

# EMPOWERMENT

# AND RESILIENCE



WOMEN'S STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE  
SRI LANKA'S ECONOMIC CRISIS,  
POST-WAR TRANSITION AND  
STRUCTURAL DISADVANTAGE



## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research study centres on the experiences of women who actively engaged in the WRN Community Conversations (CC) across various districts of Sri Lanka, including: Jaffna, Mannar, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Colombo, Nuwara Eliya, Puthlam, and Colombo. To begin with, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the Women's Regional Network for entrusting the Women's Political Academy with this important initiative.

We are deeply appreciative of the WRN Core-Team in South Asia for their decision to incorporate Sri Lanka into the Community Conversation process as part of their policy. I must convey a special note of appreciation to Patricia Cooper, Rukhshanda Naz, and Chelsea Soderholm for their unwavering support in shaping the essential framework and providing invaluable guidance at every step of the journey leading to the publication of this work. We were well guided by Rita Manchanda and Saima Jasam, our resource persons, who assisted us during a one-day training programme to develop the framework to initiate the CC based on the experiences of India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. A big thanks to Rita Manchanda for her external reading and editing support.

The Women's Political Academy in Sri Lanka could not have produced this document without the tireless efforts invested in nurturing mutual trust and building strong bonds within the communities. Our deep and sincere gratitude to our dedicated feminist activists for having collaborated with these communities for

over four decades. The resulting document is a testament to our commitment to highlighting the voices and stories of our activist leaders. This publication is a collective effort, a product of our community leaders, including Mahalakshmi Kuhathasan from Mannar, Siri Shriya from Batticaloa, Vijitha Ehamparanathan from Trincomalee representing the Women's Action Network, Saroja Sivachandran and Sarniya Rasuthan, Centre for Women and Development, Jaffna, Rameeza Fateema and Bisliya Bhuto, Rural Development Foundation – Puttlam, Oshara Daemanthi and Buddhika Mendis, Women's Centre – Katunayake, Darshi Sivapragasam, Human Development Organisation – Kandy. This is a collaborative process of the Women's Political Academy and the community based organisations. We wish to recognize the invaluable support provided to us by Dr. Subhangi Herath, Political Science Department of the Colombo University during the research and Mr. Charuka Peiris, Research Assistant – IMADR for assisting in consolidating the information and data.

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## About Women's Regional Network (WRN)

The Women's Regional Network is a network of individual women civil society leaders from Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan and now Sri Lanka working together to strengthen women's rights and ensure peace and security in the conflict-affected region. WRN is animated by a vision of women working collaboratively within and across borders, listening and learning from each other, and constructing a common agenda towards equitable and sustainable development in building a just peace. The core purpose of WRN is to amplify the voices of unheard, marginalised women and, together, address the interlinked issues of peace and security, justice and governance, and growing militarization in South Asia. At its launch in 2011, members of the Network identified interlinked areas of concern—militarization, extremism, corruption, and lack of security—as priorities for all three countries. Subsequently, WRN expanded its focus to include conflict-induced forcible displacement within and across borders. WRN has emerged as an effective and flexible platform for collaborating on research and analysis, joint advocacy, and representation.

WRN's advocacy campaigns ensure that grassroots women's concerns and their voices directly shape political discourse, policy development, and programme implementation. WRN's flagships are the Community Conversations, which evolved organically in each of the WRN 3+1 countries, adapting to the diverse community-specific socio-cultural norms and practices. This diversity is clearly reflected in the resulting research conducted in each country. The CCs emphasise women as survivors and make their agency visible in everyday life and resistance movements. WRN's work is firmly anchored in the real world of women's experiences. While the findings of each community conversation process remain context-specific, by identifying common threads and themes, WRN creates cross-border strategies and seeks common regional solutions. WRN country networks are autonomous, but they work in close coordination with one another.

The CCs emphasise women as survivors and make their agency visible in everyday life and resistance movements. The Conversations acknowledge women's

contributions to the post-conflict processes of justice, peace, and social reintegration. This process has generated rich and detailed accounts from Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan of the gendered social impact of politicised violence, militarisation, and corruption in conflict-affected areas. It anchors WRN's work firmly in the real world of women's experiences. While the findings of each community conversation process remain context-specific, by identifying the common threads and themes, WRN will develop cross-border strategies and seek common solutions.

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Dr. Nimalka Fernando is a leading figure in Sri Lanka's civil society movements for peace, human rights, and gender equality and has been a civil society representative in policy interactions and accountability processes. She has also built an international profile in human rights advocacy. For more than 30 years, she's been at the forefront of the battle against racism and discrimination as the Co-chairperson of the International Movement against All forms of Racism and Discrimination (IMADR). In Sri Lanka, her current focus has been on energising the Women's Political Academy and advancing the empowerment of women in politics. Her expertise in gender issues, governance, and democratisation has shaped policies promoting human rights. She has also made significant contributions to peace, and conflict research, including in the development of practical guides and conducting training sessions to counter violent extremism. She is a Board Member of WRN.

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## **ACRONYMS**

<b>CC</b>	Community Conversations
<b>EPZ</b>	Exporting Processing Zone
<b>FHH</b>	Female Headed Households
<b>FGD</b>	Focus Group Discussions
<b>FTZ</b>	Free Trade Zone
<b>GoSL</b>	Government of Sri Lanka
<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced Persons
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organisation
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>MWDF</b>	Mannar Women Development Federation
<b>TRC</b>	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>WRN</b>	Women's Regional Network
<b>WPASL</b>	Women's Political Academy – Sri Lanka

# INTRODUCTION

## The Context

### South Asian Region

South Asia is a region of unparalleled diversity, boasting a rich tapestry of cultures, languages, histories, and landscapes. Nestled in the southern part of Asia, this subcontinent is home to over 1.8 billion people, making it one of the most densely populated and dynamic regions on the planet. South Asia is characterised by a distinctive fusion of tradition and modernity, where ancient customs and contemporary lifestyles coexist in a vibrant mosaic of traditions.

The political map of South Asia comprises Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives, but despite the region's histories and geographies of interconnectedness, South Asia remains very weak in regional connectivity. Culturally, South Asia is a treasure trove of heritage, with India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives as its prominent nations. The region is the birthplace of some of the world's major religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, and it has been a historical crossroads for trade, philosophy, and art for centuries. South Asia's complex tapestry of languages, traditions, and belief systems continues to evolve and shape the identity of the region, making it a fascinating and dynamic part of the world.

The situation of South Asian women is complex and varies widely across the region. Within the countries of South Asia there are extremes of capability excellence and deprivation. Gradual progress is being made as evidenced in the global indices of Gender Development Index (GDI), Global Gender Gap (GGG) and Women Peace and Security (WPS) Index. Overall, there is growing

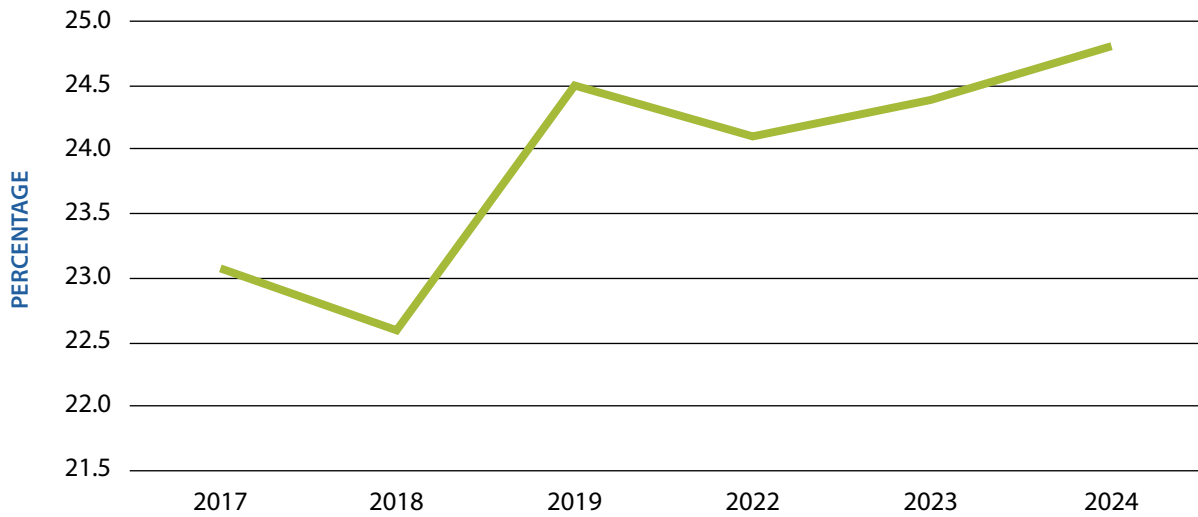
awareness of the importance of gender equality. However, continued efforts are necessary to address the existing gender disparities and improve the overall status of women in South Asia. In South Asia, access to education for women has improved over the years, yet there remains a significant gender gap. According to UNESCO, about 51% of women in South Asia are literate, compared to 76% of men.<sup>1</sup> In some countries within the region, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, the situation in regard to female educational attainment, economic participation and opportunity, health and survival and political empowerment is bleak. Sri Lankan women have been relatively better performers in the region's gender indices for education attainment and health and survival, but the country's recent economic crisis has badly disrupted women's livelihoods and local economies pushing more women into poverty.

South Asian women's significant contribution to the labour economy, particularly in the agricultural sector is widely documented, although there is a need to capture better women's unpaid and 'care' contribution. According to the World Bank, the female labour force participation rate in South Asia was around 23% in 2019 and 24.8% in 2022, but this varies widely across countries within the region.<sup>2</sup> In countries like Nepal and Bangladesh, women's participation in the labour force is higher, compared to other conservative societies within the region.

1 UNESCO (2018) 50th literacy day: Literacy rates are on the rise, but millions remain illiterate. Available at: <https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fs38-50th-anniversary-of-international-literacy-day-literacy-rates-are-on-the-rise-but-millions-remain-illiterate-2016-en.pdf>.

2 World Bank. (n.d.). Labour force, female (% of total labour force) - South Asia. World Bank Open Data. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS>

**TABLE 1. LABOUR FORCE, FEMALE (% OF TOTAL LABOUR FORCE) - SOUTH ASIA**



Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and its different forms remains a critical issue in South Asia. According to UN Women, an alarming 30-40 percent of women in the region have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. Specifically, the prevalence of lifetime intimate partner violence is 35 percent higher than the global average. Laws and regulations to address these issues are in place in many South Asian countries, but implementation and cultural norms still present significant challenges.<sup>3</sup>

### Sri Lanka Gender Profile

Sri Lanka leads in several of the region’s gender development indices, especially in educational attainment and health and survival. Girls’ literacy rate is above 97 percent, overtaking boys’ mean years of lower secondary schooling. There is gender parity in the adult literacy rate.<sup>4</sup> However, labour force participation remains low for women, maintaining a rate between 30-35 percent over the past two decades. For 2023, it was 32 percent for females and 72 percent for males. According to GDI, women’s contribution to GDP and control of economic resources is estimated at a gender imbalance of Females 6,241 compared to Males 17,990 and is amongst the

widest economic gender imbalances in the region. On women’s empowerment, the low profile of women holding less than 5.3 percent of seats in national parliament indicates their overall weak decision-making power. In 2018, efforts were made to address this imbalance by introducing a quota for women in local government. Women’s participation in various aspects of public life remains disproportionately low, hindered by structural and societal gender discrimination.

In Sri Lanka, the share of women who have experienced intimate partner violence is less than the world and regional average, and is at 27 percent.<sup>5</sup> In the 2023 iteration of the global Women Peace and Security Index (WPS Index) which assesses and ranks 177 countries based on indicators related to women’s inclusion, justice, and security, post war Sri Lanka ranks 60 and with the security band registers near zero vulnerability to ‘proximity to violence’ and ‘political targeting’. Disturbingly though, there is a sharp decline in women’s perception of ‘community safety’ from 69.7 down to 52 percent between 2017 to 2023.

Primary health grassroots structures have enabled access to sexual and reproductive rights and the achievement of impressive maternal mortality indicators, but

3 UN Women (2023) Ending Violence against Women and Girls - Asia Pacific Region .

4 <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/sri-lanka>

5 <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/sri-lanka>

**Systemic social and structural inequalities led to the widespread commission of sexual and gender-based violence and the deepening of the socio-economic marginalisation of women during and following the armed conflict.**

patriarchal traditions and societal structures have made for weak decision-making power which inhibits access to health care, status and discrimination. Worrying is the female suicide rate in Sri Lanka which is one of the highest in the world, and there are high rates of self-harm in young women living in rural, disadvantaged groups.<sup>6</sup>

Parallel to Sri Lanka's civic structure of laws and regulations is the recognition of the personal laws of religious/cultural groups that govern family and marriage laws. For instance, religious community laws governing land rights have proved particularly onerous for women-headed households (WHH). In post-war Jaffna, Hindu and Tamil women are inhibited from utilising property, even mortgaging or leasing. The local *Thesavalamai* law stipulates that women cannot make independent decisions regarding property without their husband's consent unless he is legally declared dead.

The 'Aftermath' in Sri Lanka's conflict-affected areas extends beyond the historical experience of 27 years of prolonged war for all. For women, in particular, gendered victimisation has not ceased because the armed conflict has ended. Vulnerabilities are compounded by intersectional ethno-religious identities, socio-economic class, displaced location, and disability. Women may have experienced periods of victimisation, empowerment, and re-victimization; they may have confronted violence both from the state and within their own communities and families. Systemic social and structural inequalities led to the widespread commission of sexual and gender-based violence and the deepening of the socio-economic marginalisation of women during and following

the armed conflict. Human rights violations in conflict continue to traumatically oppress families who await the unfinished processes of healing and justice.

Even though the war is over, former conflict zones remain heavily militarised, and IDPs remain displaced and dispossessed. Women who have experienced both internal and external displacement due to protracted conflict reveal profound, long-lasting impacts on their lives and identities. Displacement and refugee crises have been extensively documented by various regional and international organisations. Feminist groups in Sri Lanka have consistently highlighted the resilience and leadership demonstrated by women who, while enduring victimisation themselves, have played pivotal roles in peacebuilding, reconciliation, and the promotion of human rights. The journey of women human rights defenders and peacemakers in Sri Lanka is a testament to their unwavering dedication and extraordinary contributions to their communities and the nation as a whole.

## Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis

### Gender and Poverty

Sri Lanka is grappling with several economic challenges, including high inflation, a large fiscal deficit, a rising debt burden, and difficulties in servicing foreign loans. The COVID-19 pandemic has also affected the country's tourism industry, which is a significant contributor to its economy. These challenges have led to a balance of payments crisis and a sharp decline in the value of the Sri Lankan Rupee. The government has taken various measures to stabilise the economy, including seeking international assistance and implementing economic reforms. The Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) has signed an agreement with the International Monetary Fund to receive a loan of US Dollars. In March 2023, the IMF Executive Board granted approval for a new Extended Fund Facility (EFF) arrangement totaling US Dollars 3 billion for Sri Lanka.<sup>7</sup>

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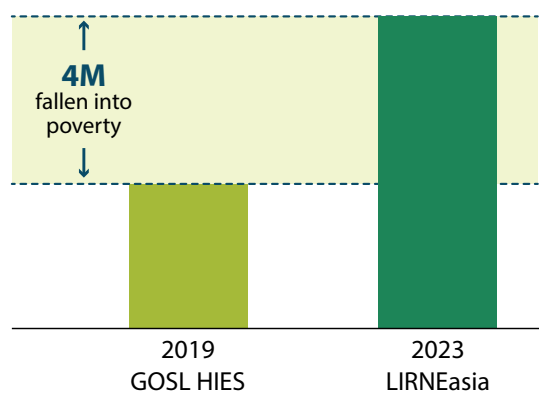
6 Gender equity unit <https://genderhealthdata.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Sri-Lanka-Gender-Report-website.pdf>

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7 Aljazeera.(2023).Sri Lanka receives first tranche of IMF bailout, says president. Retrieved from Al Jazeera: <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2023/3/22/sri-lanka-receives-first-tranche-of-imf-bailout>

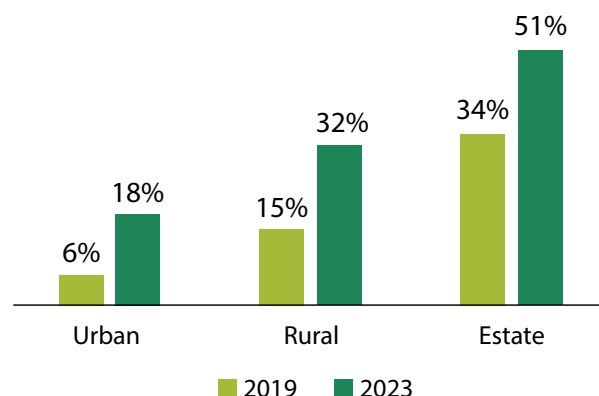


### POVERTY HEADCOUNT RATIO (% of population)



Source: LIRNEasia (2023)

### POPULATION LIVING BELOW POVERTY LINE, BY SECTOR – 2019 vs 2023 (% of population in sector)



Poverty has risen since 2019, from 11.3 to 12.7 percent in 2020, adding over 300,000 new poor in that period. It continued to increase in 2021, and it then doubled between 2021 and 2022, from 13.1 to 25.0 percent (\$3.65 per capita, 2017 PPP). This increase has added an additional 2.5 million people into poverty in 2022.<sup>8</sup>

While the burden of the current economic crisis in Sri Lanka falls on every citizen, women are the most impacted.<sup>9</sup> This is because of their disadvantaged position in accessing resources, representation in decision-making, and lack of opportunities for economic empowerment. When a financial crisis spills over into the home sphere, women, as the primary caregivers at home, face an additional burden in meeting the care needs of their families with limited resources. Women constitute 52% of the population, and the country is notable for having a substantial elderly population, accounting for 23 percent of the total population. Domestic care responsibilities restrict women from participating in income-generating activities. Empirical evidence shows that while both

**Women tend to be employed in or occupy the most vulnerable and lowest-paid jobs in the formal and informal economies.**

women and men are affected by job and income losses during crises, the impact on women is more severe than on men.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, women tend to be employed in or occupy the most vulnerable and lowest-paid jobs in the formal and informal economies. Workers in vulnerable employment are the least likely to have any safety nets to guard against economic shocks; thus, they are more likely to fall into poverty. As an indicator of the economic vulnerability of women, the UN Women Data Hub reports that the unemployment rate for females aged 15+ was 29.4 percent in 2020, significantly higher than the male unemployment rate of 5.6 percent. Central Bank data

8 World Bank (2023) Poverty & Equity Brief - Sri Lanka.

9 Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka. (2022). Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis: An Opportunity to Advance Gender Equality. Policy Insights. Colombo: Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka.

10 Daily Mirror. (2022). Continuing Economic Crisis in Sri Lanka and its Far-Reaching Repercussions for Women and Girls. Retrieved from Daily Mirror Online: <https://www.dailymirror.lk/insight/Continuing-economic-crisis-in-Sri-Lanka-and-its-far-reaching-repercussions-for-women-and-girls/374-237271>.



Free Trade Zone workers engage in a discussion on Sri Lanka's economic crisis.

indicates a rise in women's labour force participation and a shift from unpaid family work to formal employment, suggesting changes in economic roles but not necessarily improved poverty outcomes.

### **Aims & Objectives**

The Women's Political Academy initiated a series of Community Conversations (CCs) in Sri Lanka, focusing on regions that were particularly hard-hit by the economic crisis. These areas have felt not only the economic strain but also the lasting effects of conflict and underdevelopment. The conversations aimed at formulating a report that nurtures a feminist vision for capturing the voices of women coping with fortitude with the overlapping challenges of the economic crisis in Sri Lanka, the enduring impact of the long years of ethnic conflict, and the economic insecurities arising from the post-COVID-19 pandemic.

The overarching objective was to understand the experiences, fears, and insecurities of women who lived and worked in remote and insecure areas. It was to document through respectful listening the stories of women, the impact on their lives of the shrinking democratic spaces, the economic insecurities resulting from the COVID pandemic, ethnic and communal

tensions, persisting militarization, and corruption. Has it led to heightened abuse and violence against women, as well as individuals with different gender expressions and sexual identities? How has it impacted women's ability to access rights and justice? The CCs were driven by the sensibility that the fear of violence has become a significant factor in reinforcing women and girls into subordinate positions, further restricting their access to various spaces and resources.

The CCs questioned how various stakeholders, including the state and its agencies, civil society, and especially women's associations have responded to the situation of economic crisis and enduring post-war distress. The intention was to critically analyse these stakeholder roles so that strategies could be formulated to progress towards the vision of a safe and equitable society. In the post-war context, to expedite the reconciliation process and rebuild fractured societies, it is critical for people to reclaim their lives by accessing economic opportunities. But access to justice is also imperative for healing the suffering and grievances resulting from the long war. The CCs document women's perceptions about the acceptability of the setting up of the proposed Commission for *Truth, Unity, and Reconciliation*.

## METHODOLOGY & STRUCTURE

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The unifying theme of the CCs is Sri Lankan women's varied experiences of economic insecurity, complicated and reinforced by an axis of intersectional vulnerabilities, their difficult struggles for economic survival and dignity, and the constant presence of gender-based violence, both structural and material, in a post-war society still grappling with the conflict aftermath. The focus is on the subject category of Sri Lankan woman 'worker', in the formal and informal production economy, including garment workers, tea plantation workers, agricultural and fishery workers, factory workers, domestic and external migrant domestic workers, producers of food/snack packages, daily wage workers, etc. Also recognized are vulnerable sub-categories, including persons with differentiated sexual identities, WHH, IDPs, women with disabilities, and women and caste.

The organising theme remains economic insecurity, the struggle for economic survival, and related gender-based violence. The stories of these women shed light on their unwavering resilience in the face of adversity because even those who were employed and organised continued to earn incomes below the cost of living index, with gender pay gaps.

