



Paths To Peace

September 2024

Women's Representation and the Future of Sri Lankan Politics

Despite the fact that Sri Lankan women are highly educated and literate, only 4.8 percent of parliamentarians are women. To correct this imbalance, proactive action is needed by women and men. Under NPC's Active Citizens for Elections and Democracy (ACED) project, an event was held aimed at securing a 25 percent quota for women in parliament.

Organized in collaboration with the Association of War Affected Women and the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, the event, which had 263 participants, featured two panel discussions. The first panel included four women political leaders who focused on women's roles in local government. Each panellist shared her experiences and discussed the challenges and successes she faced in her political career.

NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera emphasised the need to enhance women's empowerment as a critical step toward achieving the 25 percent quota in parliament. "Although women are a majority in this country, they are a minority when it comes to politics. Democracy is supposed to be executed with the majority voice and opinion but a greater part of society is excluded from the main discourse. They don't have power; this has been the reality in our country since independence," he said.



While the 25 percent quota in local government represented a step forward, challenges remained in translating policy into action. Dr. Perera pointed out that women were still underrepresented in decision making positions at higher levels of government, underscoring the need for continued advocacy for gender parity. “In countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark, women’s representation at decision making levels is over 45 percent. This should inspire us to pursue similar changes,” he said.

Anuradhapura Municipal Councillor, Supini Sandamali, highlighted a turning point during the 2018 local government elections when some 1,926 women entered politics because of the 25 percent quota for women. “Local government is like a miniature government that looks after the people and implements decisions for them. We hope that this will be done at the parliamentary level as well. There is a good network of female representatives among local government bodies,” she said, noting the challenge of earning respect from male counterparts. “While our male counterparts acknowledge our efforts in silence, they don’t openly acknowledge the contributions made by women in formulating policies,” she added.

Responding to claims of women’s inability to work in unity, Ms. Sandamali stressed the importance of networking. “Female representatives at local government institutions were able to network from north to south and east to west. We spoke out against injustices faced by women politicians in parliament and made tireless efforts to raise our voices,” she said.

The second panel discussion explored Sri Lanka’s position on women’s political participation globally and within South Asia. Several leaders provided insights into the country’s progress, emphasising the importance of increasing female representation at all levels of government. Speakers at the event included founder of the Association of War Affected Women Visaka Dharmadasa, former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, former minister Ferial Ashraff, former Colombo mayor Rosy Senanayake and former MPs Chandrani Bandara and Sasikala Raviraj.

Participants expressed optimism about the potential impact of the 25 percent quota, recognising it as a pathway to greater gender equality in politics. They were motivated by the stories of women leaders who have made strides at the local level, sparking discussions on sustaining this momentum. As Moratuwa Municipal Councillor Shiromi Cooray noted, “Social service is more important than politics when it comes to local government institutions. Over the past five years, we succeeded in making significant progress.”

The event, supported by the European Union, marked a significant moment in the effort to secure representation for women in politics. It set the stage for further dialogue and action with the hope that local level success would inspire changes at the national level. The acknowledgment that women, despite being the majority, have been historically side lined in political discourse reinforces the urgency of implementing measures to ensure their rightful representation.



Advancing Transitional Justice Discussions

NPC, through its People Unite for Justice and Accountability (PUJA) project, conducted district-based meetings to engage diverse networks including District and Local Inter Religious Committees, organic formations, master trainers and state officials to address the complexities of post-conflict justice while fostering dialogue and collaboration among communities divided by decades of conflict.

NPC's Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera provided a critical overview of the current political climate, linking it to the transitional justice process. He noted a positive shift in the nation's electoral rhetoric, observing that there had been a marked decrease in the use of divisive, racist language in political campaigns compared to previous years, highlighting this as a significant sign of progress in the journey towards reconciliation and peacebuilding.

However, frustrations remained about the effectiveness of the proposed Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A state officer from Trincomalee said, "We have little faith in the commission's ability to uncover the truth about our missing loved ones. The process is inefficient and the constant bureaucratic hurdles are unbearable for victims' families. We need a permanent, independent body solely dedicated to investigating these cases and delivering justice."

