

# Women in Peace or Pieces?

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## Perspectives from Sri Lanka

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*Ce texte ouvre une vaste sélection d'options qui visent le développement de la paix par les femmes au Sri Lanka. Elles ont annoncé leurs valeurs, leurs diverses notions sur la paix et leurs défis face à leur participation. Des femmes furent invitées une première fois par un bureau officiel (Sous-comité sur les problèmes du genre) et leur rapport évalue le potentiel et les inconvénients de ce sous-comité. Au final, le texte inclut les recommandations destinées aux trois partenaires: le gouvernement sri lankais, les organismes de la société civile et la communauté internationale. Ce sont des mesures spécifiques qui encourageront les femmes vers la gouvernance et la construction de la paix.*

A paradox exists when it comes to women in the peace-building processes in Sri Lanka, which have been termed, for example, as “Progressive Policies, Regressive Practices” (ICAN; Yusuf “Sri Lanka’s Tryst”, “Nation-building”). This article begins with highlighting the need and value that women bring to peace-building (Dyfen, Haver, and Piccirilli). It then discusses the challenges that women in Sri Lanka face when participating in public life, including in peace processes. This article also explores the differing notions of peace that women in Sri Lanka hold, and their vision for participation in peace-building and public life.

The positive progress on the subject will be recorded in light of the state machinery that exists to empower women in public life including political participation. The inclusion of this aspect rests on the premise that a political presence is critical for meaningful representation of women’s concerns (Yusuf, “The X Factor”).

The paper will move on to discuss the first formal space

that women in Sri Lanka were given for participation within an official mechanism, namely, the Sub-Committee on Gender Issues (SCGI) that was established at the time negotiations began between the Government of Sri Lanka and the terrorist organization, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2002. This article will briefly evaluate the potential and drawbacks of such a mechanism to include women and their concerns in peace processes (Yusuf, “They Hold Up”; Kumudini).

The paper will conclude with recommendations for change directed to three important stakeholders, namely, the Government of Sri Lanka, national and international civil society organizations, and finally the international community, for specific measures that can be adopted to foster, improve, and strengthen women’s efforts in governance and peace-building in Sri Lanka.

### **The Context: Paradoxes and Challenges**

Sri Lanka is a country still emerging from a three-decade conflict that concluded in 2009. Despite the end of the civil war between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, the consequences of the struggle to the country and its people have been significant (Yusuf “Sri Lanka’s Tryst,” “Nation-building”).

Families and communities were destroyed beyond recognition. In one survey of the war-torn areas, 80 percent of women were either widowed, unmarried, divorced, or living separately from their husbands. Among them, 70 percent were heading households, and the majority had no jobs (AWAW). The civil war also led to the systematic damage of infrastructure, land, and property, as well as the destruction of the social fabric and family structures.

Furthermore, the psychological trauma among men, women, and children has been immeasurable (ICAN).

While the majority of the 280,000 to 300,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned to their areas of origin, vulnerability is most evident among the women—especially the widowed, the wives of the disappeared, and those heading households.

The national government estimates that in the north and east there are ninety thousand widows, most of them below the age of forty (ICAN). A survey conducted by

protection of rights of underserved populations including migrant and plantation workers. Attention and demand for gender equality issues contributed to the increased visibility of the multiple roles played by women. In turn, new laws were adopted by both nationalities to improve women's access to justice. Nevertheless, the paradox prevails (ICAN). Women remain largely absent from official decision-making structures, and male-dominated political parties have at times co-opted the women's campaigns without delivering on their demands (ICAN).

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the Jaffna-based Center for Women and Development revealed that the Northern region had approximately forty thousand female-headed households, including more than twenty thousand in the Jaffna District alone. Despite this, unemployment levels for women are double those of men. Their exposure to poverty is correspondingly high. Moreover, many come from traditional families where their role is to manage the domestic affairs, leaving income generation to their husbands. Entering the public workforce is a significant challenge for them.

The stigma associated with widowhood is still strong in Hindu culture. It is a key obstacle that many Tamil women in particular face on a daily basis. In unregulated rural areas and in the non-unionized sectors for example, women receive lower wages because they are considered less skilled. They are also targets of exploitation, with limits on their right to own land (some practices dating back to the Victorian colonial era). Many have to donate labour in exchange for basic shelter and housing (ICAN).