Community Conversations were held with women who lived and worked in remote and insecure areas spread across the Western, Southern, Central, Northern, North-Western, and Eastern Provinces in eight districts, namely Colombo, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Jaffna, Batticaloa, Puttalam, Galle, and Nuwaraeliya. Over 300 women participated in the CCs and represented multi-cultural backgrounds and employment categories, but shared

common challenges underscoring economic impoverishment, job insecurity, and gender-based violence. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involved about 25 women from each district and discussed various issues, recorded stories, and shed light on the economic challenges faced by women. The four Community Conversations are spatially grouped and reflect common and particular challenges associated with the region's contemporary political history. The concluding part of the report distils from the CCs focused recommendations.

The collaborative effort of the CCs brought together academics and activists who contributed to the analysis of the precarious situation of the safety and protection of women in the country. Above all is the contribution of the eight community leaders who were entry points, enabling us to listen to the stories. The narratives form the core of the work and are varied and stylistically quite idiosyncratic, reflecting different community leadership teams.

### Sri Lanka Community Conversations

The CCs with local women emphasised the crucial importance of women's empowerment for achieving gender equality in a deeply unequal society. In particular, entrenched patriarchal norms in the Northern region pose a significant challenge to achieving gender equality. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected women and girls, necessitating care policies to mitigate social and economic impacts.



Domestic violence has escalated during the pandemic, posing threats to women's safety and freedoms.<sup>11</sup>

The unstable political situation in Sri Lanka has contributed to an economic crisis, exacerbating the daily challenges faced by women. Increased violent behavior, family disputes, and suicide rates are observed. To alleviate economic hardships, immediate needs include family assessments, economic assistance, and

11 The Women's Wellbeing Survey in 2019 conducted by the Department of Statistics is the recent source for obtaining data on violence against Sri Lankan women and girls. Accordingly, Sri Lankan women subjected to physical violence by their partners during their lifetime are more than double (17.4%) compared to violence from anyone else (7.2%). Similarly, the occurrence of sexual violence from partners (6.2%) is also higher than sexual violence from non-partners (4.1%). These data reveal that Violence perpetrated by partners is comparatively high in the context of Sri Lanka. Retrieved From: [https://www.defence.lk/Article/view\\_article/27532#:~:text=Accordingly%2C%20Sri%20Lankan%20women%20subjected,non%2Dpartners%20\(4.1%25\).](https://www.defence.lk/Article/view_article/27532#:~:text=Accordingly%2C%20Sri%20Lankan%20women%20subjected,non%2Dpartners%20(4.1%25).)

income-generating means. The CCs highlighted the unresolved grievances stemming from the conflict, with women facing various issues such as becoming war widows, conflict-related disabilities, trauma, sexual abuse, and structural inequalities. The CCs process also provided an opportunity to assess the varied responses to the proposed Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as a mechanism for justice and redress.

At the grassroots level, women acknowledged the role of government officers such as Women Development Officers and Counseling Officers aimed at protecting women's and children's interests. The government has initiated safety net programmes such as *Samrudhi*. However, there are implementation gaps such as weakness in targeting and inadequacy in benefits. In 2012 itself, the World Bank reported that public spending on social safety net programmes in Sri Lanka decreased as a percentage of GDP from 2.2 percent in 2004 to 0.3 percent in 2009. Since then, Sri Lanka has moved from being a country with relatively high safety net spending to one with limited resource allocation for safety nets.<sup>12</sup>

Gender ideologies, adversely impacting women's work opportunities, continue to be predominant in Sri Lanka. Despite the extension of women's economic roles, household work and child-rearing is seen as 'women's work'. Women are expected to cook and feed all the family members which is considered their primary gender role and a compulsory duty. Also, women continue to be seen by many policymakers and administrators as 'dependent wives' and 'supplementary earners'. According to the ILO Statistical Review on Sri Lanka's Gender Pay Gap (2024), the analysis reveals that on average female hourly wages were approximately 27 percent lower than male hourly wages in 2019.<sup>13</sup> The gap is particularly large among wage workers in the informal economy and among those with lower educational attainments. However, a large GPG was found across virtually all groups in the population.

12 <https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/case-study/samurahi-programme-sri-lanka#:~:text=The%20Sri%20Lankan%20government%20launched,Ministry%20and%20the%20Samurahi%20Authority.>

13 <https://www.ilo.org/publications/gender-pay-gap-sri-lanka-statistical-review-policy-implications>

# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS I

## Northern, North-Western and Eastern Provinces

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**T**he Community Conversations (CCs) singled out the economic empowerment of women as a key focus to ensure economic safety and security. Discussions in Jaffna and Kilinochchi revealed the challenges women face due to unregulated lending practices. Women in the informal sector emphasised that their grievances about loss of livelihoods were largely ignored. Several of the women alluded to gender-based violence and emphasised the increasing incidence of illegal marriage separations, leading to significant levels of physical, social, emotional, and spiritual imbalances within themselves and the broader society.

Several factors contribute to the complexity of their situation. One set of challenges revolves around the lack of basic infrastructure, including decent housing, a supply of electricity and water, public transport, schooling facilities, ownership of land, and limited employment opportunities. Fears, economic distress, and social uncertainty contribute to the high incidence of mental health problems, which is compounded by the unavailability of psychological treatment. These services are not provided by the government, and access to professionals with the ability to provide psychosocial support is limited. Those psychological professionals who are available are likely to be conversant in one language only, either Sinhala or English, making it challenging to reach out to Tamil-speaking communities. The cultural aspect also plays a role in isolating individuals with mental health issues. This isolation further exacerbates the vulnerability of individuals who are already dealing with several hardships or suffering from psychological disorders.

The people of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, having endured thirty years of war trauma marked by frequent

displacements, injuries, detentions, torture, and the profound loss of family members, homes, employment, and other vital resources, continue to grapple with the aftermath of the civil war's end in 2009. Even fourteen years after the war ended, Sri Lanka remains in a post-war state, facing challenges in transitioning into a post-conflict society. While overt violence has ceased, the deep-seated political issues that fueled the conflict remain unaddressed.

### Displaced Peoples: IDPs and Returnee Refugees

Displaced multiple times due to the conflict in the northern region, the people have been trapped in multiple cycles of forcible displacement, becoming internally displaced persons and refugees. A significant number of Sri Lankan refugees sought asylum in India during the protracted civil conflict that lasted for four decades. Many of them returned to Sri Lanka after the conflict officially ended in 2009. The two countries' bilateral agreements and repatriation programmes facilitated the return of refugees from India. These returnees face daunting challenges, including reintegration into their home communities, often in conflict-affected areas. We have tried to capture these experiences during our conversations in Mannar and the Eastern Province.

Within the country, the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) live in temporary camps or with host families. At the end of the armed conflict, the Sri Lankan government-initiated efforts to resettle IDPs, a process of resettlement that involved rebuilding homes, infrastructure, and livelihoods. The conditions in IDP camps and the challenges they faced varied, but efforts were made to



Focus Group Discussion with Community members in Mannar

ensure their return to their places of origin or alternative locations with suitable living conditions.

The situation of refugee returnees and IDPs in Sri Lanka has evolved over the years, and while significant progress has been made in addressing their needs, challenges related to reintegration, land issues, and the restoration of normalcy persist. It is therefore crucial to recognize that the experiences of returnees and IDPs vary widely, and efforts to support them continue to be a part of post-conflict reconciliation and development in Sri Lanka.<sup>14</sup>

Community Conversation processes held in the North and East, as well as in Puttalam, covered the life experiences of the internally displaced due to the conflict. For years, thousands of families in the northern and eastern provinces remained in temporary IDP shelters. The primary reason for the forcible displacement was the military takeover of their residential areas to build military camps for security reasons while battling the LTTE. On the other hand, thousands of Muslim people residing in the North were expelled by the LTTE soon after the

**The cases shared of broken families and struggles of women are only the tip of the iceberg of the direct and indirect impact of war on people's lives and existence.**

Indian Peacekeeping Force took over the North. These Muslim families were given 24 hours and fled and resettled in Puttalam, the geographically closest safe location. This expulsion shattered the lives of families of both the rich and the poor. While those who had the means went to stay with families and built their lives in urban centres, the farmers and fishermen became destitute with no means of income. They became IDPs in the Puttalam district and remained there for over three decades, struggling to rebuild their and their children's lives. Most families saw their women migrating to Middle Eastern countries for work. This led to social and family tensions, increased school dropout rates, and early marriages. The cases shared of broken families and struggles of women are only the tip of the iceberg of the direct and indirect impact of war on people's lives and existence.

<sup>14</sup> Amnesty International (2006) Sri Lanka—waiting to go home: The plight of the internally displaced. London: Amnesty International, International Secretariat.

The long and brutal war has left the north and east of Sri Lanka scarred with wounded communities. To expedite the reconciliation process, it is crucial for people to reclaim their lives by accessing economic opportunities. Despite women's marginalisation in conflict situations and the often-overlooked roles they play in conflict resolution, their empowerment is a critical aspect of rebuilding society. But numerous war survivors find themselves in poverty, especially those in

WHH households where the primary male wage earner is missing or has passed away. Families with disabled members require special attention and need financial assistance and economic support as vital components for the realisation of their rights. In essence, fostering economic stability is a critical step towards achieving lasting reconciliation and enabling affected individuals and families to rebuild their lives.

## **SELVAMALAR**

### **Living in an IDP camp: Grocery Store Shopkeeper Husband Forcibly Disappeared**

Selvamalar is 53 years old. Her native place is Point Pedro Road, Kangesanthurai, Jaffna, in the northern province of Sri Lanka. She became a displaced person due to the ongoing civil war. She took refuge in a welfare centre in Mallagam after fleeing her native home, which was situated along the main Pallai Road near the Sri Lankan government's army camp. Since 1990 she and her family have been living in this camp as IDPs.

*"I am 53 years old. My husband disappeared on January 5, 2008. He was taken into a white van after a group in civilian clothes searched the camp. They are known by our community as an 'unidentified group.' He still has not returned home. I lodged a complaint with the ICRC and later submitted an application to the Office of Missing Persons in 2020. My children are grown up. My son is now 27 years old, and my daughter is 22 years old. Both are married, and my daughter lives in her husband's home.*

*"My son, his wife and three-year old grandchild are living with me. Since my husband disappeared, I have become the breadwinner for the family. I opened up a small grocery shop after selling some valuables, including gold jewellery. Thirty years have passed, and we have not yet been able to secure our land. With help from my parents and brothers, and some NGOs I was able to educate the children."*

In the camp, Selvamalar has built a small house. There is a very narrow room and kitchen. The family lives and sleeps in this house. There are four common toilets for 11 families living in this camp. The facilities are in poor condition. A water line is available for every house, but they have to pay for it. During the rainy season, the camp gets muddy and flooded. The roof is old and leaks when it rains.

She has made every possible effort to search for her husband and is waiting to hear about him from the authorities.

*"I am very tired now. I've grown tired of this anxiety. I was a healthy woman before my husband disappeared. After his disappearance, I now have high blood pressure and fits. I have survived bad days. I look forward to living peacefully and dying only after finding my husband."*

## FAREEDA

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### Displaced from the Northern Province

#### External Migrant Domestic Worker: Inter-generational socio-economic deprivation

Fareeda was forced to flee from Mannar by the LTTE in 1990. Displaced to Puttalam, Fareeda got married at the age of 21. Her husband was 22 years old. Initially, after their marriage they built a temporary hut in Hajiyar's garden in Kalpitiya. They have five children: three daughters and two sons. Her husband used to work in a hotel but is currently unemployed.

*"I went abroad for the first time when I was 31 years old, leaving behind my young son who was one and half years old. In order to make a living, I had to leave him while he was still being breastfed. I entrusted my husband with caring for my children. However, he was an alcoholic, and I had to return home after just one year. After one year, I went again and stayed away for two years. While I was away, my husband continued seeing other women in the area and neglecting the children. This led to my parents coming over and taking the children away to my family home. I studied up to the 10th standard, but had to give up studying after that because of lack of educational facilities and the difficult financial situation of my family. Unfortunately, my children faced similar challenges. Due to our displacement from the north and our economic hardships, we struggled to secure both food and educational opportunities, but none of my children were able to continue their education beyond the 6th or 7th grade."*

Both of her daughters got married at a very early age. Both of them are presently working as domestic migrant workers in the Middle East to support their families. The second daughter's marriage broke up, and as a result, Fareeda is now taking care of the two grandchildren.

Her third daughter's husband is physically disabled and unable to engage in heavy work and relies heavily on the financial support of his wife who also is working in the Middle East. Fareeda is now single-handedly raising her two children as well.

Fareeda recalled the gender wage disparity when she was a salt factory worker.

*"During my time at a salt factory, I experienced a noticeable disparity in employment conditions between men and women. While the work involved tasks such as spreading, washing, and adding iodine to 50 kg salt packets, women were paid 50 cents per packet, while the men got significantly higher wages, earning Rs.2000 for unloading a lorry loaded with salt."*

## IDP RESETTLEMENT: CONTESTATION OVER ARMY OCCUPIED LAND CLAIMS

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*"I am living in a resettlement accommodation/camp now. My home town is Thellipalai in Jaffna District, where I spent my entire life. I was displaced from my native town in 1989, then to several other locations, before I finally started to live with my parents in Vanerikulam Kilinochchi. I got married and stayed with my husband in a home situated in Poonagary, Kilinochchi. My birthplace, Thellipalai, has been under Army control since 1989. Recently, they issued directives relating to the return of land to the owners. On May 12, 2023 I went there, but I was not allowed to enter my land. I have registered all the related documents to prove my ownership of the land with the Divisional Secretariat of Thellipalai through the Grama Niladari of Kangesanthurai. I hope I will resettle in my own land in the coming months."*



The people of the North and East were the hardest hit, bearing the brunt of Sri Lanka's relentless and brutal civil war. Displaced multiple times in the Northern Province, they have endured years of transience, residing in makeshift dwellings on private land in the Jaffna district for the past 27 years. Initially, their homesteads in areas such as Mahiliddy, Palali, Kankesanthurai, Kattuwan, and Kurumbucitty were forcibly militarised, with the army retaining control over vast swathes of land, purportedly for war-related purposes. While some land has been returned to a select few, the majority remains under military occupation. Consequently, the displaced population migrated to Kodigamam, Palai, Iruvalai, Alavetti, Mallakam, Alambil, Mullaiththiivu, Pudukudiyiruppu, Sudanthirapuram, and Skandapuram in 1990. Subsequently, they settled in the Neethawan camp in 1996 and 1997, enduring deplorable living conditions for the past 25-27 years.

Although the camp initially housed 53 families, only 12 families remain due to their gradual relocation to nearby

villages. While some lands in the J/246 and J/248 Grama Niladari Divisions have been released, the soldiers have since cultivated bananas on the remaining land, leaving the displaced families to grapple with the hardships of residing on others' property.

## Neethevan [IDP] camp

### Lack of Basic Facilities

Temporary housing was built in 1996–1997, and in the last 27 years, the roofing has been replaced only once, with no other maintenance being carried out since. Each family is confined to a single-room dwelling, accommodating parents, children, and newlyweds alike. With three communal tube wells serving all 12 families, women endure discomfort at night, frequently resorting to daytime defecation. Additionally, the 13 families share only two tube wells, and with a solitary public well available for bathing, the residents face considerable challenges when washing clothes and maintaining personal hygiene.



Inadequate housing facilities in IDP camps

## WOMEN'S VOICES

*"We prefer to return to our own lands. Give us back our lands."*

*"The government funds provided to me are insufficient for the daily struggles of maintaining a house."*

*"We cannot continue living in a camp established 27 years ago. Why is this our fate?"*

*"The army is encroaching on our land."*

*"Government authorities are compelling us to return to camp life."*

*"Officials mock us when we approach the divisional secretariat regarding land and housing issues."*

*"We require financial support for both land and housing."*

*"We lack the means to properly dispose of the sanitary pads we use during our menstrual cycles."*

### Employment Challenges

Employment poses further obstacles, with many individuals restricted to wage labour and unable to cultivate their own land or access basic facilities. Among them, six women are dependents, three are engaged in wage work, and only four are self-employed, though their ventures fail to generate the necessary monthly income. Consequently, many resort to seeking illicit loans to make ends meet. Despite efforts to prepare and sell food, women face social stigma because they live in camps. Similarly, attempts at small-scale animal husbandry are hampered by the limited land space. Furthermore, both men and women can engage in wage labour for only 15 days per month. Despite an approximate monthly income of Rs. 20,000, the families struggle to meet their monthly expenses, which exceed Rs. 50,000.

### Health Issues

Public toilets are available in the IDP welfare camp. However, the twelve families residing here are compelled to share only three toilets, leading to the outbreak of skin diseases like rashes. If one child falls ill, the same ailment quickly spreads to all of the children in the camp. Additionally, women endure considerable hardship during menstruation, as they lack appropriate facilities to change their sanitary napkins. Without suitable facilities for disposal, women often refrain from using sanitary napkins altogether during their menstrual cycle.

Furthermore, the consumption of the available drinking water is believed to be responsible for the prevalence of urinary tract infections among the residents.

### Cultural and Social Challenges

These individuals endure both physical and severe mental suffering as a result of various social challenges. Regrettably, societal perceptions brand them as nomads and refugees due to their displacement from their own lands to others'. Government officials contribute to this disparagement, often ridiculing and looking down upon them. Consequently, they feel marginalised and unable to participate in public gatherings. The cramped living conditions endured for 27 years offer no privacy, even compromising the confidentiality between husbands and wives. The lack of space has led to an increase in early marriages and school dropouts. For instance, a promising student was compelled to marry before completing university education. This constrained lifestyle perpetuates vague superstitions about family planning, resulting in inadequate spacing between children.

Consider the case of a 27-year-old woman with three children born within five years and another woman, approximately 34 years old, who gave birth to five children within eight years. Furthermore, many young, unmarried women face societal rejection, primarily due to their residence in the camp. Traditional cultural norms persist within the community, dictating dowry

expectations, including the provision of gold ornaments, houses, and land. Living in poverty for 27 years has taken a significant toll on their psychological well-being. Among the twelve families in the camp, two women, aged 34 and 40, endure the anguish of unmarried status. Additionally, the women in the community can barely afford to adorn gold ornaments, finding themselves marginalised in public events and consequently avoiding participation altogether.

### Land and Housing Issues

These individuals have endured approximately 27 years of living in temporary, tent-like structures at Needawan camp, as previously described. During the rainy season, the houses become uninhabitable. Now, the land-owner is insisting that they vacate the premises. They are exploring various avenues, including appeals to the

government to secure land for their families. Following this, GoSL intends to offer Rs. 7 lakhs. However, a fundamental question arises: how can these people, who struggle to afford even a single proper meal, manage to purchase land independently, especially when the current government allocation of funds is insufficient?

The government's current allocation falls short of enabling the purchase of even 10 perches of land at Rs. four lakhs, let alone the desired 20 perches of land. Simultaneously, the government's allocation for constructing an entire house is Rs. 1 million, including the foundation, 5 lakh already spent on the foundation. As a result, these people are left pondering how they can possibly afford to build a house when they are unable to secure land, compelling them to reside in a refugee camp in recent years amidst disputes with government officials.

## FATIMA

### IDP intergenerational impoverishment COVID Economic and Health Impact

Fatima, a resident of Krambai in Kalpiddi DS Division, came from Mannar at the age of seven, when the LTTE expelled them from their homes in 1990. The family struggled to make ends meet, having lost their livelihood and land due to expulsion. They survived with the little money her father made working at the fish market as a labourer. Her mother decided to go to the Middle East as a domestic worker when Fatima was 15 years old. Despite all these problems, Fatima completed her studies up to the 8th grade. Fatima married at the age of 18 and has four children. Her husband worked at a small hotel specialising in 'Paratta roti' preparation.

*"Unfortunately, family conflicts and economic crises compelled me to get two of my daughters married at the age of 18 even though I know what I went through in life. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, my husband and I had fewer problems. However, the economic strain caused by his year-and-a-half unemployment led to increased financial difficulties and more frequent arguments. I now have a respiratory disease that causes me discomfort, while my fourth daughter, born during the pandemic, suffers from anaemia due to inadequate nutrition during my pregnancy. We did not receive any COVID-19 relief support from the government schemes, as we were categorised as income-earners. Still, we have not found permanent employment. With the economic crisis, purchasing nutritious food, including milk powder, is a traumatic experience.*

*Regrettably, I could only support my children's education up to the 10th grade due to rising costs and limited facilities for evening classes. The pandemic worsened the situation, making education through phones a financial burden. Our 13-year-old daughter works in a vegetable garden to support the family income, adding to the challenges we face."*

## SITHTHI

### Domestic Violence Entrepreneurial Agency

Siththi, a 52-year-old woman from Manalkundu, Puttalam, faced numerous challenges in her life. After an arranged marriage at the age of 22 years, she suffered domestic violence, endured frequent physical abuse from her husband, and later filed for divorce. Despite having five children, her husband constantly sent her abroad to work as a domestic helper, leading to a strained relationship with her children. She engaged in a small business, making and selling sweets, upon returning to Sri Lanka. The family struggled with economic hardships, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in insufficient access to food. Siththi faced health issues, including gastric problems and potential high cholesterol. During the lockdown, obtaining sanitary napkins became challenging, forcing them to resort to alternatives like cotton cloth. Employment opportunities were limited due to personal issues with her husband. Siththi initially supplied lunch packets but faced logistical challenges. The pandemic disrupted court proceedings, affecting maintenance payments, and the family struggled to secure meals, relying on borrowed money and support from friends, philanthropists, and NGOs.

Despite the difficulties, Siththi managed to sustain her family through a lunch-pack venture, supported by friends and external aid. The fear of leaving her daughters alone at home due to the rising number of drug users added to their challenges. The narrative underscores the intersectionality of issues faced by Siththi, from domestic violence to economic hardships, health concerns, and the impact of the pandemic.

### Women's Work in Agriculture and Fisheries

Women from Ulukapalam, Karamba, Thillayadi, and Rathmalyaye who shared their stories stated how they actively participated in various primary industries, mainly as day labourers. In the fishing industry, women are generally involved in fish cutting in the fish market, assisting fishermen, and helping boat owners pull fishing nets and collect the catch. Similarly, in the agriculture sector, women engage in activities such as planting seeds in nurseries, removing weeds and grass, and harvesting crops. It is worth noting that women in these sectors have the flexibility to choose their working hours according to their convenience. However, it is evident that these two sectors remunerate women at a lower rate than men.