The call for systemic reform was echoed by N. Mathivannan, another state officer from Trincomalee. He emphasised the need for a formal mechanism to ensure compensation for victims, stressing that without a strong system for resource allocation, the transitional justice process would struggle to achieve its goals. "A systematic approach to collecting credible evidence is essential," he pointed out.

Participants from Nuwara Eliya and Trincomalee said that lasting peace could only be achieved when all citizens regardless of ethnicity, caste or religion were treated equally. A participant from Nuwara Eliya stressed that the principle of one country, one law must be applied consistently to all, lamenting the government's failure to uphold it in practice. A Hindu priest from Nuwara Eliya reinforced this view, insisting that the government must treat all citizens fairly and equally.

A Buddhist monk from Nuwara Eliya raised concerns about the media's role in shaping public perceptions of the transitional justice process. He warned that misinterpretation or biased reporting could mislead the public and derail reconciliation efforts. "Sri Lanka will only achieve lasting peace if the public is properly informed about the real situation in the country," he pointed out.

The urgency of preventing further conflict was a recurring theme throughout the discussions. C. Sinthuja, a youth leader from Trincomalee, expressed her dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the truth telling process. "We see this as an act of deception towards both the country and the international community," she said.

The PUJA project is committed to fostering dialogue, advocating for systemic reform and ensuring that transitional justice efforts yield meaningful outcomes for all communities. The sessions serve as a vital platform for sharing grievances, building consensus and shaping the country's future reconciliation efforts, underscoring the importance of inclusive dialogue in the pursuit of lasting peace and justice.



Empowering Women with Legal Knowledge for Lasting Change

A series of information sessions on legislation and other initiatives relating to women was held across the districts of Badulla, Kandy, Kegalle, Matara, Monaragala, Nuwara Eliya and Polonnaruwa as part of the second phase of the Women Organized for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) project, which is funded by the National Endowment for Democracy. The sessions were designed to address a crucial gap in the knowledge of women in the WOICE Super Group and Peer Group on laws affecting women's rights and political participation.

The sessions discussed the Women's Empowerment Act, the Gender Bill, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and relevant provisions in the Constitution as well as the 25 percent quota for women in politics.

Each district session was led by a female lawyer. The resource persons, many of whom were members of the Legal Aid Commission, ensured not only a thorough understanding of the legal framework but also provided participants with connections for future community work. The women were particularly inspired by the resource persons who shared their expertise and encouraged the participants to believe in their potential to effect change.

Each district session had 25 participants including members from the Super Group, Peer Group and Youth Group. The Youth Group participants emphasised the importance of passing on the legal knowledge to younger generations, ensuring a stronger foundation for future women leaders.

Ms. Sudharma Gunapala, Assistant Director of the Legal Aid Commission in the Sabaragamuwa Province, enabled the Kegalle Super Group members to form strong connections with the legal community, which they planned to use to extend legal education to women in their villages.

A participant from Piyapathagama village in Kegalle, which faces significant issues of gender based violence, shared how the lack of legal knowledge had hindered their fight against this problem.

The sessions provided the women with crucial legal insights and empowered them to stand confidently against unjust laws. Participants across all districts expressed enthusiasm for continuing their engagement with the legal sector, planning to use their newfound knowledge to educate others and bring about tangible social change.

Once equipped with legal knowledge, the women were no longer afraid to challenge the status quo. Their voices, amplified through their new connections, are set to resonate across their communities, inspiring others to stand up for women's rights.



A New Chapter for Vavuniya's Telugu Community

In the village of Nochchikulam in the Vavuniya District, a small Telugu community of 86 families has been working hard to find recognition and acceptance. Most of the families are Christians while one family practices Hinduism. Their journey has been filled with challenges but their determination has kept them going.

For many years the Telugu people lived in the shadows, struggling for identity recognition. A significant step forward came when the Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) project team helped them to get national identity cards through a mobile service, marking an important moment for their citizenship rights. However, they faced another challenge: the freedom to practice their faith without discrimination.