The civil war prompted many women in both Tamil and Sri Lankan communities to begin to take on public roles in civic organizations. Some became grassroots peacemakers, actively involved in mediating violence and seeking peaceful solutions. Others such as the Mothers and Daughters of Lanka have been active for years promoting women's rights. The Parents of Missing Servicemen, comprised of mothers of missing servicemen, travelled to Vanni in Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)-held territory to meet LTTE leaders and help broker a ceasefire in 2001.

Across the country, women's groups also emerged calling for justice, women's rights, equal wages, and the

### **The Value of Women in Peace-building**

More than fifty percent of peace agreements fail within five years of signature (Bell). In part, this is because negotiations and accords often do not address the underlying causes of conflict or seek to prevent its resurgence. It is also because talks suffer from the absence of women. Though governments and multilateral organizations pay lip service to the critical role women play in peace-building, women remain largely absent from high-level international peace negotiations and from peace talks around the globe (Dyfen, Hayer, and Piccirilli).

In 2010, the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) (cited in de Langis) found that women comprise less than ten percent of negotiators and less than three percent of the signatories to peace agreements. The UN has never appointed a woman as chief mediator.

The Institute for Inclusive Security has argued that women mediators can change the focus, dynamic, and outcome of negotiations because they bring unique experience and expertise to the table. Ironically, this background also hinders them from engaging in Track One mediation and limits their ability to participate in formal mediation processes (see de Langis).

The Institute for Inclusive Security's 12th Annual Colloquium "Across Conflict Lines: Women Mediating for Peace," was held from January 9 to 21, 2011. Twenty-one female mediation experts from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East exchanged views on advancing women's inclusion in mediation and ensuring gender-sensitive processes and agreements. Experts found that bringing women into negotiations

may require incentives. To make it attractive, it was suggested that extra seats can be offered at the peace table for teams that bring women. To make it feasible, donors should underwrite assistance with childcare, transportation, and women's unique security concerns (de Langis). Complementing seats at formal talks can be parallel efforts that enable women's perspectives to filter directly and indirectly into talks.

Attentiveness to gender is not only women's work. To ensure peace processes are gender-sensitive, all actors must be held responsible. Participants spoke again and again of the important role played by male allies as messengers for gender equality and its link to sustainable peace. To ensure accountability, participants recommended that mediation team mandates set performance objectives requiring attention to gender and receive technical support to mainstream gender in all aspects of the process. A range of tested models ensuring attention to gender in talks were considered. In places like Darfur, gender expertise was provided by local women experts. In Burundi, female and male experts from abroad were employed (de Langis).

The oft-neglected and ironically oft-powerful quality is what I call the "X-Factor" in politics and reconciliation (see Yusuf "The X Factor"; Dyfen, Hayer, Piccirilli). Although efforts do exist, they are not scaled up to the potential they should be or indeed can be. The reasons are several. However, the case must be made, once and for all. So, what is the X-Factor in Politics and Reconciliation? It is not supernatural, neither is it superhuman. However, it is indeed in the category of a potent "super-contribution" (Yusuf "The X Factor").

We are talking about the role that women can and indeed must play in politics and reconciliation. The untapped potential is sad, not only because it is unrecognized, but mostly because it is costly. The Sri Lankan case can be made with ease: post-war efforts will benefit enormously from the contributions of women, not only on issues concerning women, but also more importantly on issues concerning the national interest.

The following are insights from comparative contexts that are meant to inform and stimulate discussion on the subject. It is hoped that this will, in turn, lead to conviction of belief and steadfastness in practice in the Sri Lankan context too.

Women's peace efforts, like many civil society efforts, can challenge unhealthy dynamics—such as ingrained mistrusts, divisions, and exclusionary politics—in both formal and informal spheres by advocating consensus-building instead of recrimination, and inclusion instead of elite-dominant politics (Yusuf "The X Factor"). These efforts often aim to address the structural changes necessary for

sustainable peace, and can attract wide support for women's groups and build their legitimacy. A key strategy that has been used by women's groups the world over is to take a non-partisan, unified, and consensus-based approach to achieve influence. Women in Bougainville and Northern Ireland, for instance, developed such forums and networks as a way to achieve strength through consensus and unity (Yusuf "The X Factor").

In Sierra Leone in 1995, the women's peace campaign put the issue of a negotiated settlement in the public domain in a non-confrontational manner, combining non-threatening events to mobilize support with more direct measures. As a result, a negotiated settlement became a respectable option for both parties to the conflict (Yusuf "The X Factor").