In general, and especially during the recent economic crisis, women continue to face discriminatory and diverse challenges that force them to accept whatever work opportunities are available. The attendant fuel crisis has had an adverse impact, disrupting access to public transportation to commute to farms or fishing areas from villages, resulting in a significant decline in many women's previous income levels.

### Issues of Concern

#### Disappearances

Family members of two women in a 13-member discussion group have been forcibly disappeared by 'unidentified men'. The husband of A. Selvamar disappeared on January 5, 2008 and the husband of P. Latha disappeared on June 15, 1990.

#### Women and Menstrual Hygiene

For some time, women in Sri Lanka have been using sanitary napkins for menstrual hygiene. However, due to economic hardships exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, they had to resort to using cotton scraps as a more affordable alternative. Nevertheless, the use of cotton scraps is not always feasible for continuous usage, so we still rely on sanitary napkins when available.<sup>15</sup>

#### Banned Drug Abuse Among Youth

Drug prevalence in Batticaloa district has led to a worrying rise in addiction among boys as young as 15

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15 United Nations Children's Fund (2021) Menstrual hygiene management in schools in South Asia - 2021, WASH Matters. Available at: <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/publications/menstrual-hygiene-management-schools-south-asia-2021> (Accessed: 17 January 2024).

years of age. Consequently, school dropout rates have surged. While families grapple with worsening economic hardships, more than half of the daily income is spent on drugs. Women, burdened with managing households and providing for their children, endure the brunt of the fallout. Additionally, the social fabric of society has suffered, witnessing a marked increase in social disorders as a result of this issue.

### Rise in Cost of Living

The ongoing difficulties stemming from a lack of job opportunities, particularly in the midst of economic crises, have intensified the daily challenges people face. Escalating expenses for goods and services, such as rising electricity bills and basic food costs, have imposed a growing burden that is increasingly hard to bear. This has led to a struggle to afford nourishing meals and maintain a consistent three-meals-a-day routine.

### Women and Nutrition

Women have been compelled to reduce their consumption of nutritious foods and seek cost-free alternatives for some of the products they used to purchase.<sup>16</sup> They have started to omit certain curry dishes such as fish, meat, eggs, or dry fish curry from their meals due to the rising prices, making them unaffordable.

*“The price increase of essential items has forced me to increase the price of the snacks we make and sell as well. If the price of the snacks is increased further, the number of people buying it will decrease. I do not get enough money now to support the whole family. I had to part from my daughter. It is a painful decision. I have sent my daughter to a boarding school. I cannot work and take care of her like I did in the past as I have to also get extra work other than selling snacks. This environment is not safe for girls. My daughter can continue her studies and also she is protected in the Convent. She will get nutritious food. I want her to study well and become a teacher one day. I do not want her to suffer like me.”*

16 Amnesty International (2023) Sri Lanka: Foregoing meals to make-do: The impact of Sri Lanka's economic crisis on maternal nutrition, Amnesty International. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa37/6872/2023/en/> (Accessed: 17 January 2024).



Women from war-affected areas in Jaffna share their life challenges, shedding light on the ongoing hardships and their resilience in the face of adversity.

### Housing and Land Issues

In Sri Lanka, particularly in the Northern Province, the military's acquisition of land has been a contentious issue, notably in Jaffna and Mannar. The Sri Lankan military acquired significant amounts of land during and after the civil conflict that lasted until 2009. The issue of housing and land poses significant challenges in the war affected North and East regions of Sri Lanka, particularly impacting numerous families, including sub-families, who find themselves without proper homes or official land documents. The military's acquisition of land has led to the displacement of local communities, causing significant disruptions in their lives. Families were forced to leave their homes, agricultural lands, and traditional livelihoods, leading to economic hardships. In our discussions in Batticaloa district about 90 individuals were identified who were grappling with the absence of adequate housing and land rights.<sup>17</sup>

17 Centre for Policy Alternatives (2010) Sri Lanka: Land in the Eastern Province - politics, policy and conflict - sri lanka, ReliefWeb. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/sri-lanka-land-eastern-province-politics-policy-and-conflict> (Accessed: 17 January 2024).



Community Conversation in Batticaloa

During our visit to the area where internally displaced persons were relocated in Mannar in the Northern Province and Batticaloa in the Eastern Province, the housing situation was a matter of great concern. Houses constructed in the post-war era not only exhibited substandard walls but also suffered from structural cracks, highlighting the overall precariousness of living conditions. A particular concern mentioned is related to houses built during the tenure of a Member of Parliament serving as a Minister. Many of these projects remain unfinished and abandoned, further exacerbating the housing crisis in the region.

### Security Situation

The information provided suggested that there has been improvement since 2022 with the change of government both in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Despite military presence, major adverse effects have been limited and there has been a reduction in intense surveillance. However, occasional visits by intelligence officials to the villages continue, particularly to check on former combatants and to obtain information related to meetings and gatherings held in the villages. We learnt during the community conversations that in the Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts, tensions have heightened recently due to religious tensions. However,

when the local communities engage in public initiatives or advocate for their land rights, the presence of intelligence officers remains pronounced. There are also reports of disruption of such events by Buddhist monks with the support of the police or intelligence.<sup>18</sup> This raises concerns, as it can deter people from freely expressing their opinions and asserting their rights.

The fear of the 'external' persists as military camps are still functioning in these areas. Post-war social tensions have not been fully resolved, leading to ongoing suspicion and fear-psychosis within the communities. There is reluctance to hold meetings or discussions on social issues by local women's groups owing to the presence of 'the intelligence' officer, who on pretext of security concerns shadow such gatherings. However, major incidents like rape or physical violence have not been reported during the past three years.<sup>19</sup>

## Intersectional Identities and Vulnerabilities

### Women Headed Families

Statistical evidence shows that women headed households have substantially increased owing mainly to protracted conflict in the North and East of the country. One in every four households is headed by a woman in Sri Lanka. Women have lost their husbands in the battlefields as LTTE combatants, as well as in service of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces. Hundreds and thousands have also gone missing and remain forcibly disappeared. Increased cost of living especially for food and education of children has resulted in a higher proportion of impoverished widows and elderly poor women.<sup>20</sup> It is an obvious fact that poverty among female heads of households is worse than that among male heads of households. Women who

18 Ganguly, M. (2023) 'if we raise our voice they arrest us', Human Rights Watch. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/09/18/if-we-raise-our-voice-they-arrest-us/sri-lankas-proposed-truth-and-reconciliation> (Accessed: 17 January 2024).

19 Jayasundara-Smits, S. (2022) 'POLITICO-RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN SRI LANKA', EXTREMISM AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN SOUTH ASIA [Preprint].

20 Iqbal, R. (2018) Conflict-affected women in Sri Lanka – still waiting for answers, Groundviews. Available at: <https://groundviews.org/2018/05/18/conflict-affected-women-in-sri-lanka-still-waiting-for-answers/> (Accessed: 17 January 2024).

had not been economically active, had to find avenues of income generation for family survival when they lost their male breadwinners due to war, or in the forced migration towards Puttalam. Many of them are still facing traumatization due to the loss of their family members and displacement from their homes.

In the morning, women leave for day-pay or labour work and return home with their earnings from the

morning shift. They use these earnings to purchase essential cooking supplies and prepare lunch for the day. Women who have young children are forced to stay at home after the first shift because there is no one to care for them after school. On the other hand, those without such care responsibilities often continue onto the second shift out of sheer necessity for economic survival and sometimes without stopping for lunch.

## RANI

### WHH: Daily Wage Worker producing lunch packets

Rani is 37 years old and resides in Thotavely Mannar. When she was 17 years old, she moved with her parents from Vidtal Island to Joshua City because of the war. She is the fifth child among six siblings. She studied until the 7th grade, after which she discontinued her education.

*"During the war, our village was surrounded, and I was captured by the army. Fortunately, I was released by the village officer. While staying in the internally displaced persons' camp women experienced atrocities."*

She got married at the age of 27 with the blessings and arrangements of her parents. Her eldest daughter is speech-impaired.

*"Since the child was born my husband's attitude towards me changed. His family believed that the child had not brought them good fortune. I have faced constant quarrels and physical and verbal assaults. I moved out of my husband's house two months ago. I had to find work and cover the expenses of the two children." Rani is a daily wage worker who prepares packed food at a house that sells lunch. This house is situated approximately 8 kilometres away from her village. However, this job is not a consistent opportunity.*

*"For my services, I receive a wage of Rs. 1700. This income is inadequate to cover the daily living expenses and medical needs of myself and my two children as the prices of essential food items have increased. As a result, I am currently seeking an additional source of employment to ensure our financial stability. I reared chickens to earn some income from home. My house is in a bit of a forested area, and a woodchuck came and ate all the chickens. I stopped keeping chickens because I could not protect the chickens from woodchucks."*

She lives in a temporary hut with 4 rows of bricks and thatched roof built on the 10 perch land that her mother gave her as a gift. As there is no toilet facility at home, they use the forest to relieve themselves. It has been 13 years since they settled on this land, and it has been 7 years since the construction of this house. It is dilapidated due to the seasonal floods which affect the house. Her family has been registered under the *Samurdhi* (government welfare) scheme.<sup>21</sup>

21 The Samurdhi Authority of Sri Lanka, created by Act no. 30 of 1995, implements economic and social development programmes in order to achieve its main objective of eradicating poverty in Sri Lanka.



Women share their insights and experiences, contributing to the creation of a more inclusive and just society.

### Muslim Women's Socio-Economic Vulnerabilities

Muslims are the third major ethnicity in Sri Lanka and make up 9.7 percent of the country's population and overwhelmingly belong to the Tamil speaking Muslim Moors grouping. The CCs drew attention to the high incidence of divorces among the community. In the North-Western Province, in Puttalam district alone, available data indicates that in the last three years approximately 3,000 divorces took place.<sup>22</sup> Although baseline data is not available specifically for the Mundal and Kalpitiya divisions, information recorded by the Muslim Women's Development Trust (MWDT) in their client entry book suggests that a significant proportion of these divorces are from these two divisions. Amongst Muslim communities the customary practice is early marriage and is governed by Muslim Personal law. Divorces amongst the Muslims are based on the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, which is interpreted in a

manner favourable to men, and disadvantages women significantly. Divorced women end up confronting financial and emotional instabilities, making it challenging to continue their lives successfully, particularly when raising children. These circumstances have a ripple effect on the mental well-being of the children involved. Oppressive cultural traditions such as early marriage have blighted the lives of many of these very courageous women and their children.

During the CC held in Mannar and Puttalam, Muslim women shared the various challenges implicated under Muslim Personal Law. Many relayed having experienced difficulties that led to extreme mental stress, leading to suicidal attempts. The limited working conditions of the Qazi Court during COVID-19 had a tragic impact on their lives, especially as the resolution processes are very protracted. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted Quasi Court<sup>23</sup> operations reducing working hours, and causing significant delays in resolving cases related to Muslim Personal

22 H.Khan, R. and Asmiyas, M. (2023) 'A study on the reasons of divorce in Putlam District, Sri Lanka', National Conference on Social Work for Poverty reduction and Sustainable Development [Preprint].

23 Quasi-judicial refers to a proceeding conducted by an administrative or executive official or organisation that is similar to a court proceeding.



Law, making it challenging for women to secure timely legal remedies, such as divorce or maintenance. These delays have made extremely uncertain the timely receipt of maintenance which is vital for a woman's financial stability after separation or divorce.<sup>24</sup> It has resulted in women, especially those with dependent children,

becoming financially vulnerable. In some instances, men have cited financial hardships as a result of COVID-19 to lower the compensation or maintenance amounts they are required to pay. These appeals prolong legal battles and create further uncertainty for women who rely on this financial support.

## UMMA

### A Poet's Resistance and Resilience

Umma is 49 years old and lives in Gopalapuram, in the beautiful Nilavali region situated in the Trincomalee district. She has six children, four sons and two daughters. Three sons and one of the daughters are married. She has had a keen interest in education since childhood, but the family situation and war in the country resulted in the family stopping her schooling. She studied only up to grade five. But keen on learning, she began to read whatever newspapers and magazines she found in her house and from her neighbours. However, at the age of 15 years her family forced her to marry, despite her reluctance. She married a man who was 21 years old in 1989. But he died in 1990 making her a widow within a year of marriage.

*"Then three years later I got married for the second time when I was 19 years old. I was forced by my family to get married again. I got married only because of family compulsion. I was not happy in this married life either. I know I have to look after the family, but yet I want to do something different. I like to write poetry."*

After her second marriage, her husband did not allow her to write.

*"He looked at me suspiciously when I wrote poetry. He used to drink at night and beat me every day. He thought I was writing love letters to my paramour. He did not allow me to leave the house. He kept me confined inside the house and tortured me. I tolerated all the suffering because of my children. Also, I had no money. I had nowhere to go. I couldn't live with him beyond a certain point. So I took the decision to leave him and returned to my parental home with my children."* They were separated from 2019-2023.

In 2023 she brought her husband back to her parents' house due to his health problems. Even now, he treats her with suspicion. They are Muslims, and her husband is a very strict follower of religious principles. Over the years, she has been severely persecuted in her home in the name of religion and religious doctrines.

Currently, she engages in various income-generating activities to sustain her livelihood, including selling dry fish and *sarbath* (a drink prepared with flower petals and fruits). In addition, she prepares and sells breakfast items. Unfortunately, the recent heavy rains have halted sales of *sarbath* and dry fish. During the economic downturn, acquiring essential items such as flour and oil for breakfast preparations has become particularly challenging. Despite these obstacles, she actively participates in community groups, including the Police Civil Group, Agriculture Group, the Food Security Group, and Women's Association. She navigates her life, drawing on these diverse experiences and affiliations.

24 Saroor, S. (2020) Disproportionate effects of covid-19 on Sri Lankan women, Groundviews. Available at: <https://groundviews.org/2020/08/04/disproportionate-effects-of-covid-19-on-sri-lankan-women/> (Accessed: 17 January 2024).

## BEGUM

### Resourceful Survivor and Aspiring Politician, Community and Government Support

Begum, a resident of Munalkundru in Puttalam embodies strength and perseverance. She is one of seven siblings. Her story starts with an early marriage at the age of 16 years to a husband who was 14 years her senior. Cultural expectations and family circumstances played a role in shaping her life, leading to initial challenges in their relationship. Despite facing financial constraints that forced her to drop out of school at grade 5, Begum remained determined to make something of her life. She became actively involved in social work, even participating in the 2018 elections. Although not elected, she got 64 votes on the strength of her commitment to community development.

Begum's marriage was a difficult one due to the significant age gap with her husband, leading to arguments. Physical health issues, such as allergies and diabetes, added to her burden, making strenuous work challenging. During the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment heightened their struggle for sustenance. Despite facing hardships, Begum and her husband received support from various sources, including government aid, NGOs, and the kindness of their local community. Access to menstrual hygiene products became a challenge, but compassionate individuals stepped in to help. Her commitment to her family's well-being is evident in her resourcefulness. She has been a recipient of *Samurdhi* assistance for 12 years, she uses it for essential needs and medical expenses.

The couple's housing situation markedly improved over the years, thanks to support from donors. Their current residence, built with the help of a generous donor, has resolved water-related issues, providing a more comfortable living space. Her involvement in politics brought additional support, providing a glimpse of hope in their challenging circumstances. Begum's story is a testament to resilience, community support, and the determination to overcome adversities. Despite facing numerous challenges, she stands strong, shaping her narrative of strength, hope, and perseverance.

Begum's story is a testament to resilience, community support, and the determination to overcome adversities. Despite facing numerous challenges, she stands strong, shaping her narrative of strength, hope, and perseverance.

Striking is women's strength and resourcefulness, but also significant is the availability of strong community support and access to welfare assistance, governmental and non-governmental. The option of women migrating abroad for domestic work relieves immediate financial distress but does not seem to provide a pathway out of intergenerational multi-faceted poverty. Also, it compounds social problems within the family.

## BANU

### Migrant Worker in Middle East, Inter-Generational Vulnerability

In the quaint town of Karambai, in the Puttalam district, Banu's life unfolded as a mosaic of challenges and triumphs, revealing the indomitable spirit of a woman who navigated the complexities of family, marriage, and health. Banu's narrative is one of sacrifice and strength, a testament to a life of hard work. Banu, born in Mannar Vidaththal Theevu, was forced into marriage at the age of 20, despite her objections and reluctance. It was a marriage in which she endured violence and mental torture until she took the courageous step to leave Sri Lanka and join the millions of women migrant workers. At the age 22, she chose to work abroad to support her family and provide money to her parents to look after the child she left behind. She married for the second time when she was 31 years old. This brought more hardships, marked by violence and an eventual divorce. After several stints as a migrant domestic worker in the Middle East, Banu returned to Sri Lanka. She was 52. Now, she is doing part-time work in a vegetable garden.

Years of hard work has taken a toll on Banu's health, manifesting as high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and diabetes. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated her challenges, making it difficult to acquire both food and medication. Hospital closures forced her to travel to Puttalam for necessary medical supplies. Her daughter also got married at a very young age to a man who is a drug addict. He has no permanent income and relies on Banu and her daughter to bring in money. He threatens them if money is not given to him so he can take drugs. When he is arrested, they must run to the police station to bail him out or visit him at the government rehabilitation centre.

### Inter-Communal Conflict

The island of Sri Lanka has a diverse population mix, and the major population groups in terms of ethnicities are Sinhalese, which constitute the majority at 74.9 percent, followed by Sri Lankan Tamils at 11.2 percent, Sri Lankan (Muslim) Moors at 9.3 percent, Indian Tamils at 4.1 percent, and other ethnic groups at 1.5 percent. The last five decades have witnessed a high level of ethnic tension, which is extremely sensitive and volatile. Predominantly, the axis of conflict was between Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicities till the end of the war between the Sri Lankan government forces and the LTTE in 2009. More recently, there has been a sharpening of ethnic tensions against

Muslims and Moors. Tension was aggravated, especially after the 2019 Easter bombing attacks by a local Islamist group. It is imperative to focus on constructing ethnic harmony through trust-building, friendship, and an understanding of and respect for cultural, religious, and social differences.

A glaring example of the widening distrust between communities is reflected in the attitude of the Government staff, the majority of which are from the Sinhala community. In the aftermath of the Easter attacks, they took an aggressive approach towards Muslims.<sup>25</sup> Muslim staff within the government departments were not allowed to take leave and higher officials would not sign requests for loans. Muslim traders or businesses could not operate in Sinhala dominant areas. Discrimination has filtered down to the school level where Muslim children are being further marginalised. Such an intolerant environment demands effective initiatives to build inter-ethnic harmony, especially for dispelling a sense of fear the Sinhala community has toward the Muslim community.

<sup>25</sup> Ethirajan, A. (2019) Sri Lanka's Muslims 'demonised' after Easter bombings, 13 August.

## Women and Caste Discrimination

The caste situation in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka requires a multifaceted analysis as it is shaped by historical, social, and cultural factors.<sup>26</sup> The protracted conflict in the region and the resultant displacement disrupted traditional social structures. The impact of displacement, coupled with the complex interplay of caste dynamics created a distinctive socio-cultural landscape.

Historically, the Northern Province has been characterised by a stratified caste system that negatively

influences various aspects of community life. While caste dynamics have evolved over time, the historical roots continue to shape social relationships, economic opportunities, and access to resources. The CCs unpacked the intricate layers of caste identities and their intersections with issues such as education, employment, and political representation.<sup>27</sup> Keeping intact the sensitivities, the discussions probed the persistent oppression of caste structures amidst post-conflict challenges, and endeavoured to understand how individuals and communities navigate these complexities in their daily lives.

### SAROJA I

#### Inter Caste Marriage: Domestic Violence

*"I married Sujeevan on the 5th November 2014. Initially, both of our parents did not accept our wedding because it was a love marriage. Eventually, they accepted our marriage, and we started to live together with his family. I have a six-year-old son. At the start of the marriage, I was very happy with my husband and my child. He took good care of me and my child. But after we started to live with the joint family, problems arose between us, primarily because we both belong to different castes, and in the caste hierarchy, mine is a disadvantaged caste. As a result, although we lived in one house, his family avoided me and insulted me. My husband, on top of that, is an alcoholic. Every night, he insulted and assaulted me, using abusive words. Some nights passed without any sleep. I was excluded from attending any ceremonies, family functions, or worship services, and I was not even allowed to go shopping. It was almost like being under house arrest. Also, I did not have a mobile phone. Day by day, his torture increased, and I couldn't survive the pain. After I had to be hospitalised, I took the opportunity to escape and returned to my mother's home with my son. I lodged a complaint in the Tharmapuram Police station and registered it as a domestic violence case, based on which I got a protection order."*

26 Kalinga T U D O R Silva (2020) Nationalism, caste-blindness, and the continuing problems of war-displaced Pancharams in post-war jaffna society, Caste: a Global Journal on Social Exclusion. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/42096240/Nationalism\\_Caste\\_Blindness\\_and\\_the\\_Continuing\\_Problems\\_of\\_War\\_Displaced\\_Pancharams\\_in\\_Post\\_War\\_Jaffna\\_Society](https://www.academia.edu/42096240/Nationalism_Caste_Blindness_and_the_Continuing_Problems_of_War_Displaced_Pancharams_in_Post_War_Jaffna_Society) (Accessed: 17 January 2024).

27 Department for International Development (2017) 'don't tell them where we live' – caste and access to education in northern Sri Lanka, GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/research-for-development-outputs/don-t-tell-them-where-we-live-caste-and-access-to-education-in-northern-sri-lanka>.

## Women and Religious Discrimination

Sri Lanka's dominant social axis of difference is structured around ethnicity, but the island also has a complicated mix of religions –Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim. According to the 2021 census, the overwhelming

majority of Sri Lanka's population is Buddhist: 70.2 percent, Hindus: 12.6 percent, Muslims: 10 percent, and Christians: 7.4 percent. Interfaith marriages in Sri Lanka are known to throw up many challenges between spouses, the family, and relatives.

