementation, with gender focal points (persons trained in gender issues) in all Ministries.
5. Gender-disaggregated Data: Gaps in economic and social statistics need to be filled, as the contribution of women to the economy and households is undervalued.
6. Promotion of public consciousness on women's issues, and implementation of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action.

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