Inclusion—ensuring that a wide range of perspectives is represented, including marginalized sections of the community—is an important factor for sustainable peace.

Women's groups can broaden the range of substantive issues on the table, promoting women's rights and general social justice. During negotiations for the Belfast Agreement, the Northern Ireland's Women's Coalition (NIWC) ensured that victims' rights were upheld and reconciliation was achieved (Yusuf "The X Factor"). Subsequently, these became key issues in the referendum campaign for the Sri Lankan agreement (Yusuf "The X Factor"; Women and Media Collective).

In Cambodia and Sierra Leone, women's groups reached out beyond urban centres. Cambodian women activists worked to promote a broad social development agenda focused on the neglected rural majority (Yusuf "The X Factor"). The Sierra Leone's Women's Movement for Peace (SLWM) opened branches in all accessible parts of the country, which strengthened its support base and helped to share information (Yusuf "The X Factor"; Dyfen, Hayer, and Piccirilli).

Women activists also promote a vision of peace that goes beyond the negotiating table. The peace conferences in Somaliland in 1993 and 1996 would not have taken place without the collective lobbying of elders by women who urged them to intervene to end conflicts (*Women Building Peace*). Women in Northern Uganda worked collectively to revive cultural institutions and prepare the community for reconciliation through peace education and storytelling (Yusuf "The X Factor").

Assistance to peace processes and practice needs to be re-thought so that women are better supported and integrated. Practical and logistical support can play an important role in facilitating participation in some cases; political support is almost always required information (Yusuf "The X Factor"; Dyfen, Hayer, and Piccirilli).

Experience from Northern Ireland shows that despite

the obstacles women can achieve political change. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC's) direct involvement in negotiations for the Belfast Agreement not only facilitated and secured women's participation in electoral politics, but also demonstrated a way for civil society to participate in and influence formal political negotiations (Yusuf "The X Factor"; Women and Media Collective).

It is important to note that women's inclusion in talks can be superficial. During negotiations for the Compre-

based on family ties. It was neither indicative of a strong women's political movement, nor did it prompt openings for women in the political sphere. Although women's groups have campaigned to introduce a quota, they have had little traction (ICAN).

Women face an even bigger challenge in this system. The male-dominated political parties rarely select women to run for office, either because they are not part of the party patronage system (i.e. they are seeking office for other reasons) or they are sidelined in favour of other candidates

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It is also important to recognize that women are not a homogenous group: location, education, class, and opportunity determine how individuals are affected by conflict, as well as the approaches they employ in peace-building. In Angola, poor women, in both rural and urban areas, face very different challenges from those more privileged.

### **Challenges that Sri Lankan Women Face in Public Participation, including Peace-building**

In many ways, Sri Lanka has been at the vanguard of gender equality in the world, with the first female prime minister in 1960 and women police officers appointed in the 1950s. The 1978 constitution clearly states the Right to Equality, under which "No citizen shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, place of birth or any such ground" (Sri Lanka, Chapter 3, Article 12).

Sri Lanka's legislation has no impediment to the participation of women in the public or private spheres, and they have equal rights in civil, national, and criminal law. The majority also has equal access to free education (thirteen years of schooling). Moreover, women have been present and powerful in the country's political landscape for decades. However, their political ascent has been

who are more aligned with the party culture. Those who do run for local office face an aggressive election system where violence is often used to intimidate candidates and shape voting patterns. As studies show, women in Sri Lankan politics tend to face more abuse than men in the political sphere (ICAN). This ranges from character assassinations, to public insults or threats, to demands to walk away from the race. In a society where basic needs are satisfied through connections to people in power, the patronage system reinforces violence since powerful people have major stakes in every election (ICAN; Dyfen, Hayer, and Piccirilli). Families—husbands and fathers—witnessing such political violence, often stand in the way of women seeking to run for office out of fear for their safety (ICAN).

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

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

## The Achievements

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

When considering the role of women in the context of post-war Sri Lanka, and whether they are able to participate meaningfully in peace-building and other decision-making processes, and deal with protection-related issues, a number of positive steps can be noted.

There has been some progress by both the State and civil society pertaining to the subject of women, peace, and development, resonating with the principles embodied in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (see Yusuf "They Hold Up"). District-level committees have

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to form groups and take action (Amnesty International).