Since moving to Nochchikulam in 2015, the community has sought a place to worship. Without a proper space, many members felt isolated and faced discrimination due to their identity and beliefs.

The ARC team, along with members of the Weligama and Akurana Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs), met community members to discuss their challenges. As they shared their experiences, a sense of hope and camaraderie began to develop.



It was recognised that fostering economic development was vital in helping the Telugu community secure their religious rights. LIRC members committed to supporting the Telugu community's economic initiatives. They also promised to help them find a dedicated place to worship and to practice their faith freely.

The Telugu community see a path forward. With the support of others, they are not just seeking acceptance but also working to create a brighter future where they can express their identity and faith without fear.

Easing Ethnic Tension and Promoting Reconciliation Through Research

NPC's Mobilising University State Engagement for Reconciliation (MUSTER) project held a district training programme for 15 students from the University of Ruhuna to share knowledge and provide comprehensive guidance on qualitative research techniques that would be applied in the project's research.

The session covered various tools for data collection and data analysis in social science research. The students received guidance on research ethics that they would need to follow while working on selected research topics which were finalised with supervision from university assigned mentors under three thematic areas - dying cultural issues, issues leading to ethnic relations and ethnic tensions.

The sessions on qualitative research methodology were led by Mr. Upul Sanjeewa while Mrs. Mayuri Kularathne from the University of Ruhuna conducted sessions on data gathering, analytics and research tools.

A session on case study development was conducted by Dr. Nisanka Sanjeevani Ariyaratne from the University of Ruhuna, which allowed the students to practically apply what they had learnt. Dr. Ariyaratne explained the difference between research reports and case study reports, which will be used in the project's final publications.



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Malitha Praneeth, a third year student, commented, “History shows that our country was once peaceful and free from ethnic disputes. However, ethnic divisions arose after the 1956 Sinhala Only Act was introduced.”

The MUSTER project, implemented across the districts of Sabaragamuwa, Jaffna, Batticaloa and Matara, is supported by GIZ. In each district, 15 students from Sabaragamuwa University, Jaffna University, Eastern University and Ruhuna University are conducting research under the three thematic areas.



Addressing Ethnic and Religious Tensions the Polonnaruwa District

The Plural Action for Inclusion, Reconciliation and Social Justice (PAIRS) project conducted a scoping activity in the Polonnaruwa district to identify ethnic and religious tensions within the community. The event saw participation of 30 members of the District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) including religious leaders, state officials, civil society organization members, local government authority representatives, media personnel and youth.

The objective was to explore the ethnic and religious tensions affecting the residents of Polonnaruwa. NPC’s collaboration with the DIRC has proven crucial in addressing conflicts, particularly between the Sinhala and Muslim communities. The Easter Sunday attacks have strained relationships with incidents reported that have disrupted peace and harmony among Buddhist and Catholic communities as well.

The meeting facilitated dialogue among participants allowing them to share their experiences regarding religious relations and intra community conflicts. Discussions explored whether religious leaders or institutions contributed to these tensions. Participants provided insights on the role of different religions in promoting social justice within their communities as well as the underlying reasons for ongoing conflicts.

Fifteen key issues were identified related to religious and ethnic tension in the district, prioritising these concerns using the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tool. The conversion to other religions, driven by the distributing of financial resources, has been identified as a primary factor contributing to mental stress within the community.

The establishment of fundamentalist ideologies emerged as another significant factor exacerbating inter religious conflict. Participants highlighted the inequality in the distribution of resources to different religious institutions as a major issue fuelling tensions within the district.

Participants expressed gratitude to NPC for its efforts in identifying and analysing critical issues at the grassroots level. State officials including social integration officers, social development officers and women development officers requested an analysis of the findings to support their ongoing peacebuilding initiatives. The participation of both male and female religious leaders in addressing these sensitive issues was indicative of a collective commitment to fostering dialogue.

The PARIS project team will gather insights on the causes of religious and ethnic tensions across 16 districts and implement activities to mitigate the issues during the project.



Toward Inclusive Service Delivery for the Malaiyaha Community

A video documentary capturing the experiences of the Malaiyaha community that sought to highlight the enduring challenges faced by this historically marginalised group, particularly their exclusion from public services and lack of inclusion in decision making processes, was screened in Colombo.