### SAROJA II

#### Inter- Religious Marriage Domestic Violence

*“The tipping point came when her husband assaulted her with his helmet, she fainted followed by an epileptic fit.”*

Saroja is 25 years old and hails from Poomalanthan, Madu Road. Born as the fourth child in her family, she has two sisters and a brother. Her early years were shaped by her father's absence, and she was raised by her grandmother. At the age of 20, she followed her heart and married the man she loved, despite the religious differences between them. Transitioning from Christianity to Hinduism, she embarked on a new chapter in her life. Presently, she is the mother of a 3-year-old son.

The journey after marriage was not an easy one for her. Her choice to marry outside of her religion led her family to withhold providing any dowry for her. This, in turn, strained her relationship with the in-laws. Despite these challenges, she and her husband survived. However, the environment at her in-laws' home was not welcoming, subjecting her to regular mistreatment. Eventually, she moved with her husband to her mother's place, where her first pregnancy became a turning point. The strain of dealing with constant suspicion and quarrels resulted in a tragic miscarriage. Though her husband and she separated for brief periods, they managed to reconcile from time to time.

During her second pregnancy, her husband abandoned her and returned to his parents' house. She made an effort to visit him at his home, where his father beat her with a torch. This incident escalated into a police complaint. In another distressing event, her husband pressured her to have sexual intercourse just 3 days after her delivery. Outraged at her refusal, he took the baby and went off to his ancestral home. She was reunited with her baby with the help of the police officers.

Reunited with her husband, they relocated to Vavuniya due to her husband's job transfer to 'Sathosa' in Vavuniya. She had hoped for a fresh start. However, her hopes were shattered as he displayed a lack of concern for her well-being. He would lock her up in the house and take the keys with him. She has been subjected to incessant sexual demands, even during her menstrual periods and times when she has fallen ill. He burned her genitals with a cigarette when she did not comply with his demands. The escalating abuse left her scarred both physically and emotionally. Rumours of his extramarital affairs added another layer of complexity to their relationship. Her husband would beat her up and scold her using filthy words.

The tipping point came when he assaulted her with his helmet, causing her to faint, followed by an epileptic fit. She believes this must have occurred in response to sadness, anxiety, or fear. In desperation, she fled to her family, leaving her child behind due to fear of his wrath. She struggled to regain custody of the baby, which was turned down owing to the biased police officers. Seeking justice, she sought help from the Mannar Women Rural Development Federation, embarking on a legal battle. For a year now, she and her husband have lived separately, meeting only during court hearings. Despite her husband's attempts to defame

her, she pursued legal avenues to secure the child's future. Her husband's manipulation and false evidence were defeated by the unwavering commitment of her legal counsel. Recently, she was granted limited custody, a glimmer of hope in the midst of adversity, as her husband now has to hand over the baby to her for 2 days per week.

When she was with her husband, she was economically dependent on him. He was a manager of the Sri Lanka Sathosa Cooperative. After the separation, she now lives with her mother at her house. Her sister takes care of her and her baby. Together, she and her mother prepare and sell lunch packets. Their clientele includes district secretariat employees. For each lunch parcel, they charge Rs. 250 per pack. They manage to supply around 5 to 8 parcels each week, typically spanning 5 days. She doesn't have a house of her own. She had a job and was not a recipient of any housing projects. The church had offered a plot of land with 40 perch to her grandmother, who gave that land to her for cultivation. The land was fully covered with shrubs, and there were wild elephants in the area. She did not have the money to clean and prepare the land for cultivation. Since the land was not utilised, the church informed her that they were taking back the land and had given her an ultimatum. *"How can I start with no money to clean the land as I am already depending on others?"*

## Women Living with Disabilities

In post-conflict Sri Lanka, women living with disabilities face severe difficulties and challenges that stem from the intersection of gender and disability within a society recovering from the scars of conflict. The armed conflict had a long-lasting impact on the country's social fabric, with women bearing the brunt of the consequences, especially disabled LTTE women. During the Community conversations, it was apparent that these women were silenced and marginalised!

*"We were soldiers. Brave women while the war lasted. Once it was over and when we came back home we were nobody. We have to live with these scars and disabilities. If not for the support received from non-governmental organisations to start income-generation activities, I would have been begging and remaining hungry. I cannot work hard. I get tired as some injuries have impacted my physical being, as well as left me mentally strained."*

Women with disabilities, in particular, confront multiple layers of discrimination and vulnerability. They often experience limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, exacerbating their marginalisation. The aftermath of conflict has resulted in inadequate infrastructure and services for individuals with disabilities, hindering their ability to lead independent lives. Limited access to public spaces, a lack of inclusive

policies, and social attitudes further compound the struggles faced by these women, leaving them on the margins of recovery efforts.

Moreover, the stigma surrounding disability in Sri Lanka contributes to the social isolation of women with disabilities.<sup>28</sup> Deep-rooted cultural norms perpetuate harmful stereotypes, leading to misconceptions about the capabilities and potential contribution of individuals with disabilities. The absence of comprehensive disability-inclusive policies and programmes further hampers the empowerment of women in this context. Addressing the specific needs of women living with disabilities in post-conflict Sri Lanka requires a multifaceted approach that includes targeted interventions, advocacy for policy reforms, and the promotion of inclusive practices within the broader society.<sup>29</sup> Only through concerted efforts to dismantle barriers and challenge societal prejudices can these women fully participate in the reconstruction and development of their communities.

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28 Kandasamy, N., Soldatic, K. and Samararatne, D. (2016) 'Peace, Justice and disabled women's advocacy: Tamil women with disabilities in rural post-conflict Sri Lanka', *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, 33(1), pp. 41–59. doi:10.1080/13623699.2016.1237101.

29 Saman Kumara, J. (2019) 'Human Rights Status of Persons with Disabilities in Sri Lanka: Challenges and Opportunities', *Human Rights and Reconciliation in the Post-Conflict Multicultural Society in Sri Lanka*, pp. 308–344.

## ARUNA

### Struggles with disability

Aruna is 43 years old. She lives in Pulyankulam Village Town, Gavets Division. She was born in Trincomalee. She has a sister. When she was eight years old, her father left them. After working as a daily wage earner for several months, her mother went abroad to work in Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman to provide for the children. Aruna has studied up to grade 11; she has been an amputee since birth. In 2007, knowing that she was disabled, a man proposed to marry her, who also suffered from speech impairment (could not speak). They both got married, and she had her first girl child in 2008. After a girl child was born, her husband committed suicide on January 16, 2009.

*"I am now a member of the Disabled People's Association and attend the monthly meetings of the organisation. As a member, I learned about the rights of disabled people. I now have the courage to live and recognize the need to live uniquely in this community as a differently abled woman. I now have a new hope and strength to change my life mainly through this PWD Sangam and Mathar Sangam."*

It has been her misfortune that Aruna's family, her late husband's family, and the entire community unjustly blamed her for her husband's tragic suicide. Despite receiving harsh criticism, she persevered and took on the responsibility of raising her child through diligent housework. Refusing to succumb to despair, her determination stemmed not only from her desire to provide a good life for her child but also from her identity as a woman with a disability. Navigating the challenges of single parenthood, especially as a differently-abled woman, proved exceptionally tough in societal norms that often questioned her choices.

Compelled by her family, she eventually considered remarriage. Eventually, in 2014, she entered into a second marriage and experienced three years of happiness. The arrival of her second child, a boy, in 2017 marked a new chapter. Her marital bliss was short-lived as their quarrels increased. Relations turned tumultuous, marked by daily beatings and torment and different forms of domestic violence. When she went to register a case against him in court, she discovered he was already married, and the marriage registered by him and her was invalid. In this situation, she did not know what to do. She did not want to live with him and left him, taking the children with her.

Her eldest daughter is now fifteen years old. Both her daughter and son often quarrelled over the issue that the daughter is from the first husband and the son is from the second husband. To avoid this bitterness, she admitted her daughter to a hostel. Her 13-year-old son is living with her and is studying in grade nine at Selvanayakupuram School. Since her childhood, Aruna has struggled through life as a differently abled girl. She continues to struggle, facing domestic and social hardships.

*"I can't even do my work. The reason is that I have to take leave to attend to my health condition. At the same time, transportation is a very challenging issue for people with disabilities like me. It is painful to think that the main reason we face difficulties is because of our disability."*

Aruna had tried to engage in animal husbandry activities such as poultry farming and goat rearing. But she kept on losing her goats and chickens. People were stealing them. She transitioned to making snacks and selling them, but due to the economic crisis, the price of essential commodities increased, and she found it difficult to purchase the wheat flour and coconut oil required for making snacks.

## MAILVAGANAM RAJANI

### Disabled ex Combatant Garment Factory Worker, Grocery Store Keeper

Rajani is an ex-combatant who was disabled during the war in 2009. She is 33 years old. She is a Hindu and a native of Gandhinagar, Batticaloa. She is the eldest of 10 siblings. She studied until the 8th standard. After that, she stopped studying due to financial difficulties in her family. She got married at the age of 21 and has 2 children, a boy and a girl. When her son was 3 years old, her husband left her and married another woman. Then the creditors and the Sanasa Development Bank began harassing her for repayment of a loan of Rs 100,000 that her husband had taken and left unpaid. With no one to turn to, Rajani left her son in the care of her mother, who is suffering from cancer, and worked in a garment factory in Colombo for 2 years in order to pay off the loan. While she was working in Colombo, she was introduced to a disabled person in Mannar through a telephone conversation. At the age of 29, she started living with him without a registered marriage. She came to Mannar and is living with her son, now 10 years old, and a daughter from her second 'marriage' who is 2 and a half years old.

As both her partner and she are not legally separated from their previous marriages, they were unable to get married but are living together. She has a separate birth certificate for the elder child, but her second husband's name is in the birth certificate of the girl's father. However, her partner's relatives do not treat her well. Her second husband refuses to take care of the expenses of her son, and she has to provide for him. Her husband gives her a part of his salary after spending most of it on alcohol, and at times he gives her nothing. She is now used to this situation. Her brothers have avoided her since her cohabitation. She has land and a *Samurthi* grant. If she registers her second marriage, she will lose her entitlement under the *Samurthi* scheme.

During the war, her lower leg got caught in a bomb blast, and the flesh was torn off. Therefore, she has to change her footwear once every three months, owing to wear and tear, for which she needs Rs. 1200. She often gets oozing blisters in her feet every 6 months or so and has to go to the hospital for the prescription of expensive ointment, which she purchases from an outside pharmacy. With these expenses and having to support her son, it is very difficult for her to make ends meet. She receives Rs. 1500 per month from the Samurthi Welfare Programme, which has been very helpful in paying small amounts towards the loan. She is reluctant to ask her partner and does not want to borrow money from creditors, as she does not have enough income to pay it back.

Her partner, with his disability support, has set up a small bicycle repair shop near the house. But it does not make much money. Rajani has also set up a business in the form of a small shop near the house. This shop sells soap, shampoo, some essential items, and vegetables from her home garden. Since it is a small shop, her daily income is about Rs. 200. Sometimes she does not make even that much.

*"In our village, the Mannar Women Development Federation organises meetings to discuss their projects and I also started to attend these meetings. Since our first meeting, I have begun to feel a change in my life for the better. They introduced me to a sweet made of nutritional flour produced by their institution and explained the benefits of it. It was really delicious. I was informed that I can prepare porridge by adding coconut milk and sugar to this flour. I also started to prepare this flour by grinding the pan-frying grains, such as green gram, peas, ulundu, etc., and selling them in packets. The product I make is in good demand and I earn, on an average, Rs. 400 by selling these nutritional flour packs, vegetables and other things from my shop."*



She has constructed a temporary shelter with a cement floor and tin roofing sheets on a 20-perch parcel of land gifted by the government. Forty tin roofing sheets were bought as a result of a request made to Mannar Women Development Federation (MWDF) after her tin roof was damaged and started leaking during the rainy season. *"In our area there are a lot of monkeys and they damage the roof which then needs to be repaired."* There is no drinking water facility in her house, and she has to fetch water from one of her relative's house nearby on payment of Rs.350. MWDF has now helped her get a drinking water facility connection. However, she has no electricity because she is unable to pay Rs. 5000 to obtain the connection. The family uses the forest area as a toilet facility. Although there are schools and temples within a distance of 1 km from the house, there is no hospital, and she has to go to Mannar General Hospital for her treatment.

## TALES OF ENDURANCE AND RESILIENCE

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### LTTE Women

*"Due to my injury, I feel chest pain, and due to the clip on my leg, I frequently feel chest pain and at that time I have to be admitted to the hospital for treatment. Also I have asthma. I am unable to bend my leg due to leg injury."—Rajeshwary*

*"My leg was blown up and the flesh completely cut off. Therefore, I have to change my footwear every three months. Also, I get blisters all over my feet which ooze pus."—Rajani*

## RAJESHWARY

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### Social Stigma, Health and Security Concerns of an ex-combatant. Garment Factory Worker, Marriage as Security?

Jesudash Rajeswary is 47 years old. She previously lived in Kandy and Matale then migrated and settled in Kilinochchi in 1987. She studied up to grade 10. Due to displacement in 1990, her mother settled in Vattakandal. At that time, she joined the rebellion group because of the war situation in the country. She also lost her father at the same time. She has an elder brother, 2 sisters and 2 younger brothers. Everyone is married. Her Mother is a cancer patient. When she returned from the detention camp after the end of the war in 2010, her relatives did not allow her to stay at home due to security threats as she was a former combatant. Her mother also did not support her. She eventually settled in her uncle's house who agreed to keep her in Kilinochchi. In 2011, she started working in a garment factory. She faced many threats from the security forces inside and outside the camp. Due to this reason, her relatives pressured her to get married.

After she got married, she continued to work until her son was born. She stayed at her mother's house in Mannar, as there was no one to look after the child. Later, due to a lack of land, she settled in Parupukadathan East in 2016. Her husband is from Trincomalee, and she does not know anything about her in-laws.

A few years after having her second child, she decided to leave the child with a relative and went to cook in a restaurant in Adampan. She left that job because the salary was not sufficient to meet her expenses. Currently, she is employed as a daily wage earner but does not get work every day. She used to leave her children at her mother's house when she went to work. She feels that she is bothering her mother, who is a cancer patient. Due to her injury, she feels chest pain, and due to the clip on her leg, she has frequent chest pains, and at that time she has to be admitted to the hospital for treatment. She also stated that she has asthma and is unable to bend her leg due to a leg injury. Her children are unhealthy from birth and prone to

frequent illnesses. *'Due to the constant economic crisis we face, we do not consume nutritious food and are eating food only to halt hunger'* she added.

In 2017, they got a house under the Indian housing project worth Rs 800,000 through the Samurdhi Welfare Programme. A house was built on 10,890 square feet of land given by the government in Parupukadandan village. She has put up her house on 5,445 sq ft, which includes 3 rooms and a toilet. The bathroom wall construction was completed, but no commode has been installed. Therefore, she goes to the forest to relieve herself. As the grant money is not enough to complete all the work, she has done the plastering only in the prayer room. The floor is not cemented. The exterior door is fixed up to keep the house safe, and the windows are made of tin. The kitchen, too, is not finished yet. Besides taking out a loan for the house repairs, she has constructed parts of the house by pawning the 5 gold jewellery pieces she purchased from her savings from work.

The land she received is located in a forested area that is frequently occupied by elephants. An elephant once destroyed her coconut plantation. She asked the Divisional Secretary for an additional ½ acre of land for gardening, which was granted. She cleaned the land and fenced it. However, when she went to the hospital due to her health, someone damaged the fence and the electric light, including the electric fence established to prevent elephants from entering. She has no idea who did this, but she said that the neighbours caused her a lot of mental stress. No action was taken by the police, although she lodged a complaint. The divisional secretary has requested that the fence be removed. The issue of documents for the land has been delayed without reason.

Rajeshwary got married in 2012, knowing that her husband was an alcoholic because of the threats to her life. He is a mason. After the wedding, she returned to work. After the birth of her first son, her husband began physically abusing her. Her husband also gives her no money for living expenses. She survives on her savings. Her husband would withdraw money from her ATM card and even sell household goods for liquor. With anguish, she told us of how she lost a bracelet that she had pawned. After giving birth to her second child through a caesarean section, she gave money to her husband to pay the interest on her loan. Her husband used the money to purchase alcohol, leaving the interest unpaid. Another time, when she sold the house-building materials to people in need because she was unable to find a mason to do her house construction, her husband went and collected the money and spent it on alcohol. Her husband routinely beats her up on grounds of suspicion. Finally, she filed a maintenance case with the support of the MWDF. The case is still ongoing.

## COMMUNITY CONVERSATION II

### Nuwaraeliya District – Central Province

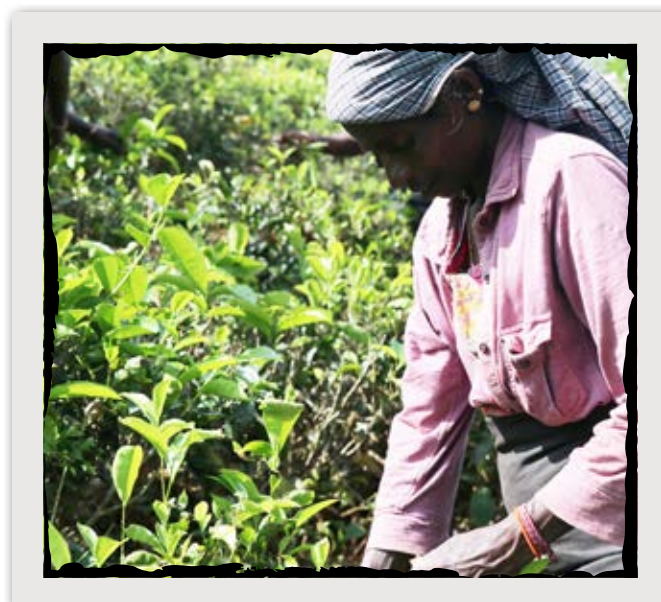
#### Women Tea Plantation Workers

In Sri Lanka these women, often referred to as 'tea pluckers' constitute a significant portion of the country's labour force, particularly in the central highlands where the iconic Ceylon tea is produced. Women are responsible for meticulously harvesting tea leaves from the lush plantations. Their work is characterised by long hours in the fields, where they carefully handpick the tender tea shoots, a task that demands skill and precision.

Tea plantation women face a range of challenges, including low wages, difficult working conditions, and limited access to basic amenities. Many of them live in labour lines provided by the plantation companies, and their lives are deeply intertwined with the plantations, often spanning generations.<sup>30</sup> In recent years, there have been efforts to improve the conditions and empower these women, including initiatives aimed at providing education, healthcare, and advocating for better labour rights. The tea plantation women of Sri Lanka are not only key contributors to the nation's tea industry but also serve as a symbol of the country's rich cultural and agricultural heritage.

#### Hope Estate

Nestled among the breath taking landscapes of the Nuwara Eliya District, *Hope Estate* emerges as a microcosm of resilience in the face of persistent challenges that afflict certain regions, thwarting the prosperity of



Tea plucking women is the backbone of Sri Lanka's export industry.

its 688 families.<sup>31</sup> Beneath its scenic beauty, Hope Estate grapples with myriad issues, ranging from infrastructural deficiencies to educational limitations, casting a shadow on the daily lives of its inhabitants. Positioned below the poverty line, Hope Estate finds itself ensnared in a web of challenges, each thread exacerbating the struggles of its resilient inhabitants. The dearth of public transportation compels individuals to embark on arduous journeys, walking several miles to reach their workplaces and return home, amplifying the daily hardships they endure. The inadequate roadways further compound their woes, creating hurdles in their routine commutes. Adding to the complexity, essential government facilities within the enclave remain underutilised, perpetuating the commu-

30 Srinivasan, M. (2023) Malaiyaha Tamils: Two hundred years of struggle, *The Hindu*. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/malaiyaha-tamils-two-hundred-years-of-struggle/article66901833.ece> (Accessed: 17 January 2024).

31 Department of census and Statistics (2021) Grama Niladhari Divisions Statistics - 2020 - Nuwara Eliya.

nity's struggle for access to basic services. Notably, the existing government hospital, while designed primarily as a clinic for expectant mothers, leaves critical health-care services in disarray.

The predominantly line-room-dwelling inhabitants underscore the critical need for improved living conditions and essential amenities. The economic downturn induced by the COVID-19 pandemic has further strained their resilience. Education, a cornerstone for personal and societal growth, presents a formidable challenge for the youth of Hope Estate.<sup>32</sup> The distance between their homes and the school compels students to embark on arduous journeys, walking up to 8 kilometres and navigating small jungle paths. Compounding this issue, the absence of Advanced Level (A/L) studies in the local school compels students to travel to Deltota in the Kandy district for their higher education, resulting in a discouraging dropout rate. Meanwhile, the realm of occupational safety for estate workers is marred by risks such as bee attacks, revealing a startling lack of preventive measures and management concern.

### **Violence Against Women**

The issue of violence against women casts a long and troubling shadow over the community. Domestic violence is a particularly distressing facet and manifests in the daily lives of women and girls, revealing a deeply rooted problem that demands urgent attention. One alarming example of this problem is the prevalence of drunken husbands subjecting their wives to daily abuse. The harsh reality of male dominance within families further compounds the challenges faced by women, perpetuating an environment where their rights and well-being are compromised. Tragically, a significant number of women find themselves dependent on others, lacking the means to achieve independence and autonomy. The burdens borne by women at Hope Estate are multifaceted. Apart from enduring domestic abuse, they are compelled to shoulder the responsibilities of house chores, engage in estate work, and care for both children and adults within the household. This relentless

**The community struggles with harsh realities, ranging from physical violence to early marriage and with the practice of forcing young girls into domestic employment.**

juggling act contributes to a stark imbalance in family life, leaving women in a vulnerable position. In addition to the complexity, the prevalence of single-parent households stems from spouses working abroad who sever all connections with their families, leaving them unsupported and financially strained. The impact on children left behind is profound, with unmet needs and a lack of familial support compounding their struggles.