Since the war's end, many organizations have shifted their attention to the protection of women. The Association of War-Affected Women (AWAW), for example, is engaging police and local authorities in the northern and eastern provinces to build capacities for prevention and protection against sexual and gender-based violence. In small group consultations, AWAW found that local police often identified violence against women as their primary concern. As a result of the workshops provided by AWAW, the police devised strategies to tackle gender-based violence in a number of communities. One tactic has been to participate in voluntary efforts to clean up communities. Through their interactions, they have been able to build a degree of trust that enabled women to come forward with complaints of violence (ICAN).

Small steps have been taken to address war-affected women. For example, the State has employed women as rural development officers to liaise with women's groups and establish women's committees that provide a space and means for them to discuss and address livelihood issues and housing needs. However, the national development planning processes have paid scant attention to the issues of women. This is highlighted in the 2011 report of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) that identified the needs of war-affected women as a critical and urgent challenge. These needs are reiterated in the action plans of the *National Framework Proposal for Reintegration of Ex-combatants into the Civilian Life in Sri Lanka and the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights* framework, but the reconstruction programs do not sufficiently reflect these priorities.

been constituted by the State at intervals in an attempt to address district-level concerns. These committees are well-suited to address aspects of peace and security given that they are closely allied with the local populace and ground realities (Yusuf "They Hold Up").

The most common means of mobilizing women has been through the formation of Women's Rural Development Societies (WRDSs) in the District Secretariats around the country. These are set up by the State and consist of one hundred members per society, on average, and work within a Grama Niladhari division, the smallest unit of local government in the country.

Further, community-based organizations exist in the north and east of the country; the Madar Sangams, for example, have successfully mobilized women in the country (Yusuf, "They Hold Up"; Women and Media Collective). These organizations carry inherent potential for women's empowerment activities and thus must be supported to execute projects for raising awareness on gender issues, not only among women but also among men in the community.

The WRDSs generally consist of strong women, and they should strive to participate in local governance structures so that their voices are heard in the decision-making processes. Every effort must be made to drive these societies to ensure women are able to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

The WRDSs are essentially composed of women with leadership qualities and talents who seek to empower all women. It is for this reason that every effort must be made to ensure that these women speak up in local governance structures for and on behalf of women. This will ensure that women's perspectives and grievances are reflected

in decision-making processes. Further, WRDSs must be strengthened for the potential they carry to enable women to have a say in programmes and policies that ultimately affect their lives (Yusuf, “They Hold Up”; Woman and Media Collective).

More importantly, WRDSs are good entry points to bring in the language issue, and, through this avenue, to introduce peace-building, equal opportunities, inclusivity, and similar principles to the grassroots of women, thereby addressing the concepts laid down in UN Resolution 1325. These areas can then be worked on through leadership-building and other skills-building with WRDSs, which can in turn become a useful resource and lead to the creation of a pool of women peace-builders (Yusuf “They Hold Up”).

The Ministry of Child Development and Women’s Affairs has also helped raise awareness on teenage pregnancy, reproductive health, gender-based violence, and women’s empowerment in conflict-affected Northern communities.

Another achievement has been the appointment of 56 Women Development Officers (WDOs) by the Ministry of Women’s Affairs all around the country. The aim is to compose a team of over three hundred WDOs who are specifically dedicated to working for women’s empowerment. Team members are trained on issues of domestic violence, CEDAW, gender, and gender-based violence. The Ministry to Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Jaffna has appointed “ReliefSisters” (Yusuf “They Hold Up the Sky”) have been appointed and currently there are 101 relief sisters island-wide. Their terms of reference are similar to those of Women Development Officers.

Mediation Boards, which have been established in all Divisional Secretariats in the country, also need to include more women. Mediation Boards are alternative dispute resolution mechanisms that solve the minor issues of the locality. More women mediators are recommended. A further recommendation is to conduct capacity-building trainings on UN Resolution 1325, which will strengthen women’s participation in decision-making processes.

The State has shown interest in working with war widows, female single-headed households, and military widows. These women can be helped further to rebuild their lives, and to gain livelihood options and other basic amenities. They must also be empowered so that their voices are heard in the development drive taking place in the conflict-affected areas.

While acknowledging the positive progress in terms of establishing local governance structures and mechanisms to foster women’s participation in decision-making, more training on UN Resolution 1325 needs to be provided to women occupying decision-making positions and roles. Further, it must be ensured that women’s grievances and

aspirations are reflected in all processes of nation-building, including rebuilding and reconstructing communities and societies with provision of life chances for women in every sector.

