

Violence against Women in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's recognition of gender based violence and the need to address it

The five teacher unions affiliated to EI have conducted awareness programmes that more women especially women teachers have become aware of their rights.

Gender Equality and non-discrimination of women is a guiding principle of state machinery and state action in Sri Lanka. The constitution of Sri Lanka in article 12(2) sets out the principle of non-discrimination on the ground of sex and other specified grounds. Article 12(4) further provides for affirmative state action for the special advantage of women.

In keeping with the commitment made in the constitution Sri Lanka ratified CEDAW. Sri Lanka is also a signatory to a number of other international conventions including the covenant of civil and political rights. Sri Lanka also recognizes the definition of GBV set out in the declaration on the elimination of violence against women. It also accepts that violence against women encompasses but is not limited to physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household and dowry related violence. The government of Sri Lanka has been actively committed towards gender equality and the advancement of women including working towards reducing gender based violence. The government has established the women's bureau for Sri Lanka, the first ever national level machinery for women. The women's charter was drafted and adopted by the state and is the main policy statement by the government regarding the rights of women. The most significant introduction to state machinery to work towards the rights of women made by the charter was the setting up of the national committee on women.

Amendments to the Penal Code introduced two new offences that criminalized two forms of gender based violence, sexual harassment and incest. 361a of the penal code considers incest as a criminal act and is an offence largely victimizing women and girl children in Sri Lanka.

Domestic violence is a widespread problem in Sri Lanka. As a result lobbying by civil society organizations strengthened by research carried out by institutions and individual academics the prevention of domestic violence act was enacted in 2005. The Sri Lanka Women Teachers' Network works with other like minded NGOs on issues relating to violence against women. WIN (Women In Need) is a non-profit making organization committed to the cause of elimination of all forms of violence against women and children. It was formed by a team of Sri Lankan women dedicated to the cause of domestic violence and other forms of violence against women. They offer free counselling and legal advice to victims in the city of Colombo and Matara. An emergency shelter provides temporary place of refuge for women and children in times of need. WIN has a small budget to retain lawyers to take on the case of rape, and incest victims and in some cases financial assistance is also granted. Awareness programmes for schools and community groups to

promote non-violence is another aspect of their work. In Sri Lanka the legal system addresses gender based violence through the provisions of the penal and the prevention of domestic violence act 2005. The amendments to the penal code drastically updated archaic laws and resultant practices that discriminated against women victims of rape for over a 100 years. The new laws are extensive and carry a mandatory punishment of 7 years imprisonment with enhanced punishment for gang rape, custodial rape. Many organizations dealing with women's issues have published handbooks on violence to make the women of Sri Lanka aware of their rights.

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