A research report on shortcomings in delivering public services to the Malaiyaha community was handed over to the participants. The report provided an analysis of systemic discrimination within public service institutions, underscoring how the community had been affected by bureaucratic inefficiencies, limited access and exclusionary practices.

The documentary and research report sharing served as a platform to foster dialogue between the Malaiyaha community and key stakeholders including government officials, community leaders, non-governmental organizations and media representatives.

The audience included Deputy High Commissioner of India Satyanjal Pandey, former MPs Mano Ganesan and Bimal Rathnayake and Dr. Sathishkumar Sivalingam Vice President of the Up Country People's Front. University coordinators and students from the Universities of Jaffna, Ruhuna and Sabaragamuwa, who were enrolled in the Advanced Certificate Course on Sustainable Peace through Pluralism and Inclusive Service Delivery, participated along with community facilitators and researchers representing the Malaiyaha community.

One issue raised during the session was the lack of legal documents such as birth certificates and identification cards within the Malaiyaha community. These documents, which are fundamental for accessing services and exercising rights, are inaccessible due to systemic neglect, lack of awareness and bureaucratic challenges.

"Since 1948, the Malaiyaha community has been unfairly treated due to a political agenda. One of the key issues is that they don't own land, which pushes them further to the margins. They have been labelled only as plantation workers but they also have their own political and cultural identity. It is important for society to recognise and support this identity. While policies can be made, changing people's mindset is much harder. What we need to do is create space in society where this community can be treated as citizens with full rights," Mr. Rathnayake said.

The research report emphasised the need for systemic reforms and detailed how administrative hurdles, language barriers and limited government outreach hinder effective service delivery to the Malaiyaha community. The documentary also showcased how their exclusion from public services and decision making processes continues to keep the Malaiyaha community on the fringes of society.



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Ethnic Reconciliation Must Be Priority for the New President

As the presidential election campaign draws to a close, the focus must shift from electoral competition to the urgent challenges facing the country. While the election outcome remains uncertain, what is clear is that the next president will inherit a country grappling with economic instability and deep-rooted problems of impunity and corruption. A pressing challenge that also needs to be at the forefront of the government that is formed is the need to resolve the long-standing ethnic conflict through a sustainable political solution based on the devolution of power. The new president must prioritize this issue to bring lasting peace and unity to the country.

Since independence, the failure to govern a multi-ethnic society with fairness and inclusion has led to decades of war and terrorism. These divisions have drained the country's economic and human resources, leaving scars that continue to hinder progress. A genuine political solution that acknowledges the aspirations of all communities is essential to rebuild trust and foster a sense of national belonging. In any political solution, the incoming president should ensure that the Malayaha Tamil Communities do not fall between the cracks, which they have endured since Sri Lanka gained independence seven decades ago.

The three leading candidates have each demonstrated their ability to lead in various ways. However, to move the country forward, they must commit to addressing the ethnic conflict without putting the issue on the backburner. The new president, regardless of who wins, must demonstrate leadership by advancing a power-sharing arrangement that empowers provincial councils and ensures equitable representation for minority communities. Without political stability and ethnic harmony, the country will continue to struggle to attract the foreign investment and international partnerships it desperately needs.

The next president needs to work across political, ethnic, and class lines to forge a new social contract that prioritizes devolution, accountability, and inclusion. Only then can Sri Lanka move towards the future its people deserve—one marked by justice, equality, and lasting peace. The solution to the country's challenges lies not just in economic reform but in building a political framework that respects the rights and aspirations of all its citizens. Resolving the ethnic conflict through devolution is not just about governance but is also about economic recovery. The international community and all Sri Lankan citizens must support this effort.

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Our Vision:

A just and peaceful Sri Lanka, in which the freedom, human rights and democratic rights of all peoples are assured.

Our Mission:

To work in partnership with different target groups with an aim to educate, mobilize and advocate the building of a rights conscious society of people that work towards a political solution to the ethnic conflict, reconciliation and equal opportunities for all.

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