Ultimately, there is a need to foster awareness that women must and can play an important role in structuring the very nature of peace. What they require now is to be given the opportunity and space to do so.

### **First Formal Space for Women in Sri Lanka: Potential and Drawbacks**

The first formal space for Sri Lankan women to participate in a formal peace process was established during the peace talks between the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The mechanism was called the Sub Committee for Gender Issues (SGI) and was intended to report directly to the plenary of the peace talks. Previously, no allowance was made for women’s official involvement in the negotiating process. Hence, the SGI is a landmark achievement for women in peace-building in Sri Lanka, given that it shifted the participation of women in peace processes from the informal to the formal arena.

Mandated to “explore the effective inclusion of gender concerns in the peace process,” the SGI was comprised of ten appointees, five each from the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (Samuel).

The SGI carried with it notable potential and positive outcomes for women. These included the sharing of experiences and strategies, and the potential for shaping policy interventions in key arenas of marginalization for both LTTE women and the women/feminists from the women’s movement.

Significantly, space to discuss gender-sensitive strategizing was fostered as a result of formal talks with the LTTE women combatants in the context of peace-making. Further, both LTTE women and women from the women’s movement discussed and explored their experiences of conflict, conflict resolution, and peace-building (Samuel).

Another achievement of the SGI is that it allowed feminists from the peace and women’s movements to act as a bridge between local communities and women affected by the conflict, and to contribute to the deliberations of top-level decision-makers at the table of peace negotiations (Samuel; Women and Media Collective).

While the SGI must be hailed as a significant achievement for women’s autonomy, it was constrained by a mandate of providing advisory input only. This made women’s voices and aspirations still dependent on the political will of both parties to the negotiations, namely, the LTTE and the

government. It also meant that the SGI had to ensure that the issues it raised and sought to address did not contradict the political agendas of the government and the LTTE. For instance, since human rights, demilitarization, and the inclusion of Muslim political representation in the peace process were contentious issues at the Plenary, the SGI was also constrained in directly dealing with them (Samuel; Women and Media Collective).

Sri Lanka has an abysmal record of women's political representation at both the local and national level. Women have never exceeded six percent in Parliament, and the current representation in local and provincial government is under three percent (Kodikara).

As a result of very weak internal democracy within political parties, women have begun to explore other avenues of representation. Coalition-building among like-minded groups, collaborative programmes between marginalized sectors, and discussions on the subjects of non-discrimination have been non-formal channels to increase the voice of women in peace-building agendas (Samuel).

The historical political "invisibility" of women has resulted in women adapting through alternative means of mobilization. Over the years, women have come together to promote common goals, transcending lines of ethnicity, religion, caste, and class. These women also came together to engage beyond gender concerns and in larger imperatives like governance, accountability, and transparency.

It has been pointed out by civil society women's leadership that this type of engagement could also lead to redefining the manner of engagement as well as reframing issues at the heart of peace processes ("The Role of Women"). This is a strategy that could be adopted by autonomous women's groups in the context of peace processes. The Sri Lankan women's movement has a history of such activism in the non-formal arenas of peace-building. It has been said that the Sub Committee for Gender Issues, given its short time of existence, did not enable its full potential to be realized by this informal women's movement.

On a more positive note, the process that led up to the establishment of SGI and the operationalizing of the mechanism itself has many lessons for women's movements in peace-building that can be replicated in other similar contexts. Women in communities tirelessly endeavoured to bring opposing factions to the table and convinced stakeholders to establish a mechanism for women from all sides of the conflict to have a voice. Notable achievements in this regard are the establishment of broad coalitions, the far-reaching consensus secured on difficult topics, and the demonstration of patience required to keep talks alive. Women demonstrated an ability to negotiate successfully (Samuel).

## **Recommendations for Change**

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

## **Recommendations to the Government**

Introduce a minimum quota for women in governance (national, provincial, and local) as recommended by women's groups to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Electoral Reforms; Ensure that women are fully included in provincial mediation and decision-making structures; 3. Draw on the Women's Agenda and further consult with women's CSOs including all sectors of society (ethnic and religious minorities, regional representation etc.) to develop a National Action Plan for the implementation of U.N. resolution 1325 in Sri Lanka. The process should include all ministries and integrate CSOs as partners in the development, implementation, and monitoring of the actions related to the plan; Increase and facilitate women's access to credit, skills, and extension services; Introduce laws to ensure a gender-sensitive wage policy for women working in the informal sector, including domestic workers; Amend gender-discriminatory laws and practices that prevent women's equal access to land and inheritance with particular reference to widows and women heading households. Ensure and expedite their access to inheritance, pensions, land, and justice. Initiate targeted outreach programs to inform and enable them to benefit from farming and agricultural assistance, credit, markets, etc. Ensure facilities such as housing and water are accessible to all those who are resettled. Consult with women (especially widows and FHH) to determine and address the obstacles they face in accessing housing and water; Develop women's entrepreneurship programs with access to credit and marketing, as well as child support provisions to enable widows and women household heads to participate; Provide infrastructure such as electricity, education, and health, as well as transportation for all the