The community struggles with harsh realities, ranging from physical violence to early marriage and with the practice of forcing young girls into domestic employment. The practice of early marriage which emerged out of financial desperation, drives young girls to marry wealthy adults.<sup>33</sup> This distressing reality not only robs these girls of their childhood but also places them on a risky journey marked by family pressure, mental abuse, and a risk of physical harm. The consequences of this dark practice are tragically evident in the alarming rates of suicide attempts among young girls in Hope Estate. Overwhelmed by the coercive force to marry against their will, these girls face the stark choice between forced matrimony and escaping their daily torment through self-harm. Regrettably, Hope Estate has become witness to several cases where these attempts have turned fatal.<sup>34</sup> The insidious cycle persists as some young girls contend with the trauma of early pregnancies resulting from rape, layering additional anguish onto their already challenging lives. The journey to and from school and workplaces, undertaken along jungle roads during the evening hours, exposes these children and

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32 Vithanage, H. (2022) Rising school dropouts: The plight of Estate Children in Sri Lanka. Available at: <https://island.lk/rising-school-dropouts-the-plight-of-estate-children-in-sri-lanka/> (Accessed: 17 September 2023).

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33 Ibid.

34 Human Rights Office, Kandy (2021) "The Grinding Poverty of Tea Plantation Families has Left Young Girls Vulnerable" Dec 27, 2021. <https://www.humanrightsofficekandy.org/legal-assistance/the-grinding-poverty-of-tea-plantation-families-has-left-young-girls-vulnerable>



Hope Estate

young girls to physical abuse, harassment, and bullying, further eroding their innocence in the face of the harsh realities of their environment.

### **Economic Hardships**

Amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, families living in Hope Estate have experienced profound economic hardships, particularly impacting the employment prospects of the youth within the estate sector. The pandemic's repercussions resulted in a significant loss of employment for many individuals, exacerbating economic woes in the post-COVID era. The enduring economic downturn has left a lasting imprint on the community, making it increasingly difficult for residents to meet their basic needs, especially as the prices of essential commodities, such as dry rations and food items, continued to surge.

During the peak of the pandemic, numerous residents were confronted with the stark reality of having only one meal a day, highlighting the severity of the economic challenges faced by the community. Even today, a significant portion of the population in Hope Estate struggles to secure an adequate number of meals due to the persisting economic challenges. This prolonged struggle has given rise to an alarming increase in malnutrition among children, reflecting the profound and far-reaching consequences of economic adversity. Compounding

the hardships faced by the community, the distribution of essential supplies, such as dry rations, by local authorities exhibited partiality, creating disparities between the majority and minority communities. Instances were reported where these crucial resources were not distributed equitably, further deepening the divide among the residents. Moreover, there were also ample cases, as reported, where these essential provisions were sold to the residents at minimal costs, when they should have been provided freely to alleviate the economic burden.

The monthly wages of estate workers, ranging from Rs. 8,000 to 10,000, proved insufficient to sustain the needs of their families and support their children's education. As a result, the rising number of children dropping out of school to become child labourers in major cities such as Colombo and Kandy was a distressing consequence of the economic strain. This unfortunate turn of events not only compromised the educational prospects of these children but also perpetuated a cycle of poverty within the community. In essence, the economic hardships experienced by the residents of Hope Estate have permeated all facets of their lives, impacting education, livelihoods, health, and overall well-being. Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires a comprehensive and targeted approach to uplift the community from the throes of economic adversity.

## DINESH

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### **“...Modern Slavery Under Management”**

*“Born amidst the lush landscapes of Sri Lanka’s tea plantations, my life was rooted in the vibrant culture of the estate community. The rolling hills, the aroma of freshly plucked tea leaves, and the laughter of fellow youths defined my upbringing. However, my journey took an unexpected turn as I confronted the harsh realities of economic crises that cast a shadow over our aspirations and challenged our resilience. My name is Chandrakumar (Dinesh). I’m living in Hope Estate in Nuwara Eliya district. My wife is pregnant, and she is a housewife. My mother was an estate worker, and she became a pensioner recently. Currently, I am running a small bakery to manage my family’s expenses. Previously, I was working in a big restaurant in Colombo. We are still living in the line rooms on the estate.*

*Growing up in the estate’s centre, I was surrounded by tales of toil and aspiration. The elders predicted a brighter future for our town, one in which it would overcome obstacles like poverty and a lack of chances. We, the young adults, clung to these goals because we wanted to overcome the constraints that history had placed on us.*

*Following the COVID-19 pandemic, I returned to my hometown with the idea of starting a restaurant or bakery. To gain permission for this venture, I submitted the necessary documents to the estate management (Janawasa Estate Management). Despite meeting the eligibility criteria, the management denied me permission to start at the estate. This setback did not deter me, and I decided to pursue the project privately.*

*To kickstart my plan, I sought a loan from a company and submitted all the required documents. The company approved the loan. However, during their verification process at my estate, the estate management falsely claimed that I was not associated with Hope Estate. This misinformation caused the loan company to retract their offer. Due to these obstacles, my efforts crumbled, and I ended up running a small bakery from a roadside cart.*

*Furthermore, anyone on the estate who wanted to start a shop or bakery was not given permission by the estate management. These kinds of issues with the management made many people migrate from our estate. Many children dropped out of school and have gone to cities as child labourers, aged 13–18. It manifests modern slavery under management.*

*My experience managing economic crises as a young adult from an estate has been challenging and transformative. Although the challenges we faced were great, they simply served to reinforce our determination. We discovered the value of flexibility, cooperation, and the strength of neighbourhood solidarity. Yet the situation is the same, everyone in the Estate found some way to survive themselves.”*

## SRIYANI

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### **“...The importance of adaptability, resourcefulness, and unity within the family unit.”**

*“The global economic crisis of our time has brought about a multitude of challenges for families around the world. The repercussions of such crises are far-reaching, affecting the very fabric of society, including family dynamics and financial stability.*

*I am Sriyani. I was an estate office worker in Nuwara Eliya District’s Moolloya Estate. Temporarily, I stopped working because I had to look after my children and family, and now I am a housewife. My husband is a school teacher, and my children are studying in primary school. When I was an estate officer, I attended the Janatha Estates Development Board training. Later, I decided to continue the work, so I attended the interviews held in Colombo*

and submitted the relevant documents needed, but I did not get any opportunities to work. Even though Hope Estate Office had a vacancy, they did not select me for the job.

Economic downturns can trigger a domino effect of hardships, affecting various aspects of family life. As my family's sole breadwinner, my husband bears the responsibility of ensuring our financial stability. However, the economic crisis has led to job losses, reduced working hours, and wage cuts across various industries, making it increasingly difficult to sustain a consistent income. This, in turn, has had a significant impact on our ability to meet basic needs and manage daily expenses.

The economic crisis has presented numerous challenges. The most immediate concern has been ensuring essential needs such as housing, food, healthcare, and education for our children are met. The uncertainty surrounding my husband's job security has added emotional strain, creating an atmosphere of apprehension and stress within our household. Additionally, rising inflation rates and escalating prices of goods and services have further stretched our already limited budget, making it difficult to strike a balance between necessities and discretionary spending. I could see that the estate people like me were suffering massively. There were times when my husband was unable to go to work, and my children and I starved for days when there was a shortage of food due to the economic crisis in our country. Even though the country's economic situation is projected to be improving, we, the estate people, are still facing several economic difficulties as we try to feed the children, cover their educational expenses, and fulfil their needs.

The economic crisis has undoubtedly presented my family with formidable challenges in managing our needs and expenses, given our reliance on a single income. However, through careful planning, budgeting, and embracing a frugal lifestyle, we have been able to navigate these difficulties with resilience and determination. This experience has highlighted the importance of adaptability, resourcefulness, and unity within the family unit during times of economic uncertainty. As we continue to navigate these uncharted waters, we remain hopeful that our efforts will eventually lead us to financial stability once again."

## **PADMAVATHI**

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**"...My heart is filled with hope."**

"My name is Padmavathi. Growing up, my world was centred around the family and the estate. Raised in a close-knit household, I watched my father, Muthu Kumar, diligently practise the family's hereditary profession of barbering. My father's decision to establish a salon on the Hope Estate was a testament to our determination to improve our circumstances. However, the road to success was not without obstacles. My early years were marked by a difficult turn of events. I had to drop out of school because of my mother's illness. This was a pivotal moment that would redirect the course of my life.

At the tender age of 13, I found myself embarking on a new journey—one that took me to the tea estates. To contribute to my family's income, I took up the arduous task of tea leaf plucking. This physically demanding job not only provided financial assistance to my family but also inculcated within me a sense of responsibility and determination. The remuneration was tied to the quantity of tea leaves plucked, and I strived to meet the target of 18 kilograms to earn a daily wage of Rs. 1000.

As I ventured further into adulthood, life presented me with new challenges. My husband's battle with heart disease became a focal point of our lives, requiring regular visits to Kandy General Hospital for his monthly clinic appointments. The weight of his health struggles became a shared burden, bringing us closer as a family. The dream of owning a house has remained elusive due to issues with estate management and the deeply entrenched

caste-based prejudices that continue to affect our lives. Despite our perseverance, the estate leaders have denied us the support we so desperately need, often leaving us marginalised at social events.

The economic crises that have swept through our country have further compounded our challenges. The uncertainty of our financial situation has cast a shadow over our dreams and aspirations. Yet, in the face of adversity, I find solace in the resilience that has carried my family through trials before.

My journey, like many others, is a testament to the human spirit's ability to rise above adversity. From tea leaves to the pursuit of education and the fight for a better life, I have been moulded by the circumstances I faced. The challenges I encountered have taught me to be strong and resourceful. As I continue my journey, my heart is filled with hope."

## **DANABALAN**

"I am Danabalan, a man of 52 years who has spent a significant portion of my life working as estate security staff. My journey began at Hope Estate, where I took on the responsibility of not only safeguarding the estate but also contributing to the well-being of the estate people. Alongside me stands my partner in life, Geetha, a resilient woman who is 51 years old and has been a committed estate worker. We have 4 children.

Our story is connected to the ebb and flow of economic crises that have swept through our lives. These times of adversity tested our courage and resilience, as we faced numerous challenges that came our way. These trials, while difficult, have only fortified our resolve to persevere and create a better life for ourselves and the family.

As the estate leader of the Hope Estate workforce, my role extended beyond merely maintaining security. I took it upon myself to address the glaring lack of maintenance that had plagued the estate. The absence of proper upkeep had paved the way for a myriad of dangerous animals and creatures to infiltrate our surroundings. Tigers, cheetahs, bees, snakes, and wild pigs were unwelcome visitors that we had to contend with. Through determination and collective effort, we embarked on a journey to reclaim our estate from the clutches of neglect.

One of the most pressing challenges we faced was the absence of a proper hospital within the estate. While a hospital existed in nearby Moolloya, it functioned far below the standards our community deserved. This led to the inevitable consequence of the estate residents having to undertake arduous journeys to Kandy General Hospital for urgent medical attention. The lack of accessible healthcare underscored the urgent need for change.

The economic hardships led many of our youth to seek opportunities in Colombo as labourers. However, this move came with unforeseen consequences. They were exposed to vices in the city, such as alcohol and drugs, which led them down a destructive path. Upon their return to Hope Estate, they brought back these harmful influences, further exacerbated by the illegal sale of substances among school children. Tackling this issue was no small feat, and it had far-reaching implications, especially for the education of our children.

Our journey through the pages of the Hope Estate's history reflects the trials and triumphs of a community united in the face of adversity. Still, we cannot find solutions for the issues that take place in our estate. Even though we tried several ways to sort out the problems, nothing helped. But we are still struggling to find the right solutions for our Estate."



## KAMALADEVI”

“ ...My story is one of resilience.”

*“My name is Kamaladevi, and I am 73 years old, and my life’s narrative is etched with the stories of Hope Estate. The tale begins with my mother, a diligent worker at the Uduwala Tea plantation, whose toil laid the foundation for our family’s connection to this land. In the year 1947, my father’s footsteps led him to an estate house nestled within the embrace of Hope Estate. This humble abode would become our sanctuary, a witness to the battles we waged against both nature and circumstance. The pages of our existence have been filled with struggles, with each chapter bringing its own set of challenges. Living in the estate house brought a unique test during the rainy season. The elements waged their assault on our dwelling, making it a daunting task to endure the torrents and tempests.*

*My life, much like those around me, was defined by labour. For years, I served under Janatha Estates Development Board, contributing my efforts to the intricate dance of the Estate’s rhythm. The culmination of this journey was my retirement, a point where my identity shifted from an estate worker to a pensioner. The transition to being a pensioner was not without challenges. To meet the demands of everyday life, I found myself seeking daily wage work in the homes of others. The necessity was clear: to fulfil basic needs and put food on the table. The battle to manage my family’s needs and expenses persisted, often taking centre stage in my daily thoughts.*

*The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic thrust us into a new realm of struggle. The economic crisis that followed cast a heavy shadow on our lives, intensifying the difficulties we faced. The pandemic’s grip tightened, leading to days where hunger was an unwelcome companion. In the midst of these challenges, we learned to survive on a single meal per day. As time marched forward, the cost of essentials skyrocketed. Necessities became elusive luxuries as prices soared beyond our reach.*

*The issues of the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) and the Employees Trust Fund (ETF) have long cast a shadow over the lives of estate workers. The struggle to access our rightful funds has been a persistent source of frustration. Countless workers, including myself, found themselves entangled in bureaucratic hurdles, unable to access the funds that were rightfully ours. This injustice forced us to file cases to reclaim our dues, which was difficult.*

*Today, I find myself at the crossroads of my life, reflecting on the chapters that brought me to this point. The echoes of the Hope Estate, the battles waged against nature, circumstance, and injustice, reverberate within me. As I look ahead, I am unsure of what lies on the horizon. The only certainty is that my story is one of resilience, of navigating the turbulent waters with unwavering determination. And so, I continue to live, to persevere, and to hope for the day when the tides of fate will shift in our favour.”*

## COMMUNITY CONVERSATION III

### Free Trade Zones Garment Factory Workers

Sri Lanka's first Free Trade Zone (FTZ) was established in 1978. Today, there are 12 such zones including eight FTZs, three industrial parks and one export processing park. The zones attract and contribute to a significant portion of Sri Lanka's labour force— from urban and suburban areas around Colombo to the rural areas with high unemployment rates. Ever since Sri Lanka adopted free market economic policies in 1977, investment promotion zones have become magnets for young female workers. As of 2020, these zones, located in places like Katunayake, Biyagama, and Galle employed over 36995 women.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, apparel industries are dispersed throughout the country where garment workers typically work in factories under challenging conditions. Long working hours, low wages, and frequently crowded and cramped workplaces are common, resulting in physical and mental strain. In spite of their hard work, they often struggle to make ends meet due to meagre salaries. Some workers are paid on a piecework basis, which can lead to erratic earnings.

Gender disparities are prevalent within the garment workforce, with a substantial proportion being female. As a result, women commonly encounter discrimination in wages and advancement, harassment, and various challenges related to maternity leave and childcare support. In some cases, workers' rights and the ability to unionise face restrictions, leaving garment workers with limited avenues to advocate for better working

conditions and fair compensation, ultimately affecting job security.<sup>36</sup>

FTZ employers have faced heavy criticism for the exploitation of workers, especially women workers, with long working hours, workplace sexual harassment, and forced work during the night shift. Trade unions and other Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working in FTZs often voice their concerns over the exploitative practices of the employers, especially the implicit restrictions on freedom of association and collective bargaining. Critics also point to the recruitment policy of hiring workers on a casual/contract basis as a common ploy adopted by employers to control workers from unionising and advocating for their equitable rights.<sup>37</sup> This practice of promoting contract labour has pushed workers into vulnerable positions with regard to job security. About 80 per cent of workers in the FTZs are young single women between the ages of 18 to 24 years.<sup>38</sup> Many female workers leave within the first three to five years of employment, mostly for marriage.

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35 Board of Investment of Sri Lanka (BOI) (2021) 'Employment Statistics of Export Processing Zone Enterprises, as at end of 2020', in Labour Statistics of Sri Lanka . Department of Labour, pp. 34–34.

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36 Women's Center Sri Lanka (no date) The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women garment workers in Sri Lanka's free trade zones (ftzs), UNDP. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/srilanka/publications/impact-covid-19-pandemic-women-garment-workers-sri-lanka%E2%80%99s-free-trade-zones-ftzs> (Accessed: 17 January 2024).

37 Premaratne, S., Senanayake, S., & Warnasuriya, M. (2012) Empowerment of women through Self Help Groups (SHGs): a study of a SHG microfinance project in Sri Lanka. UEH Journal of Economic Development, (210), pp: 17 - 36.

38 Lynch, C. (2007) Juki girls, good girls: Gender and cultural politics in Sri Lanka's global garment industry, Ithaca, USA. Cornell University Press

## Koggala EPZ, Galle District

The Community Conversations were held with women garment factory workers in the Koggala Export Processing Zone (EPZ) in Galle district in the Southern Province. The investment promotion zone was established in 1991 across 227 acres. Currently, 23 enterprises operate in the FTZ and the main products manufactured are garments, plastic dummies, footwear, aircraft repair and boatbuilding. According to the Board of Investment (BOI), presently, the zone employs a total workforce of 12,740 (9,131 female and 3,569 male workers).<sup>39</sup> Most of the women workers in this EPZ travel from their home to the workplaces in transport facilities provided by the companies, while nearly 80 workers reside in the hostel run by the Ministry of Labour and some others at private boarding facilities in the vicinity.

There are 21 garment factories in the Koggala Free Trade Zone. Four factories were closed down following COVID-19 and the economic crisis leading to hundreds of workers being sent home.<sup>40</sup> These factories were closed without giving prior notice to the workers nor were workers provided with necessary compensation as per the country's labour laws.<sup>41</sup> Presently only 17 factories remain open. This is an alarming trend in relation to employment loss and is the emerging trend in the Zones. During our conversations it became evident that this threat of closure of the factories, due to the economic crisis, was being used as a ploy to create a sense of insecurity among the workers to get them to work overtime without properly remunerating them for extra work. The factory owners flout the labour laws with no accountability.

*"The owners of the factories do not care about the labour laws in Sri Lanka. There is no proper monitoring by the Board of Investment nor the Labour Department."*

The CCs participants highlighted the lack of adequate health and safety measures, which placed them at significant risk. Accidents, injuries, and occupational health issues were common concerns. Also, the present wage structure is not enough to deal with the high inflation and the increase in rents and fees women have to pay for accommodation closer to the EPZ. Citing the economic crisis, the owners of lodges and houses have increased their monthly rentals. In order to cope with the situation, the workers told us that they had reduced their food expenses. They have stopped buying fish, meat, and eggs and reduced the number of meals they take. Most of the participants in the Community Conversations lamented the fact that they had to pawn the jewellery they had purchased with the money they earned as workers.

*"I have studied up to GCE Ordinary Level and could not pursue further studies since my father could not continue with farming. We had borrowed a lot of money to cultivate paddy, and this was our only income. A succession of droughts and floods affected our crops. Therefore, I decided to stop my studies and join a factory in Koggala. After several months, I was able to buy a small gold chain. This is my future investment. But I felt sad the day I had to pawn the gold chain. Even my mother cried."*

Presently, there are about fifteen thousand workers in the Koggala zone, situated in the Galle district of the Southern Province of Sri Lanka. The average monthly income of workers is between Rs. 18,000 – Rs. 20,000 (US dollars 100 – 200 before the Sri Lankan Rupee's devaluation). With the devaluation of the Sri Lankan rupee, this amount has halved. Making matters worse, during COVID, some factories paid only 50 percent of the wages to the workers.

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39 Investment Sri Lanka (no date) Koggala EPZ Profile – Investment Opportunities – Board of investment of Sri Lanka, Investment Opportunities Board of Investment of Sri Lanka. Available at: <https://investsrilanka.com/koggala-epz-profile/> (Accessed: 19 January 2024).

40 United Nations (1997) Women in Sri Lanka: A country profile. New York: United Nations.

41 Sivananthiran, A. (2007) Promoting decent work in export processing zones (EPZs) in Sri Lanka [online] Available at: <http://www.ilo.org/public/french/dialogue/download/epzsrilanka.pdf>

## DINESHA

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Dinesha is 41 years old and a resident of the Galle district, where the zone is situated. She is married and has three grown-up sons; two boys are twins 21 years old, and another boy is 15 years old.

*"When I was a child, there were conflicts among my parents. As a result, my mother and father divorced. I faced a lot of difficulties as a child."*

Her husband, a mason, is no longer able to work like he used to since his accident. Earlier, he worked not only as a mason but also as a house painter. But since he fell from a roof and underwent an operation related to the spinal cord, his nerves have become weaker. *"My husband does not have a permanent job. He is a mason. He had a very dangerous accident. After the operation, he does not have the capacity to work as he used to. Since he is disabled, he cannot ride a bicycle."*

Dinesha has become active with the trade union and attends regular meetings in Colombo, much to her husband's resentment against this involvement, over which he quarrels with her. Her basic salary is Rs. 23,500.

*"If I work a full month, I can earn between Rs 25,000 to 26,000. By working overtime, all of us earn additional income. We did not have overtime for several months. In my family, I am the only one who works in the apparel industry. I must pay my children's tuition fees, as well as the Rs. 18,500 bank loan. I am sewing to earn additional money through self-employment. My salary is not enough to maintain my children."*

*I have taken a loan from the bank to build the house we live in now. The banks have increased their interest rates following the economic crisis, and this will affect us further. If we cannot pay, then the house and the land we have will be auctioned, and we will have nowhere to go. I live a life full of anxiety and uncertainty about life."*

The twins have not done well in their studies, so they are not fully employed. They assist construction workers at construction sites. Though they earn this money, it is spent by the boys for their expenses and is not used to support the family.

*"If I shout at them, once in a while they give some cash for the extra class fee of their brother."*

## RASA

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Rasa is 40 years old and a resident of Galle. She started working from home for a factory in 1990 and, since then, has worked in 3 different factories. *"In the factory where I am working now, we sew CK, BOTI, and POLO brands. We make frocks, T-shirts and blouses."*

She is married and has two children. *"My daughter studies in grade 8 and my son is waiting for the Ordinary('O') level exam results. My son tells me that he does not want to study further. I am a machine operator in the garment factory. I've been a garment factory worker for over 20 years. At present, my basic salary is Rs. 21,500. Already I have taken a loan of Rs. 24, 000 to buy a bicycle."*

During COVID-19, Rasa received 50 percent of her wages. Also, work was available for only 15 days. *"We have had to be isolated on several occasions due to colleagues and family members getting COVID-19. During this period, our village officers provided us with food parcels."*

During COVID-19, factory workers and their families came to be stigmatised. The media propagated the story that the COVID-19 virus entered the country due to the interaction of garment workers with foreigners. A high prevalence of COVID-19 was observed in the free trade zone region in the Katunayake area, as well as in some factories. One of the factories had a visit from its Indian counterpart.

