

A CALL TO STRENGTHEN ACTIVITIES TO STOP WARTIME VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

There has been an alarming escalation of war-time violence against women, in the recent past in Sri Lanka. Sexual violence committed by armed forces against Tamil women has been multiplying. Marginalized women are subject to violence by those who are in power that is further entrenched by patriarchy and the culture of violence. Power is further made shatterproof without any reference to the positive changes, though they are few and slow, that are taking place over the last few decades due to change in the law, consciousness of the people and activism of women's organizations.

The recent incidents that happened in the North and East and also in other parts of Sri Lanka, explicate the attitude that one can evade from punishment if violation is enforced on powerless and marginalized women.

Women at present increasingly seek justice to the violence inflicted on them. This is also a time during which consciousness regarding violence against women is being enhanced. Contradictory to these changes violence is on the increase. The major factor that contributes to the persistence and the increase of war-time violence against women is that the violators always belong to the forces of the state. State with its accumulated power always tries to safeguard its forces.

However, the state is expected to be responsible for the violations of human rights committed by its forces.

We urge that state and its administrative and judicial sector should not defend and protect the violators. State should take serious note of the common voice expressed by women's organizations and other social and political organizations with regard to the increasing sexual violence against women by the security forces in the aftermath of the Maradana incident and employ necessary steps to address the issues effectively.

We seriously feel that the activism of women's organization and other concerned groups regarding wartime violence against women is inadequate. We are in a situation where we, all women, by accumulating our strength with the help of individuals and social institutions that advocate for social justice have to create a corresponding activism to enforce changes at the level of civil society and the state.

The threat to the family members of the affected woman by the perpetrator has been a major obstacle in seeking justice if she reveals the details to the outside world. The problems and complications in the legal system either prolong the cases or do not provide justice to the women. The absence of a protective support system in the society lead to the frustration of the women who seek legal measures.

In the present context, to create awareness among society, organization and institutions, we need to formulate a collective form of action. To do so, the following should be recognized:

- There is a direct link between the war situation and the increasing violence against women.
- Historically militarization functions hand in hand with sexual abuse of women, moving brothels, bureaucratic justifications and threat.
- Those who are in power put themselves in an imaginary state of satisfaction through enforcing sexual violence on a woman who is defined (in the process of war) as a member of an enemy community. Historically the act of conquering women of the enemy community is considered as first and last steps in conquering the enemy.
- Sexual violence in our society has been culturally defined as a matter that cannot be openly discussed. This creates a conducive situation for the perpetrators.
- The woman who is subjected to sexual violence is not always in a position to face the situation. Hence it would be difficult for her, at the mindset of the time of abuse, to decide whether to seek legal action. However, legal actions should be taken immediately.
- The legal action depends in the medical report of the Judicial Medical Officer at the Government /State hospitals. The doctors, Medical Officers and the hospitals are most often not aware of the complication of the issues. An affected person does not have an option.
- The lawyers, judges and the court systems do not most often act with gender perspective. This situation aggravates the complication of the legal system.

- At present in Sri Lanka, the legislation does not permit termination of pregnancy even if it occurs from rape. This is a serious issue if the victim is a child.
- Often the regulations such as the PTA which are said to “curb the terrorism” most often create conducive situations for sexual violations against women. In most cases the violence occurs during search operations, at check-points and during detentions.

In this regard, we, Suriya Women’s Development Center, put forward the following requests.

Take necessary steps to implement the suggestion made in the section *Women and Armed Conflict in the Beijing Platform of Action, as agreed.*

- Activate and strengthen women’s activism against war, militarization and the culture of violence.
- Work towards changing the laws that are against women’s rights and human rights, that enable harassment of women.

- Appoint a commission to study and change/abolish the procedures regarding arrest, custody and checking of women that make room for sexual violence.
- Identify and enforce institutional and social supportive systems that enable survivor/women to seek for legal remedies and equal social status.
- Identify the violator and declare it as a crime.
- Create a violence free, peaceful society where women and others can live peacefully.

We request that the state and other concerned people who believe in social justices should take our call and demands into serious consideration.

Through this statement we also require women’s organizations to form a network on this issue (war-time violence) to act continuously. ■

**Suriya Women’s Development Centre
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WOMAN

Jayshree Misra

I, Woman,
Stree-jati,
 Symbol of my Land,
 Bound, yoked to be
 Selfless, unassuming,
 Velvet glove in callused hand.
 Silent, always, grieving, seething,
 Suppressed desires, intangible hopes.
 Unable to take a stand,
 Or question, reason,
 Patriarchal discussions;
 Such secure governance,
 By this august band
 Of oppressors, descendants of Manu.

I, Woman, weary, unalluring,
 Scarred body, soul and mind,
 Wrapped in ancient mummy-cloths,
 That defy beauty, scrutiny.
 Fluttering strands of hair escape
 From my fettered head.
 Solitary tendrils flee my *pallu*-covered
 head,
 Tenuous independent movements.
 A feeble transient display of freedom
 In the shifting scenes
 Of sanctioned bondage.

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