resettled people, with attention to the specific challenges faced by women; Encourage the private sector to set up industries in the affected areas for employment creation, especially for young women; Set up local-level grievance committees (and do outreach to affected populations) including a balance of male and female members to assess the needs and problems of those who were affected by war; and Include gender-sensitive peace education and non-violent dispute resolution mechanisms in school curricula (ICAN).

### *Recommendations to the International Community*

Ensure that all internationally led or funded reconstruction efforts are derived from a gendered analysis of the context and adhere to the issues and recommendations raised by the Women's Agenda; Ensure that all international recovery and development assistance efforts have established mechanisms for systematic and structured engagement with women in the target communities; Ensure women's full inclusion, determined if needed through a minimum quota where decision-making structures are

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### **Recommendations to Civil Society Organizations Working in Sri Lanka**

Facilitate dialogue between women's groups from the north, east, and other districts to bring women's concerns into the reintegration and reconciliation process; Create a public platform using local media and other means for women affected by war to discuss issues pertaining to their lives; Monitor the effective reintegration of female ex-combatants, and organize community level programs to address their needs and concerns; Support or establish programs encouraging men to act against gender-based violence; Establish or improve support networks for women affected by violence including counselling, legal aid, shelter, skills and income opportunities, and mental health services; Provide legal counselling for women subjected to family separation and trauma; Organize community awareness-raising campaigns to address the stigmatization of victims of sexual violence; and organize gender-sensitive awareness-raising programs for law enforcement officers, attorneys, and the Mediation Boards to bring about attitudinal changes; Build capacities and skills of women interested in leadership positions in community-based organizations and subsequently in political bodies; Empower women to face challenges in accessing positions of governance and strengthen their negotiation skills; Support the development of grassroots constituencies and strengthen a national women's movement building on the Sri Lankan Women's Agenda; and facilitate and support advocacy for increased representation of women in political and institutional structures from the village level up (ICAN).

being created or rehabilitated; Encourage the private sector to set up industries in the affected areas for employment creation, especially for young women; Support women in agriculture and animal husbandry by assessing and addressing the critical barriers they face; Strengthen local CSO capacities for legal advocacy, public awareness raising, networking, and service delivery through funding, technical assistance, and ensuring systematic and structured engagement with state and international counterparts; and quantify women's contribution to the economy, especially those working in the plantations, factories, and foreign employment (ICAN).

### **Concluding Observations**

The biggest challenge concerning political engagement of women is in the politics of decision-making generally, whether at household, community, or national levels, or within civil society movements. For peace to be sustainable it requires structural change towards greater levels of inclusion and participation (Yusuf "The X Factor"). This means going beyond expressing women's immediate and practical needs or simply promoting quotas. New political structures and practices are needed in which the involvement of women as decision-makers is accepted as legitimate and normal.

A clear lesson from comparative experiences is the importance of networking. Linking women across divides—facilitating contacts and consultations between women in capital cities and those in the countryside—can contribute to the development of broad-based agendas.

Moreover, women peace activists and their organizations



gain confidence and inspiration from learning about other women's experiences elsewhere in the world, as Bougainville women did for example when they attended the Beijing Conference on Women in 1994.

Significantly, it is critical to accept that just as war is a gendered concept, so too is peace. Experiences from conflict-ridden contexts have shown how women describe a view of peace as holistic and inclusive. Involving women in peace processes, on their terms, will help to ground settlements and ensure their sustainability. Important contributions by women at household and community levels tend to go unrecognized, and it is therefore essential to link efforts at multiple levels more effectively, to open up the space where women and others excluded from formal forums work, in order for this space to receive more recognition.

The experiences from other countries and contexts demonstrate that women's contribution has not always been to its full capacity. It is time we ratchet up efforts to ensure that women in Sri Lanka not only speak out on women's issues but also on national issues.

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