*“When my child went to school with me to get into the bus, people asked whether his mother was a garment worker. One day my child had to walk over 3 kilometres crying, unable to face up to such abuse.”*

During the conversation, she praised the work of the Women’s Centre (WC), a feminist organisation working in the free trade zones for over 25 years. *“I got to know about the WC from friends and started participating in the workshops conducted to raise our awareness. I began to value myself and was able to help my children overcome the shame. Also, now I walk with self-esteem, with my head held high.”*

There are around 600 employees; the majority are female workers categorised as unskilled workers, while the male mechanics are classified as skilled workers and receive a higher wage.

*“At times we are given high, unrealistic targets, which we must achieve, somehow, otherwise, we will be thrown out.”*

As the region is a tourist destination, Rasa wants to build a house so she can rent out rooms and make an additional income. However, the current crisis is making that dream impossible because banks have stopped giving credit. Also, there is the uncertainty that factories might close down because of the introduction of import restrictions. She is attending language classes to learn Japanese, facilitated by the foundation of a local politician. She plans to migrate to Japan in search of greener pastures. Or she could find a job in the government sector where she would receive retirement benefits.

## **KUMU**

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### **Factory Closures**

Kumu is 50 years old and a resident of Galle district. She has worked for over 12 years in the garment factory, but her work was terminated in June 2023 as the factory locked its doors. She had not been paid her salary due for the month of May or her gratuity entitlement. Kumu is waiting to attend a meeting convened by the Labour Department. They have promised to pay the gratuity amount. While some factories have paid two or four months’ salaries as compensation, in Kumu’s factory, the workers have refused to accept this amount and decided to take legal action. They are demanding a gratuity as well as a payment.

*“I have managed my family expenses with a monthly income of Rs 35, 000. My husband is a labourer; he spends all his wages on liquor. I have 3 children; they are old enough to work, but they do not have jobs. All my children are boys: the eldest is 25 years old, the other is 22 years old, and the youngest is 16 years old. My eldest son who is 25 years old, had met with an accident and broke his teeth and because of that he cannot join the army.”*

*“During COVID-19 we spent our own money and took treatment for COVID. The factory did not provide us with sanitising liquid or masks. After complaining, we got one mask per week, and we had to wash and use them regularly. We were paid 50% of the salary. Transportation was not regular. We used to hire a vehicle as a group and report to work since we wanted to keep our jobs.”*

*“Now, having lost that job, I am now working as a daily wage agricultural labourer and getting Rs 100. It is hard work, and we have to bear the heat. I tried to register my name for the relief scheme established to assist the poorest of the poor during the economic crisis, called Aswasuma. However, since we are categorised as daily wage earners by the village officer, our names have been deleted. I have made an appeal.”*

The present crisis has affected my family life. My husband comes home under the influence of liquor, shouts at home, and physically assaults me very badly.

*“I went through serious mental issues. I have to also take care of my mother who is 75 years of age and lives with us.”*

## COMMUNITY CONVERSATION IV

### Batticaloa and Jaffna Districts

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#### Bill on Commission for Truth, Unity and Reconciliation 42 (2023)

Four decades of relentless conflict came to a violent end in 2009, but in Sri Lanka's conflict-affected areas, post-war trauma and suffering have found no closure, and impunity has thwarted restorative justice. Protesting mothers and female family members of the forcibly disappeared who have been at the forefront in leading victim demands for accountability are routinely detained, intimidated or put under surveillance, and their voices suppressed. This is despite successive UN Human Rights Council Resolutions calling for the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms with the active participation of all stakeholders, including women.

The Sri Lankan government in January 2024 introduced the Bill on setting up a Commission for Truth, Unity and Reconciliation as a process for establishing accountability, closure and rebuilding a peaceful united society. Civil society responses have been mixed with skeptics pointing to the ambivalent even ineffective record of existing transitional justice institutions such as the Office of Missing Persons (OMP) and the Office for Reparations have been ineffective. Others have questioned the governing establishment's sincerity and commitment and drawn attention to the lack of consultation with victim communities in the process of developing the T-U-R Commission Bill.<sup>42</sup>

Women's Political Academy, the conveners of the Sri Lanka Community Conversations, have used the

opportunity of the CCs to document the responses of women from the conflict-affected areas in Batticaloa and Jaffna districts. During the CC discussions, women voiced mixed feelings. In general, they were not sure whether the desired results could be achieved in the present political context where reconciliation still remains "projectised" and not driven as a democratic political process.

#### Batticaloa District Conversation

The CC participants came from the following areas in Batticaloa District: Periyapullumalai [146A], Welikakandy[146A], Kiththul [185B], Thumpalaichcholai[146A] and Grama Niladhari (GN) Divisions. Notably, these villages fall within the administrative purview of the Eravurpattu and Chenkalady Divisional Secretariats. The Eastern Province was devastated by the war in 2007. The impact, the women said, still continues to reverberate among the inhabitants, particularly those in the above-mentioned villages. For the individuals who have called these areas home for nearly six to seven decades, the events of the 2007 conflict irrevocably altered the course of their lives. They endured profound losses, including the tragic deaths of family members. The survivors continue to grapple with lingering trauma. The fragility of their lives is compounded by the region's persistent underdevelopment and the villages remain mired in a state of backwardness.

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<sup>42</sup> [http://documents.gov.lk/files/bill/2024/1/432-2024\\_E.pdf](http://documents.gov.lk/files/bill/2024/1/432-2024_E.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.icj.org/sri-lanka-new-bill-to-establish-commission-for-truth-unity-and-reconciliation-lacks-credibility-and-unlikely-to-bring-accountability/>



Jaffna women come together to discuss and address community issues, empowering each other through shared experiences and collective action.

Widespread and mass displacement left a lasting imprint on their social, cultural, and economic well-being. Struggling to navigate the aftermath of forced relocation, these communities continue to deal with the far-reaching consequences of their lives.

## WAR-INDUCED DISPLACEMENT AND RESETTLEMENT

Village	Displacement Year	Resettlement Year
Welikakandy	2007	2008
Periyapullumalai	2007	2007 Nov
Thumpalaichcholai	2007 March	2007 Nov
Kiththul	2007	2007 Nov

Widespread and mass displacement left a lasting imprint on their social, cultural, and economic well-being. Struggling to navigate the aftermath of forced relocation, these communities continue to deal with the far-reaching consequences of their lives. Regrettably, the prevailing circumstances have contributed to a persistent state of underdevelopment, leaving the affected population in a continual struggle for stability and progress.

Forcibly uprooted, people sought refuge across multiple locations, shifting to three or even five locations during the course of the war. Eventually, they returned to their original lands, only to be haunted by painful memories of their loved ones' harrowing fates—victims of fatal shootouts and abductions during the conflict. Each participant recounted the heart-wrenching tale of their

abducted family members, further emphasising the enduring trauma etched deeply within their hearts.

The scars of their collective experience extended beyond the 2007 war, stretching back to the tumultuous years of 1987, 1988 (during the Indian Peacekeeping Force's presence in Sri Lanka), 1990, 1991, and 1996. The cycle of displacement and the constant spectre of death has cast a gloomy pall over their lives.<sup>44</sup> Disturbingly, the precise methods of abduction employed during these turbulent periods are outlined as follows. The women were not afraid to give these details as they expect an effective interventions from civil society to support their inquiry into the whereabouts of their loved ones. This cohort of women were hopeful that the proposed T-U-R Commission (TRC) would be able to assist in seeking the truth about what happened to their relatives.

<sup>44</sup> Srinivasan, M. (2021) The Sri Lankan War: Chronicles of a carnage foretold, The Hindu. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/chronicles-of-a-carnage-foretold/article62038118.ece>.

## LIST OF THE DISAPPEARED WAS SHARED WITH US

Name of Family Member	Village	Relationship with abducted person	Date and year	By Whom & Status
K.Saroja	Thumpalaichcholai	Husband	1992.09.28	Unknown
		Son	1997.12.04	Unknown
J.Bandara Menikka	Thumpalaichcholai	Husband Three Sons	2008 2008	SL Army SL army
R.Mageswary	Welikakandy	Husband	2008.04.10	Unknown
R.Deivanai	Periyapullumalai	Husband	1986.11.20	Unknown
		Son	1988.07.21	Indian Army
		Son	1996.06.21	Unknown
K.Letchumy	Thumpalaichcholai	Husband	2008	Unknown
		Daughter	1997.04.07	Unknown [abducted while collecting firewood]
		Son in law	2008	Unknown [Abducted / Killed]
K.Pathmawathy	Kiththul	Son [16yrs]	1993	Unknown
		Son in law		Unknown
K.Amaravathy	Pullumalai	Husband	1991.10.02	Unknown
A.Vanasakala	Kiththul	Son	2006.11.13	Unknown
M.Meenatchi	Kiththul	Father	2008	Unknown

The enduring plight of these affected individuals continues to this day, as they grapple with the persistent uncertainty surrounding the fate of their abducted relatives. The search for truth remains an ongoing struggle, underscoring the profound emotional burden that continues to weigh heavily on their hearts.

## Livelihood Challenges

### Main sources of income

- Freshwater Fishing
- Sand mining
- Casual Labour [Daily wage]
- Paddy cultivation/Home Gardening
- Livestock

The livelihoods of the residents in these villages is predominantly dependent upon casual work, with both men and women relying on the above sources of income. Despite their arduous efforts, the monetary returns of the day are meagre, between Rs. 1000 to Rs. 1500 per day. This coupled with the scarcity of employment opportunities, poses significant challenges. Work is

only available for three days per week, leaving the community grappling with financial instability and uncertainty.<sup>45</sup> Sometimes, the available labour work extends only to a paltry three to five days per month, exacerbating financial strains on the families. Consequently, many are compelled to resort to borrowing money to meet their monthly expenditures. For a typical family of four, the necessary monthly expenditure amounts to approximately Rs. 50,000.

Among the participants in the discussion, five women are actively engaged in labour-intensive occupations, while two dedicate their efforts to home gardening. Additionally, one woman manages a modest grocery shop, while another is financially dependent on external support.

<sup>45</sup> Attygalle, K. (no date) Sri Lanka's Youth Employment Challenge: A dilemma of attitudes and aspirations, Talking Economics. Available at: <https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2012/03/11/sri-lankas-youth-employment-challenge-a-dilemma-of-attitudes-and-aspirations/> (Accessed: 19 September 2023).



For an extended period of time, the longstanding practice of sand mining has persisted in this region, with the extraction primarily taking place along the riverbeds. Notably, both external business entities and local villagers actively participate in these operations. Unfortunately, the devastating ecological ramifications of this practice have become increasingly evident, exacerbated by the prevailing drought conditions in the area. The continuing allure of this occupation for the local villagers lies in its perceived simplicity, despite the stark reality that a mere Rs.1000 per day is extended to labourers, while each tractor load fetches a substantial sum of Rs. 56000.

The adverse effects of sand mining extend beyond environmental concerns, as the continuous passage of heavy trucks along the village roads has led to their deterioration. Despite numerous protests and complaints voiced by the women to higher authorities, no significant actions have been taken to address the issue. Villagers have not opposed these activities because of their heavy dependence on sand mining as a primary source of income.

## Problems of underdevelopment

- Human –Elephant Conflict
- Potable Drinking Water Availability
- Robbery and Threat Insecurity
- Banned Drug Usage Among Youth
- Widespread Unemployment
- Security Situation

### Human-Elephant conflict

Prevalent human-elephant conflict in the region remains a pressing concern for the local populace. The primary issue stems from the frequent incursions of wild elephants as land settlements encroach more and more on their natural habitat. Incursions typically occur after 3 pm, leaving the residents in a perpetual state of fear and vulnerability. Particularly vulnerable are households with only women, who contend with the constant stress induced by the elephants' unpredictable movements, reminiscent of wandering cattle. The destructive impact of elephants extends to ruining the crops, destruction of homes and fatal attacks on individuals. Since the



Elephant damaged homes

beginning of the year, seven houses in Pullumalai village and ten houses in Kiththul village have been destroyed, resulting in one fatality. In Thumpalaichcholai village, the destruction affected 25 houses and claimed two lives. In Velikakandi village two houses were damaged.<sup>46</sup> The measures taken to address this recurring problem remain inadequate. The installation of flimsy electric wire fences provided minimal protection, and endangers the safety of the residents. Women in the community bear the brunt of its consequences.

<sup>46</sup> Gunawansa, T.D. et al. (2023) 'The human-elephant conflict in Sri Lanka: History and present status', *Biodiversity and Conservation*, 32(10), pp. 3025–3052. doi:10.1007/s10531-023-02650-7.



Women from Batticaloa highlighting their challenges and aspirations for a brighter future.

### Drinking water

The scarcity of available drinking water continues to afflict all the villages. The local councils of Sri Lanka are obliged to regularly fill the water tanks in the villages, but do so sometimes only once every two days or even once a week. Consequently, the women in these communities are forced to tirelessly scour for drinking water, adding to the burdens they shoulder.

### Robbery and Theft

The prevailing economic downturn has caused financial distress, leading to an increase in theft of household goods and livestock. This has heightened the

vulnerability of women living alone, subjecting them to constant fear, particularly during the night. A recent incident in Kiththul village saw the theft of 15 chickens belonging to K. Padmini, underscoring the prevalence and severity of the issue.

### Banned Drug Usage Among Youth

Increasing drug abuse in Batticaloa district has led to a worrying rise in addiction among boys as young as 15, as well as numerous men. Consequently, school dropout rates have surged. As families grapple with worsening economic hardships, more than half of their daily income is wasted on drugs. Women, burdened with managing households and providing for their children, endure the brunt of the fallout. Additionally, the social fabric has suffered, witnessing a marked increase in social disorders as a result of this issue.

### Widespread Unemployment

The main challenge for the region's inhabitants is the scarcity of employment opportunities, leading to multiple economic crises. Rising costs of goods and services, including electricity bills, have seriously strained the household economy and resulted in an inability to afford nutritious meals and three meals a day. Furthermore, numerous families, particularly sub-families, find themselves without homes or any official land documents, affecting approximately 90 individuals. Furthermore, the houses constructed in the post-war era exhibit

#### AGGRIEVED WOMEN'S VOICES

*"Caring for my daughter, who has special needs, restricts my ability to work outside the home."*

*"The use of banned drugs is devastating the lives of our children."*

*"We're aware of the environmental damage of sand mining, but breaking free from this industry is not possible given our economic dependence."*

*"My husband disappeared in 1992. My son lost his life because of his involvement with the LTTE. My present life is filled with uncertainties."*

substandard walls and structural cracks, whereas those initiated during a Member of Parliament's tenure as a minister remain unfinished and abandoned.

### Security Situation

Despite military disturbances, the major adverse impact has been limited, with the occasional intervention by intelligence officials. However, when the local communities engage in public initiatives or advocate for their rights, the presence of intelligence officers remains pronounced. This raises concerns, as it can deter people from freely expressing their opinions and asserting their rights.

### Batticaloa District Public Opinion On Truth Commission

*"Despite sharing testimonies with multiple commissions, like the LLRC, we've yet to see any concrete actions. It's been 16 years of searching for our lost children and relatives without any satisfactory answers."*

*"What does it matter if the Commission has been formed in Sri Lanka? Our grievances remain unheard. Their reports ultimately serve only the government, there is no respite for us."*

*"We've previously submitted evidence twice to the Divisional Secretariat, but no decisions have materialised."*

*"The Truth Commission appears to be another deceptive tactic."*

It's evident from people's sentiments that there's little faith in the Commission's effectiveness. These sentiments reflect the profound suffering experienced by the community. *"I refuse to testify before any commission,"* stated one woman. Based on this collective sentiment, all 11 participating women voiced their opposition to the need for a new commission.



Resettlement Housing Project



## KARUWATHAMBI PADMAVATHI

### Kithul Village

Karuwathambi Padmavathi is a 64-year-old resident of Kithul Village, within the Chenkaladi Eravur Divisional Secretariat in Batticaloa District. Her National Identity Card number is 56 64 72 95 3v. She is a practicing Hindu. Padmavathi is one of the numerous women who are victims of Sri Lanka's brutal war.

Her husband abandoned her when their children were young, leaving her to endure several hardships while raising her two children single-handedly. Struggling to make ends meet, she tirelessly worked to provide for her family. Despite these difficulties, her father went missing during the war and was later found shot dead. Adding to her ordeal, her 16-year-old son was abducted by unknown assailants on May 26, 1991. Despite her relentless efforts to seek information about her missing son, no significant leads have emerged. As she copes with the weight of depression, she also attends to her bedridden mother, taking full responsibility for her care. Her daughter is married, and she is the family's sole earner. Undertaking small-scale tailoring and leasing her mother's field, she manages to sustain the family with a monthly income of Rs. 15,000. This falls far short of their monthly expenses, which exceed Rs. 20,000.

Despite labouring under such hardships, she actively participates in various community initiatives. She has led protests relating to the persistent issues of human-elephant conflicts, drug abuse, and sand mining practices that detrimentally impact the local populace. Her involvement has contributed to the exemplary work of local women's organisations.

When inquired about her views on the Truth Commission, she expressed deep skepticism. According to her, the Commission's efforts appear to be futile attempts to deceive the international community and buy time. Having already provided testimony before two previous committees, she remains disheartened by the lack of progress. She contends that even if new commissions are established, their inquiries would ultimately loop back to the government, yielding no tangible outcomes for the people. In her view, the inclusion of foreign representatives with the authority to promptly prosecute wrongdoers is crucial for the Commission to be effective. She emphasised the necessity for the direct involvement of affected communities, a proposition deemed improbable as long as the current ruling authorities remain in power.



## THEIVANAI

Theivanai lives in Periya Pullumalai, within the Chengaladi Divisional Secretariat of Eravur Bittu, Batticaloa District. She is 65 years old, and her National Identity Card Number is 589364515v. She is the mother of four sons and one daughter.

The war in the North East left a trail of brutality, deeply scarring individuals like Theivanai. Her husband went missing on Nov 20, 1986, leaving her to shoulder the responsibility of raising their children single-handedly amidst severe poverty. Just as she was navigating this hardship, another tragedy struck; her 14-year-old son disappeared on September 7, 1988, leaving a lasting mark on her.

Despite these traumatic events, she persevered, working as a daily-wage labourer to provide for her remaining three children. Over time, her two sons and daughter found their own paths, got married, and started their own families, leaving Theivanai to live alone.

The war's escalation in 2007 forced her to flee, seeking refuge in the Mayilampaveli camp. During this tumultuous period, on April 25, 2007, her son-in-law was abducted and subsequently killed by unknown perpetrators, the reason for which still remains a mystery. Following this tragedy, she assumed responsibility for caring for her daughter and her two children, including shouldering the financial burden of their education. Currently, she manages a small shop, persisting through life's trials with unwavering courage despite the deep sorrow that has marked her journey.

When questioned about the Truth Commission, she stated *"I harbour a deep aversion toward such initiatives. Over the years, numerous mandate groups have visited Sri Lanka, conducting meetings at the Divisional Secretariat. I have found these endeavours to be futile, offering no resolution to my queries. While I have heard of collaborative efforts involving foreign representatives in the new commission, my optimism remains cautious. I am hesitant to place full trust in the government's ability to act independently."*



## Jaffna District Conversation Public Opinion On Truth Commission

During our discussions with 13 women participants, they emphasised the significance of establishing a commission to amplify their voices and unearth the truth. They expressed confidence that, by bringing their issues to light, viable solutions could be attained. Despite their repeated efforts to engage with mandate committees and submit petitions, no resolution has materialised to date. However, the appointment of a commission similar to that of South Africa's TRC instilled a sense of hope among the participants.

Although the Sri Lankan government has initiated several commissions to investigate the truth, no tangible solutions have emerged for their grievances. The participants urged the Commission representatives to visit and witness their living conditions firsthand. They believe that direct engagement and firsthand experiences would provide a comprehensive understanding of their plight. Consequently, they advocated for an independent and inclusive commission that actively engages with the people and drafts comprehensive reports. Overall, the participants expressed optimism about the establishment of the Truth Commission and its potential to uncover the realities of their struggles.

## **JULIUS ANIWOODS RAJ SELVAMALAR,**

Selvamar is a 52-year-old woman and the mother of two children, a son and a daughter. Originally residing on her ancestral land on Point Pedro Road, Kangesanthurai, she was displaced in 1990 due to the civil war, subsequently relocating multiple times. Since 1996, she has resided in a refugee camp for a span of 27 years. In 1994, she entered into a joyful marriage, leading a contented life with her husband until he was abducted in a white van at 10 am while transporting sand on January 5, 2008.

Julius firmly believes that her husband's abduction was likely due to his associations with individuals involved in the LTTE movement. At the time of his disappearance, their son was 12 years old, and their daughter was merely seven. A formal complaint was lodged at the Thellipalai police station on January 6, 2008, followed by submissions to the Human Rights Commission and the ICRC. Engaging actively in protests concerning ongoing disappearances, she lodged a complaint with the Jaffna District Secretariat regarding missing persons in 2021.

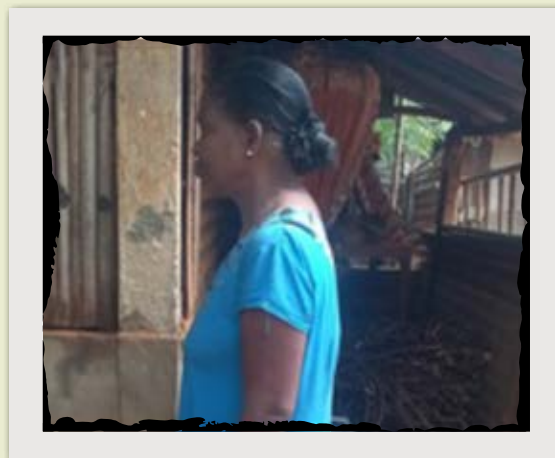
Despite assurances of receiving a monthly stipend of Rs. 6000 from the authorities, she has yet to receive any payment. Following her husband's disappearance, her parents stepped in to support the family, taking up wage labour to provide for their needs. Julius diligently educated her daughter until she reached the university level. However, due to the challenges faced in the refugee camp, her daughter was compelled to marry without getting her university degree. Presently, Julius resides with her son, struggling amidst challenging circumstances. Despite her hardships, she engages in social work to the best of her abilities.

Recognising the significance of an investigative commission, Julius expresses her belief that such an entity would serve as an effective platform to amplify her plight to the wider world. She remains hopeful for a just resolution and the possibility of accountability for those who have deceived them and previous administrations. She advocates for the direct involvement of Commission representatives in a comprehensive examination of the suffering endured by her community. Reflecting on past commissions, she underscores the necessity for unwavering integrity and fearlessness in the newly appointed commission, emphasising the importance of transparent proceedings independent of any undue influence from the Sri Lankan government.



## THANABALASINGAM LATHA,

Latha is a 57-year-old native of Mahiliddy South. Due to the ravages of war, she was displaced from her hometown on June 15, 1990, and endured a series of dislocations, residing in approximately ten different places. In 1996, the family finally found a place to settle. While discussing her experiences, Latha nostalgically remarked, *"We used to live freely on our own lands,"* her voice quivering with emotion. Before the conflict and after Latha got married on October 2, 1985, she and her husband, along with their two sons and a daughter, thrived on their own land, which included a substantial banana plantation. Life was characterised by freedom and tranquillity. However, their displacement in 1990 brought upon them immense suffering. Tragically, her husband went missing just two days after they were uprooted. To be precise, on June 17, 1990, near the Amman temple, her husband was abducted. Despite registering complaints with the police, the ICRC, and the Human Rights Commission, they still await any information regarding his whereabouts.



When her husband disappeared, their son was only two years old, their second son was one, and their daughter was three months old. Left to shoulder the responsibility of raising her young children, Latha faced numerous hardships, exacerbated by the absence of arable land. She turned to wage labour to make ends meet and had to rely on her parents' support. The family's financial constraints meant that the children could not access a comprehensive education. Both sons completed studies up to the fifth standard, and their daughter finished up to an ordinary standard. In the early days of residing in the camp, Latha struggled with a constant sense of fear. Venturing outside for work, she felt society's judgmental gaze, exacerbating her distress. Presently, she manages a small business and relies on assistance from her daughter. She expressed her concern about her son-in-law's excessive alcohol consumption, which has precipitated various challenges for her daughter's family, further intensifying her stress.

Latha's anticipation of the Truth Commission is filled with hope and happiness. She strongly believes that the war has had a profound impact on their lives, resulting in immense suffering and the disappearance of family members without any information emerging. She seeks justice through the Commission, believing that it has the potential to provide much-needed answers. She insists that the Commission's representatives should visit them directly and allow them to openly share their experiences, as they are often plagued by suspicion. Having provided testimonies to multiple commissions previously without any tangible outcomes, she retains some doubts about the efficacy of the new commission. Nonetheless, she firmly believes that their long-standing suffering since 1990 should be acknowledged, and she hopes to find justice through this Commission at the very least.



Participants share a snack after a lengthy discussion on post-war transition, fostering camaraderie and continued dialogue.

## Conflict Affected Women's Ordeals

Our engagement with women in the former conflict-affected regions of Sri Lanka, particularly those heading households in temporary settlements, highlights profound challenges that go beyond mere economic hardship. Their ordeal represents the daunting situation confronted by 40,000-60,000 women as our community conversations unfolded and explained the multi-faceted challenges these women face. Their experiences of displacement and dispossession bring to light not only economic and physical vulnerabilities, but also deep psychosocial impacts exacerbated by social stigma and discrimination.

When women shared experiences of being displaced or dispossessed, they often spoke of the stigma associated with being seen as 'the other.' Displaced and dispossessed communities were often labelled with derogatory names such as 'ahadi', which means displaced or refugee. Women often seemed to face these social stigmas while trying to access state services or when moving to host communities. Such discrimination extended beyond individual experiences and harmfully affected children, who faced segregation, exclusion, and isolation in schools.

In Jaffna, a young woman shared her experience of how none of her classmates ever came to her house, not even for a birthday, as their houses were seen as unhygienic and dirty, with sewage and garbage everywhere. Her community had been displaced, and she has lived in temporary settlements for nearly 30 years. A whole generation grew up in these settings. Others shared

experiences of children from displaced communities being asked to sit separately in classrooms.

In these experiences of discrimination, it is clear that stigma was also related to caste, as well as ethnicity. In patriarchal societies, women are frequently considered the default carriers of community identity and disproportionately bear the burden of the stigma held against the community. This stigma is sometimes expressed through varying forms of

violence in the private and public realms against women's bodies. Some of the participants from the Northern Province shared that, for women from families of the disappeared, an added challenge was related to utilising property, even mortgaging or leasing it, because of the customary Thesavalamai local law, whereby women cannot make independent decisions regarding property without their husband's consent unless he is legally declared dead.

Some of these vulnerabilities, especially affecting women in conflict areas, such as protracted and multiple displacements, are linked to the government's consolidation of control over the territories of the former conflict zones, while other vulnerabilities relate specifically to structural and societal gender discrimination. Thus, serving as a breadwinner is made particularly difficult for women not only because they live in a former conflict zone but also specifically on account of their gender.<sup>47</sup>

The United Nations resolution co-sponsored by the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and UNHRC in October 2015 aimed to specifically address the need for durable solutions for IDPs, with an expressed aim of promoting reconciliation, accountability, and human rights. Displacement is a long-standing issue for some groups, with long-term effects on community identity, support systems, family structure, and gender roles, particularly in communities with a higher frequency of women-headed households.

<sup>47</sup> Raksha Vasudevan. (2013), "Everyday Resistance: Female Headed Households in Northern Sri Lanka", 5.1 (2013) available at: <http://books.openedition.org/iheid/689>.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**A**lthough there is dearth of specific data on the female poverty rate in Sri Lanka for 2023, the available information suggests that overall poverty increased during the period 2019 -2022, that is, from 11.3 percent to 25.0 percent,<sup>48</sup> disproportionately affecting women as compared to men. This highlights the critical need for gender-responsive policies and programmes. Such initiatives are essential not just for mitigating the immediate impacts of the crisis on women but also for laying the groundwork and restructuring the economies for addressing economic disparities and promoting women's empowerment.

Even though Sri Lanka had a relatively high level of educational equality, well-being, and health care when the armed conflict began, it was still marked by traditional patriarchal structures, particularly in male-dominated socio-economic and political spheres. As a result, women have traditionally occupied a primarily domestic role, and this role has defined their identities within society.

In Sri Lanka, as in many other societies, traditionally defined gender roles are compounded by historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors: male members of the house occupy the public space, and female members of the house occupy the domestic space. These preordained social roles have forced women to depend on male family members to materially provide for the family. Additionally, the status of the head of the household that is automatically assigned to male family members in society enables them to exercise control over female family members and view this status as their right. Women are assigned a lesser status and therefore

face unequal treatment and discrimination outside and sometimes inside the home. This unequal power relationship, along with societal discrimination, often leads to violence against women. However, as documented in myriad case history cameos in this study across regions and communities, women have had to assume the subject identity of worker, indeed the primary wage earner for the family.

The Constitution of Sri Lanka, by virtue of Article 12(4), provides that the State may make "special provision" through "law, subordinate legislation or executive action for the advancement of women, children or disabled persons." This allows for the adoption of specific interventions for women's advancement through the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security adopted in March 2023.

### Gender-Based Violence

Even though the war is over, former conflict zones remain heavily militarised, and this has constrained the space for local women's collectives and individual advocacy. Women participating in the CCs specifically noted how surveillance practices, such as those done during evenings and/or conducted with women officers, negatively impact the lives of ex-combatants and result in exacerbating their social ostracism from village communities.

Women in the North and East have continued to advocate for justice, accountability, and redress for harms stemming from the armed conflict. Women have boldly testified at international and national forums regarding grave crimes committed by the government and the LTTE. However, despite their bold efforts, most cases of

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48 World Bank (2023) Poverty & Equity Brief - Sri Lanka .

violence against women are yet to be prosecuted, and many socio-economic harms remain unaddressed.

### **SGBV**

Digitalize the data pertaining to sexual violence with a special tracking system that records the timeline from the first complaint to the resolution of the matter through dismissal, withdrawal, acquittal, or conviction.

### **Socially Re-integrate ex-combatants**

Establish effective grievance-handling mechanisms and introduce psycho-social counselling for women ex-combatants to aid them with reintegration into society more effectively and with confidence.

### **Code of Ethics**

Development of a Code of Conduct and Ethics guiding Tri-Forces and police officers on the relevant laws, policies, and mechanisms to prevent sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict contexts.

Dealing with gender discrimination, which drastically exacerbated women's vulnerabilities during and after the war, must begin with an analysis of deeply embedded cultural norms regarding masculinity and femininity, entrenched gender-obsessed traditional cultural practices and discrimination related to caste, as well as disabilities

### **Eliminating Discrimination Against Women**

Take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs, and practices that constitute discrimination against women, including reforming the Muslim Women's Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA).

### **Women with War-Related Disability**

These women continue to experience social, structural, institutional, and intersectional violence, which threatens women's peace and security. A national strategic plan should be formulated that caters to their needs accordingly.

The harms endured by women in the North and East as a result of the armed conflict and the causes of those harms are likely to be more varied and complex than what transitional justice mechanisms have traditionally

dealt with. Thus, transitional justice mechanisms will not only have to examine the causes of harms using a broader scope, but they will also have to examine the harms themselves using a broader scope.

Women in Sri Lanka do not speak with one voice. Not only do their experiences vary across time and place, but also their responses to their experiences and their ideas of justice are equally varied. For example, some women prefer to stay silent with respect to their experiences, whereas others would prefer to voice their experiences to a wider audience. Therefore, responding to their needs will require each mechanism to take an inclusive and flexible approach.

### **Transitional Justice Mechanisms**

In the case of a transitional justice mechanism, inclusion and flexibility can only be attained with consistent and continuous input in the design and implementation of transitional justice mechanisms from survivors of violence themselves, as well as their representatives and trained gender specialists.

### **TJ: No Return to Gendered Status Quo**

To effectively address the issues that led to women's victimisation during the armed conflict and the perpetuation of victimisation in the post-conflict period, transitional justice processes must not seek to return society to the place that it was in the past. To do so would re-invigorate the systemic inequalities that led to the widespread commission of sexual and gender-based violence and the deepening of the socio-economic marginalisation of women during and following the armed conflict. This would result in both a failure to provide adequate redress for harms done to women in the past and a re-victimisation of women in the post-transitional justice era.

### **TJ: Locate 'harm' in structural issues**

A transitional justice mechanism that hopes to effectively uncover the causes of violence against women associated with armed conflict must examine broader societal issues over a longer period of time than it might for other issues.

Due to gender discrimination stemming from biased gender norms, women in the North and East have

endured considerable hardships. Despite these hardships, they have operated within the little space they carved with ingenuity and perseverance. Not only do they have the possibility of benefiting from transitional justice mechanisms, but their perspectives are necessary to develop a successful transitional justice process. Given the challenges that lie ahead for the transitional justice process in Sri Lanka, their opinions and their cooperation in transitional justice mechanisms are essential if their goals are to be realised.

## Displacement and Land Rights

Women who have experienced both internal and external displacement due to protracted conflict emphasised the continuing effects of being distanced from their homes, the pervasive disruptions to their lives, and the fact that they continue to be treated differently and as outsiders, even after decades of living together with their host communities.

### Restoration of Lands of the Displaced

Land under the control of the military must be released and lives restored in the North expeditiously. Mechanisms should be developed to provide families with technical support in relation to the required documentation.

### Land Policy for Displaced Muslims

Land policy must provide for displaced Muslim families, giving them the option of returning to their own lands or receiving adequate compensation, as well as alternate lands in mutually agreed-upon areas. It must also provide proactive measures to ensure social integration and acceptance.

### Provision of Social Security

The application processes for social security and other welfare programmes, such as the Samurdhi and ASWASUMA schemes, should be made more inclusive. Information about such programmes must be easily accessible to the public.

### Displacement and disposal are no reason for Exclusion

Social security programmes that are tied to a permanent address cannot be used as reasons for removing people

from social security programmes that are tied to a permanent address. Where there is a structural issue, such as the loss of a permanent address, the state should find alternative mechanisms to facilitate vulnerable communities' joining social security and welfare programmes.

Social security is about sustaining women and households in the long term—supporting them in their land struggles and rebuilding their lives. Also, social security and welfare programmes must recognize the long-term impacts of war and loss, particularly loss of land and livelihood, on the human body.

### Recognise Women's Care Work

Social Security Schemes should recognise women's care work in holding together families affected by the war and those who have experienced dispossession from their lands and factor in how such dispossession is impacting women's well-being.<sup>49</sup>

## Land Rights

*"My father remarried, we are his firstborn but we are daughters. In his second marriage, he had a son, and the land will go to the son according to the law."*

### Develop People-Centred Definitions for the Commons

In relation to the commons (public land or space) and community property (possession by communities based on traditional or historic possession and use) develop people-centred definitions.

### Equitable Distribution of State Lands to Landless

The state must proactively ensure and prioritise the equitable distribution of state lands to landless communities. The state must also introduce sex-disaggregated data on state land ownership and distribution processes.

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<sup>49</sup> Report of the Final Report of The Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms of November 2016, the Public Representations Committee considering Constitutional reform of May 2016, the Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Lessons Learnt And Reconciliation of November 2011



Voicing their concerns and ideas to address local issues and promote unity.

### **Amend Land Development Ordinance**

The state must urgently amend the Land Development Ordinance to remove gender discriminatory clauses.

### **Respect Interests of Local Populations & Indigenous Peoples**

State officials and government bodies must not misuse land distribution policies by introducing settlements disadvantaging or oppressing local populations and indigenous peoples.

Greater acknowledgment and recognition are needed regarding how past governments pursued and implemented settlements with political and racist agendas. The government must proactively protect people from homelessness caused by unfit policies, laws, and development projects.

### **Stop the land alienation of Minority Communities**

Minorities must not be alienated from the land they have historically used. Citing spurious archaeological evidence or reasons related to protecting wildlife and forest cover, the displacement of these communities must be stopped.

### **Truth, Unity and Reconciliation Process**

Over the years, several consultations have been held with the women affected by the conflict. A civil society-led initiative, the Consultation Task Force, has documented the experiences of women and provided detailed recommendations. Women expressed a fatigue of more consultations, as consultations take up time and money.

### **T-UR Commission based on LLRC**

The proposed Truth, Unity, and Reconciliation Commission should base its strategies on the recommendations related to truth-seeking based on the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission and the Consultation Task Force on Transitional Justice without delay.

Reparations must acknowledge loss while also providing for collective and symbolic reparations.

### **Demilitarisation and human security**

Demilitarisation and human security should be part of the truth-seeking process whereby the present disruption to livelihoods and local economies is restored.

## **Demilitarising the Northern and Eastern Provinces**

Active and retired military personnel appointed to civilian offices such as the urban development authority have oppressed local people. The state must demilitarise the Northern and Eastern Provinces with immediate effect.

## **Parallel Mandate for Reparations, Restitution, and Compensation**

There should be a parallel mandate for reparations, restitution, and compensation. People's grievances related to the violence and injustice experienced at the time of displacement must also be addressed.

## **TRC Agenda to Include Demographic Engineering**

Changing the demographics of areas where minority communities live in significant numbers, especially the northern and eastern parts of the island, by settling Sinhalese and Buddhists from the south should be a focus of the TRC.

## **Attention to Plantation Workers Historic grievances**

Grievances should be taken into account when restoring benefits that are due to the plantation workers.

## **Women and Economy**

The community conversations revealed that communities are not well informed of development planning and International Monetary Fund (IMF) processes. They receive information from the media and political discourse. There was a lack of awareness regarding projects. Also, there was a lack of consideration of the impact of particular types of development on the lives of local communities, and too little consideration was given to the opportunities for local communities to benefit from these developments. Women have become mere beneficiaries of schemes and projects with little or no participation at all as decision-makers. Women have become victims of a continuous cycle of debt.

## **Ensure 30% Resource Allocation & Representation in decision-making bodies.**

Ensure a minimum 30% resource allocation for women's livelihoods and access to infrastructure and decision-making bodies, and 30% representation at all levels of decision-making bodies. It is important to adopt a gender budget policy.

People must be provided with information about agricultural and fisheries services provided by government and private institutions.

## **Prioritise Small-scale Producers Rights**

Small-scale Producers must be guaranteed rights to their lands, water and commons and should be given priority over large-scale land transfers to multinational companies

## **Recognize Women's Care Work**

The state must design a policy that recognizes women's care work and ensure new social security programmes that support care work, including (but not limited to) maternity support and support for the care of elders and family members with disabilities and/or illness.

## **Protect Workers Rights**

The state must enact laws that ensure the labour rights of workers in the informal economy, including a decent living wage, maternity benefits, health insurance, childcare support, and pensions. International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention C190 should be ratified.

## **Impact assessment of relief programmes on women's economic independence**

The government social welfare scheme 'ASWASUMA' launched in 2023 provides Rs. 12,000 monthly to a population of 3 million. We propose an impact assessment be made to ensure the programme facilitates sustainable livelihood practices and income generation.

## **Regulating micro-credit schemes**

Women are trapped in various microcredit schemes burdened with debt repayments. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka should introduce a regulatory framework for such enterprises and regulate scams.

## Plantation People

The tea plantation community's 200 years of grievances and exploitative labour practices in Sri Lanka require immediate attention. The CCs revealed many hardships in the lived experiences of people working on one of the oldest tea plantations in Sri Lanka. The Malayaha Tamils' historical experience of injustice and the impact it has had on their lives and futures are undeniable. They have been crushed by generations of exploitative extraction of their labour, together with disenfranchisement and systematic exclusion from decision-making processes, a lack of support from or access to public services, and a general lack of care or support for their well-being. This cumulative layering of harm requires special attention.

### Grant Land and House Ownership to Plantation Families

At least 20 perches of land with a house each should be granted to resident families of plantations as their due for working for the plantation. Full ownership of this land should be provided by way of a proper land deed, so they have the freedom to decide how to utilise this land for housing and household food productivity. Ensure women get equal ownership of land.

### Ensure Access to Government Services

People living in plantation areas should have access to services provided by local government authorities similar to those in other villages in Sri Lanka.

### Provide Access to Agricultural Land

Plantation workers will be provided access to agricultural land (at least ½ acre), and assisted in developing ecological home gardens to ensure their food security.

Policies pertaining to the management of plantations must be reconsidered to ensure that the labour rights of plantation workers are protected and that other social and environmental externalities are considered.

Sustainable coexistence between humans and wildlife must be facilitated by interconnecting fragmented ecosystems and facilitating the processes by which forest plantations transition to natural forests. Women shared experiences related to conflicts emerging with officers of the wildlife authorities, especially those living in the

villages bordering forests in the Puttlam and Mannar districts. The human–elephant conflict has resulted in the tragic deaths of both animals and human beings.

### Implement subsidised insurance programmes

To address the economic fallout from the human –animal conflict, a subsidised insurance programme must be implemented. Retroactively, compensation mechanisms should be based on assessments conducted in consultation with affected individuals and groups (including farmer societies).

A sustainable, environmentally friendly solution must be found to manage the human-eagle conflict in these regions.

## Women And Decision-Making

### Ensure minimum 25% representation in Provincial Councils

Introduce provisions within the Provincial Council Election Act No. 2 of 1988 and the Parliamentary Elections Act No. 1 of 1981 to provide for a minimum representation of 25% guarantees for women at the parliamentary level.

Advocate for at least 25% of each party's nominations to be given to women candidates to promote women's inclusive representation in national politics.

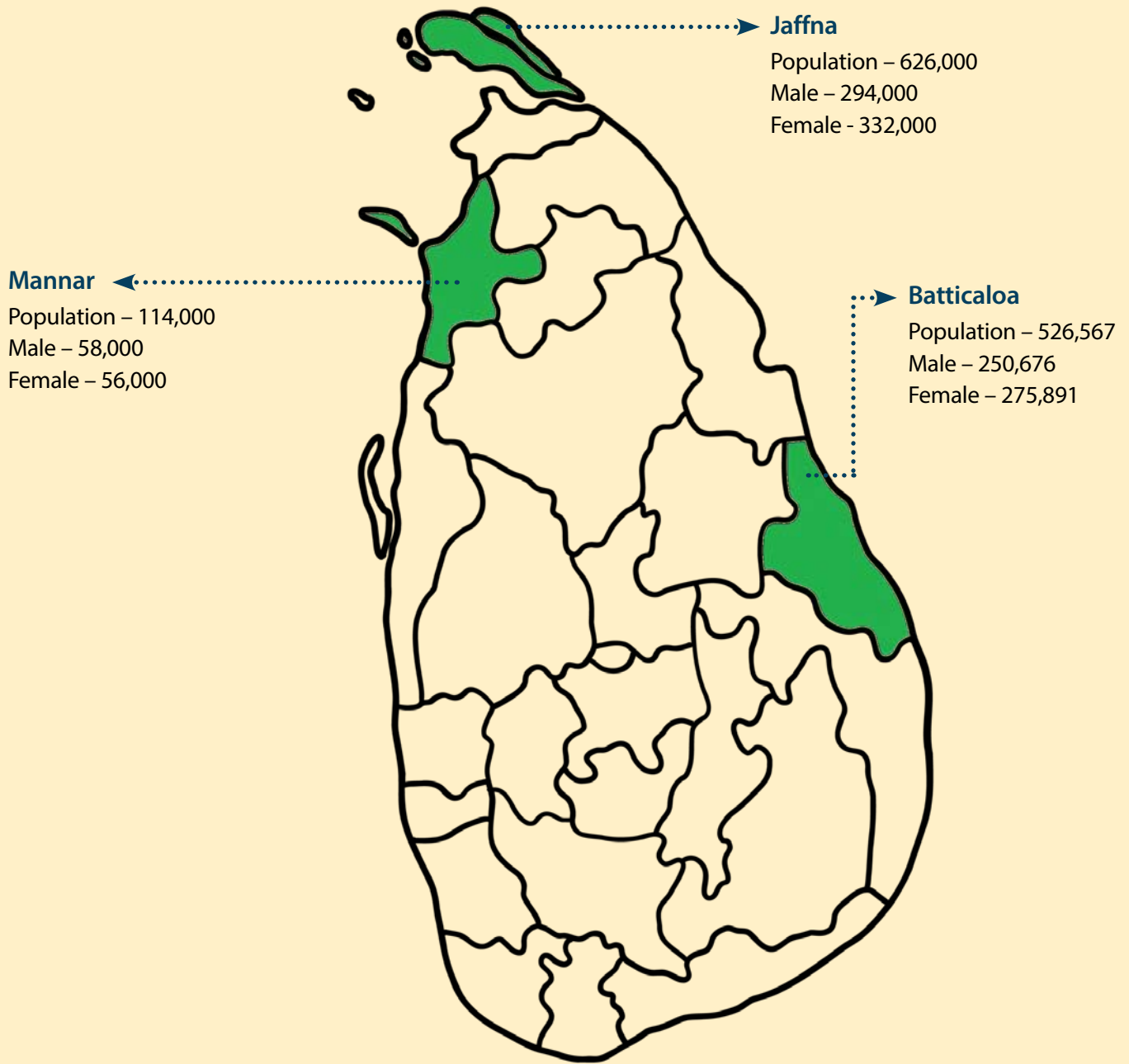
### Female-Headed Household

Female Headed Households (FHH) should have priority over access to livelihood support institutions and sectoral unions (e.g., farmers'/ trade unions), as well as the right to participate in decision-making within those institutions.

## **ANNEXURES**

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# Country Profile





# Country Profile

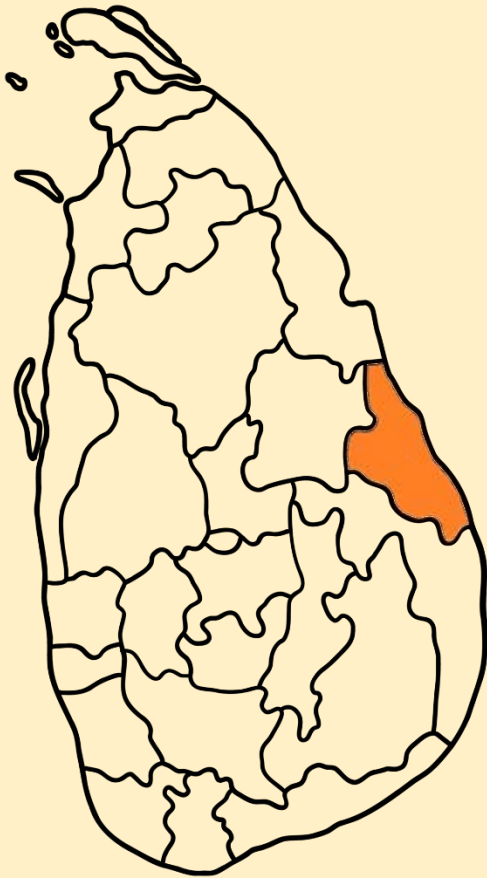


**Colombo**  
Population – 2,324,349  
Male – 1,140,472  
Female – 1,183,877

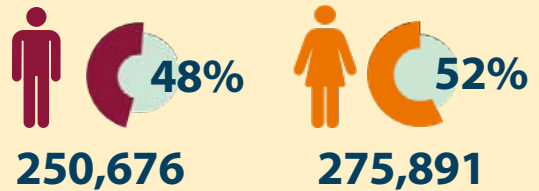
**Galle**  
Population – 1,147,000  
Male – 550,000  
Female – 597,000

**Nuwara Eliya**  
Population – 711,644  
Male – 340,347  
Female – 371,297

# Batticaloa District



Population – 526,567



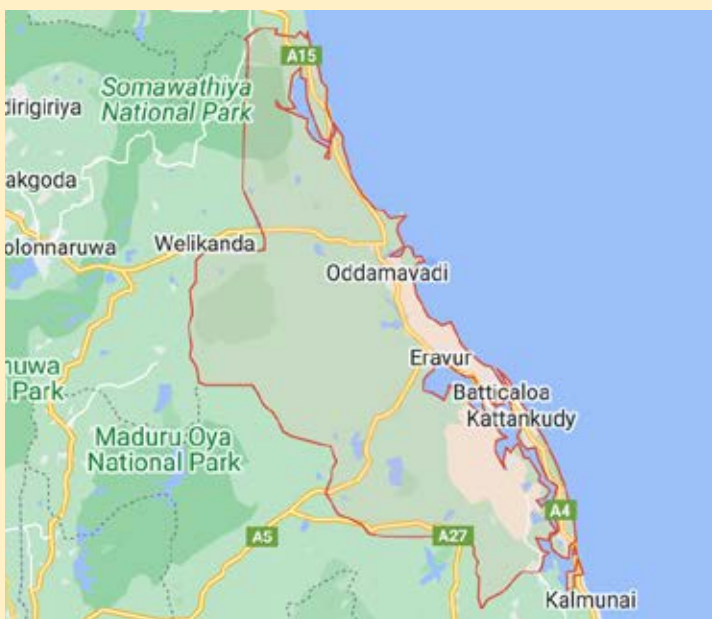
## Administration

Batticaloa District is divided into 14 Divisional Secretary's Division. The DS Divisions are further sub-divided into 346 Grama Niladhari Divisions. Batticaloa district has three electoral divisions, Paddiruppu, Batticaloa and Kalkudah.

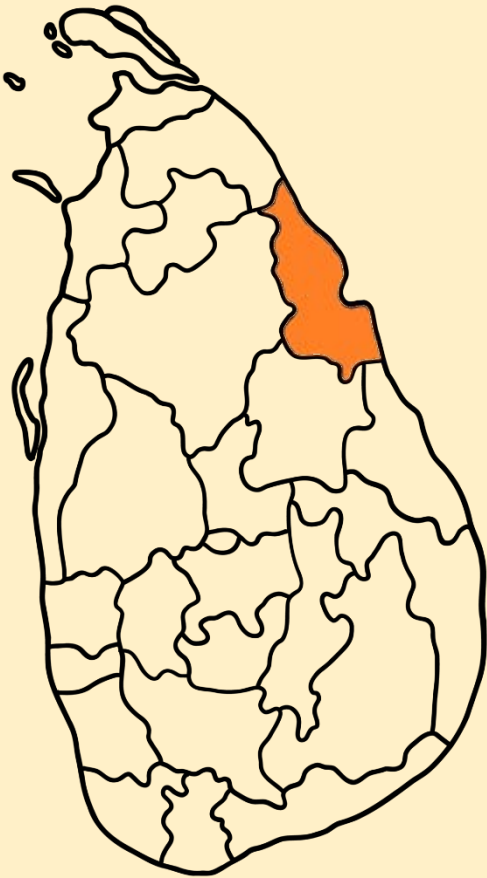
## Economy

Major portion of the population is engaged in agriculture, dairy farming while the fishing occupies the second place in the district. Other occupations are industrial activities, business and employment in government, corporation, and private establishments. The economy of the district is depending mostly on Agriculture and Fishing. The district has about more than 30,000 Agriculture families and about more than 15,000 fishing families (Sea fishing, Lagoon and River fishing and Pond fishing).

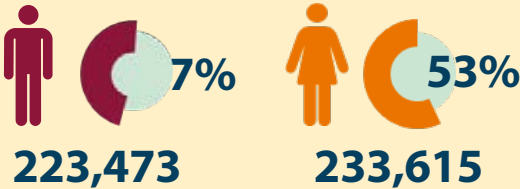
The social structure is further refracted by a complex class system which is intersected by caste, ethnicity, and gendered hierarchies as well as other stratifications. In addition, decades of civil war and persisting intercommunal conflicts disclose various social, economic, and political histories, making this region a complex socio-cultural and political terrain.



# Trincomalee District



Population – 457,088



### Administration

It has an area of 2,272 square kilometers (1,053 sq mi), Trincomalee District is divided into 11 Divisional Secretary's Division (DS Divisions). The DS Divisions are further sub-divided into 230 Grama Niladhari Divisions (GN Divisions). Trincomalee District has 13 local authorities of which two are Urban Councils and the remaining 11 are Divisional Councils (Pradesha Sabhai or Pradeshiya Sabha).

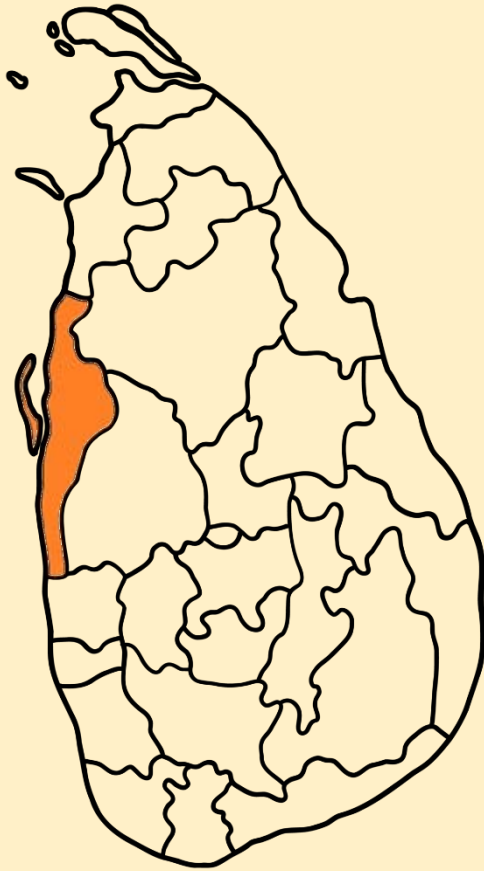
### Economy

The major source of livelihood of the community is the agriculture and fishing. Paddy cultivation stands as the main agriculture crop in the District. The Kanthale Tank, Wendrasanwewa, Morewewa, Mahadiwulwewa, and Paravipanjankulama are some major tanks. There are three major irrigation projects: Kanthale, Alla- Kanthale and Morewewa.

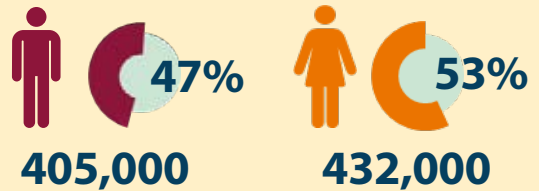
Livestock & cattle breeding is another livelihood. As Trincomalee is blessed with a world-renowned coast and tourist destinations, tourism industry is another important economic activity. With its excellent natural harbor and strategic positioning, international companies like Prima Ceylon and Tokyo Cement, have located their manufacturing plants and distribution center at Trincomalee.



# Puttalam District



Population – 837,000



## Administration

Puttalam which locates in the Northwestern province of Sri Lanka is divided into 16 Divisional Secretariats. Further it is divided in to 548 Grama Niladhari Divisions and 05 Electorate divisions as administrative units. Puttalam urban council and Chilaw urban council are the two urban councils functioning in the district. The total local bodies of the district are 24. Out of these 10 are Pradeshya Sabhas and 14 are sub Pradeshya Sabhas.

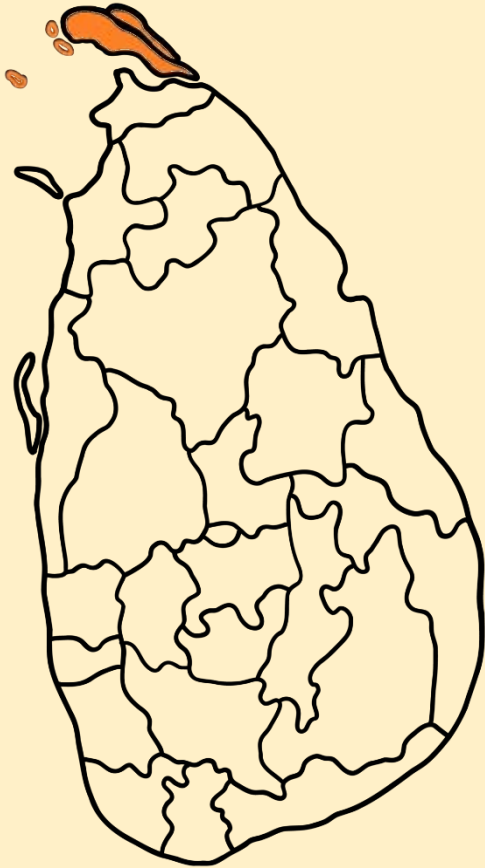
## Economy

Paddy cultivation is the main livelihood of the people of the district, which is fed by the advanced irrigation system that has existed since ancient times. Fishing is the main livelihood of the coastal people living in the district, which has 150 km lengthy coastal line. Shrimp farming in tanks set up adjacent to the coastal line also contributes to foreign exchange earnings.

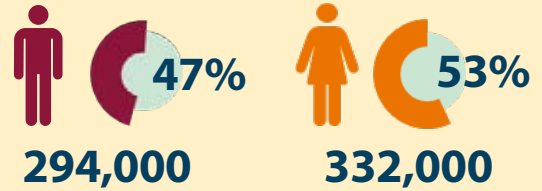
Puttalam District has a special attraction for foreign tourists due to its close proximity to the Katunayaka International Airport and the presence of religious places such as Munneswaram Devalaya and Talawila church which are respected very much by foreign devotees.



# Jaffna District



Population – 626,000



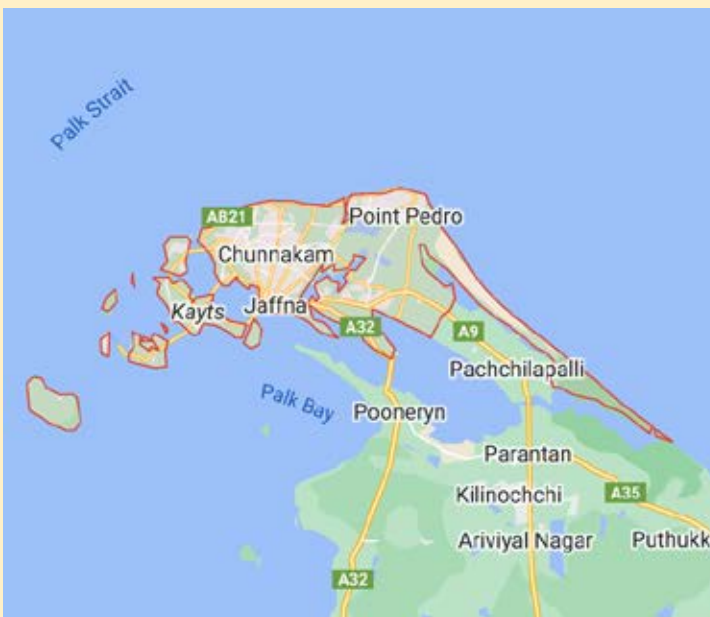
## Administration

Jaffna District is divided into 15 Administrative divisions. These Administrative Divisions are divided into 435 Grama Officers divisions. Seventeen Local bodies are functioning in Jaffna district. Jaffna and Part of Nallur Divisions are covered by Jaffna Municipal Council.

## Economy

People in Jaffna district traditionally farming community. Their culture is mostly agrarian based. These traditional farmers have generations of experience about the soil, climate and agricultural technology which is unique to their system of production. Jaffna District is surrounded by Sea and Lagoon. The Fisheries Sector is an important sector in Jaffna District and major economic activity and the source of livelihood for about 21456 families consisting of 91,129 persons in and 22,103 persons active fisherman in Jaffna District.

Jaffna is an immense potential for tourism and Hotel industry. Three types of places such as Historical, Natural and Religious places are available in Jaffna district.



## ANNEXURE 2

### **District Report Compilations were co-ordinated and written by the following:**

**Mahaluxmy Kurushanthan** is a resident of Mannar and has been an active women's rights activist since 1990. She was displaced twice during the ethnic conflict and on return in the late nineties joined SEDEC and the Community Trust Fund focusing on work related to the displaced in her district. In 2003 she pioneered the formation of the Mannar Women's Development Federation in 2003 and is serving as the District .Coordinator. She is also a member of Women Action Network., a feminist activists and human rights defenders interactive forum.

**Dharshika Sivapragasam** is a resident of the Kandy district is a LLB Graduate. She is a youth activist, representing the tea planation community and now working as a Legal and Human Rights Associate at Human Development Organization.

**Saroja Sivachandran** is the Director of the Centre for Women and Development Jaffna and a pioneer member of the Women's Political Academy . She holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree from the University of of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka and a Master's Degree from the University of Jaffna. She was a lecturer in the University of Peradeniya and then joined as a Senior Lecturer at the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute, Colombo. She is a prominents women's rights advocate working for women's human rights, gender based violence and reconciliation for over three decades.

**Bisliya Bhutto**, presently residing in the Puttlam district was evicted with her family from Jaffna in 1990 and has lived as an internally displaced person. During her displacement she began to get involved in issues related youth in her region and joined a change makers' programme in the North and East. She began to focus on the rights of women in these engagements and became a member of the Women's Action Forum in 2011. She is a former member of the Puttlam Pradeshiya Sabaha.

**Sirany Thevakumar** started to engage with activities of the Women's Action network focusing on women human rights defenders since 2016. She has been supporting research activities focusing on gender based violence and being involved in advocacy for women's rights and human rights.

**Buddhika Mendis** is a member of WPA-SL since its inception. She is a Programme Co-ordinator of the WPA-SL. She has over twenty years' experience in the non-governmental sector and has worked in a number of leading NGOs such as the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), the Foundation for Co-Existence, Women's Education and Research Centre, Right to Life and IMADR Asia Committee. Her focus is on women's rights including gender budgeting, economic social cultural rights and civil and political rights in general. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sinhala, English, and Western Classics from University of Peradeniya and a Master of Arts degree in Human Rights from the University of Colombo.

**Oshara Deemanthi** is a LLB graduate and a youth activist of the Women's Political Academy and the Women's Centre. She has been an intern working with female garment workers in the free trade zones supporting labour rights advocacy of the WPA-SL and IMADR-AC.

**Vijitha Ehamparanathan** is a Women Rights Activist based in Trincomalee.

**Sarniya Rasutham** is an Attorney – at-Law a resident in Kilinochchi district, Northern Province. She is a member and youth activist of the Centre for Women and Development. Presently she is working in the Legal Aid Commission.

## ANNEXURE 3

### INTERIM REPORT

The Women's Political Academy launched activities related to the implementation of the Community Conversation process in Sri Lanka in 2023 having the following objectives:

- a) To facilitate a discussion based on Community Conversation style related to the **Women's perspectives on Truth and Reconciliation and associated advocacy efforts with recommendations**
- b) To build a community conversation process documenting the adverse impact on lives of women due to the ongoing economic crisis
- c) Broadening the understanding related to **Countering Violent Religious Extremisms and their negative impact on women linking to regional experiences eg Afghanistan**
- d) **Strengthening the WRN in all aspects including joining the Regional WRN online WPS Course**

### The Context of the Project Implementation

The project has taken into account

- a) The impact of the long years of internal civil conflict resulting in large scale of internal displacement, hundreds and thousands of disappearances, assassinations of journalists, political activists and human rights activists including prominent politicians.
- b) The living experiences of the population living in those worst affected areas in the Northern and Eastern Province and the border villages of the conflict experienced severe economic hardships, social tensions and security issues.
- c) Living experiences of Women Workers especially those in the tea plantation region who were brought in by the British as indentured labour 200 years ago the majority of tea pickers being women.
- d) Women workers in the garment industry who will fall into the category of 'modern labour force' nonetheless recognised as a voice to be recognised as strong advocates for women's human rights and reconciliation representing the majority Sinhala population.
- e) Other feminist studies and research documentation related to the experiences of the ethnic conflict and IDP experiences.
- f) The recent adoption of a Gender Equality Policy, the proposal tabled to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the agreements signed with the International Monetary Fund and the Women, Peace and Security Action Plan (2023)

### Expectations of the Project

The project has linked an advocacy component related to recommendations stemming from the CCs with the already established transitional justice mechanism e.g. with the Office on Missing Persons, Office for Reparation and with the proposed Truth Commission. Further the core team will also make initiatives to hold a high level policy dialogue with relevant government authorities based on the CC Report at a launch.

These activities will promote regular meetings of the WRN Sri Lanka Core Team as those who have given leadership to facilitate the implementation of the CCs will be drawn into expanding the platform of WRN in Sri Lanka.

## **Preparatory Process**

Prior to the launching of CCs in Sri Lanka with the support of WRN a Training Programme was held in Sri Lanka on 11th and 12 March 2023. Two experts from the region Ms Saima Jasam of Pakistan and Ms Rita Manchanda provided valuable inputs to the WRN Core Team and district level activists identified by the Core Team to facilitate the community conversation process. The full report has already been finalised and shared with WRN and our members involved in the implementation of the process.

## **Implementation of the Activities**

Following the workshop held in March a budget review took place taking into consideration the experiences and the need to include academic consultants to supervise the documentation work involved in leading the project. The Sri Lanka process was developed involving several districts and varying voices involving both activists and academics going beyond one researcher format documenting experiences of women.

Further Directors of IMADR are participated in the community conversations wherever possible and particularly the Women's Centre and Human Development Organisations who contributed towards holding several CCs as required without burdening the project budget. We appreciate this voluntarism from them. It is taken as an experience for the second generation whom they are involving in the process.



## ANNEXURE 4

### Sample size for the Community Conversations

#### DETAILS OF WHO ATTENDED THE FOCUS GROUP AND THEIR PROFILE

District	Number	IDP	Indian Returnees	Single Women	Age	Disability	Daily wage earners	Employed
Mannar	25	17		12	20-63	02	15	05
Northern Province (Jaffna+Kilinochchi)	50	26		24	22-65	10	05	02
Puttlam	50	25		30	21-65	03	35	15
Batticaloa	27	20	03	08	23-65	01	24	03
Galle	25	06		17	20-62	02	16	09
Colombo	25	04		12	23-58	03	08	13
Nuwaraeliya	25	07	08	11	19-59	02	19	06
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>227</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>19-65</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>53</b>







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