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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை  
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka



# Paths To Peace

February 2026

## A Window of Opportunity

A recent micro survey conducted by NPC in Jaffna offers a revealing snapshot of public opinion in the north. The survey, carried out among young people at a focus group discussion on citizen perceptions of the electoral process, points to a cautiously improving mood. Its findings broadly align with a national survey by Verité Research that showed government approval at 65 percent in early February 2026.

Among the predominantly young and educated respondents in Jaffna, a majority say they feel safer and more fairly treated than in the past. About 78 percent report that their livelihoods have improved and an equal number say they feel safe in their daily lives. Three quarters express satisfaction with the new government while 64 percent believe the state now treats their language and culture more fairly. These are not small gains in a region that bore the heaviest burden of three decades of war.

These responses suggest that the political change at the centre has begun to have an impact on everyday perceptions in the north. For many years communities there felt distant from the institutions of the state and often viewed them with mistrust. A greater sense of fairness in administration and a reduction in fear in daily life can therefore be seen as important steps in rebuilding confidence between the state and citizens. The fact that young people express these views is particularly significant as they represent a generation that grew up in the shadow of war but now seeks a more normal and secure future.

But the optimism is tempered by significant reservations. Only a quarter of respondents say they are satisfied with how past grievances have been handled. The same proportion see no change in land and military related concerns. Most strikingly, nearly 90 percent express anxiety about land being taken without consent for religious purposes. Many are also unsure whether the future will be better than the present. These concerns cannot be dismissed as marginal. They point to deeper structural questions that remain unresolved, including land rights, demilitarisation, accountability and the sharing of political power. For many in the north these are not abstract political debates but issues that affect daily life and dignity. Land in particular remains a highly sensitive matter, linked not only to livelihood but also to identity, heritage and community security.

The survey therefore points to a moment of opportunity as well as risk. The present level of public goodwill towards the government creates space to address long standing grievances in a constructive manner. If the government takes credible steps to resolve land disputes, reduce the military presence in civilian life and engage sincerely with questions of political power sharing, the current improvement in public sentiment could deepen into lasting reconciliation. But if these issues remain unaddressed, the gains in public confidence may prove fragile. The experience of the past shows that goodwill can quickly dissipate when expectations are not met. Sustaining the present positive trend will require consistent effort, transparency and a willingness to tackle the difficult political questions that lie at the heart of Sri Lanka's long ethnic conflict.



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# Strengthening Women's Leadership and Political Participation

A two day intervention programme that brought together women leaders from the Polonnaruwa and Monaragala Districts was held in Matara under NPC's Women Organized for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) project, creating a powerful platform for cross-district collaboration and solidarity.

A total of 106 participants joined the programme, demonstrating a shared commitment to advancing women's rights, strengthening leadership and addressing pressing gender-related challenges at community and national levels.

The programme commenced with a peaceful and public demonstration in Matara. Women leaders walked in unity carrying placards and banners, calling for increased women's representation in the upcoming Provincial Council elections and an end to verbal violence and all forms of abuse against women.

The peace walk symbolised resilience, unity and collective determination to secure greater gender equality and political participation. It also served as a reminder that women's voices must be central in governance and public decision making.

The programme concluded with a panel discussion with Minister of Women and Child Affairs Saroja Savithri Paulraj, OIC of the Children and Women's Bureau in Matara A.P. Neela de Silva, Additional District Secretary Kanchana Talapawila and others.

The discussion addressed a wide range of challenges affecting women, including political representation, gender-based violence, economic barriers and institutional support mechanisms. Women leaders shared their experiences, concerns and proposals, resulting in a practical, solution-oriented dialogue focused on strengthening women's empowerment at both community and policy levels.

Sri Lankan women continue to play a pivotal role in national development. They serve as primary caregivers while contributing significantly to key sectors such as agriculture, garment manufacturing, foreign employment, education and health services. In post-conflict communities, women have been instrumental in peacebuilding and reconciliation, rebuilding trust and fostering social cohesion.



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Despite these contributions, women face persistent structural and cultural barriers. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms limit opportunities, reinforce wage disparities and maintain a significant glass ceiling in leadership. Many women shoulder the double burden of paid employment alongside domestic responsibilities. Gender-based violence and safety concerns further restrict full participation in public life.

Although constitutional guarantees ensure equality, women's political representation remains critically low - below 7% in Parliament - despite high literacy rates and strong health indicators. The introduction of a 25% quota for women in local government in 2017 marked progress; however, many women leaders continue to face exclusion from meaningful decision making roles due to financial barriers, male dominated party structures, cultural stereotypes and election-related violence.

The intervention programme demonstrated the power of collaboration across districts and sectors. By creating safe spaces for dialogue and public advocacy, the project continues to empower women to raise their voices, influence policy and claim their rightful place in governance. The initiative reinforces NPC's commitment to fostering inclusive participation, reducing gender-based violence and promoting equitable representation.

Achieving full gender equality requires dismantling structural barriers, ensuring safety and dignity, expanding leadership opportunities and recognising women not only as caregivers but as equal partners in shaping a just, inclusive and peaceful society.



# Strengthening Youth Engagement in Democracy

The Active Citizens for Electoral Democracy (ACED) project, funded by the European Union, conducted youth engagement programmes in Nuwara Eliya, Jaffna and Mullaitivu, strengthening democratic awareness and meaningful political participation among young people. These initiatives form part of ACED's continued efforts to promote inclusive governance, electoral reform dialogue and youth leadership in democratic processes.

At the Nuwara Eliya programme, which brought together over 35 youth participants, discussions were contextualised within recent political developments, including the 2022 aragalaya that reshaped national dialogue on accountability and governance reform. Participants engaged in interactive group exercises reflecting on the political landscape, electoral participation, youth and women's representation, sub-national governance and accountability mechanisms. The session emphasised that power sharing is a democratic and constitutional mechanism that strengthens unity through inclusive governance, particularly in diverse districts such as Nuwara Eliya.

A second youth training was conducted in Jaffna with the participation of 34 youth members. Group discussions focused on the need for social interaction, decentralisation, land issues, responsibilities of people's representatives and the role of provincial and local government councils. Participants raised concerns regarding limited responsiveness of public officials, language barriers in service delivery, land ownership and archaeological demarcation issues, accountability for the disappeared and the importance of meaningful devolution of power. The dialogue reflected both critical awareness and a strong desire for institutional accountability.

In Mullaitivu, youth and civil society leaders engaged in discussions on democratic participation, local governance and electoral responsibility, emphasising the need for stronger community consultation, youth inclusion in political decision making and improved institutional responsiveness and power devolution. Many participants highlighted the importance of addressing local grievances through democratic means and recognised the role of political and administrative authorities in sustaining civic engagement and decentralisation for a better service delivery mechanism and the need for devolution of power for a better decision making process.

Across the three districts, participants demonstrated strong political awareness and thoughtful engagement. Young women in particular showed an understanding of ethnic harmony and rights-based democratic participation. Many university students expressed interest in contributing articles to media platforms and continuing civic discussions while some indicated willingness to consider future electoral participation. Through sustained civic education and youth network strengthening, the project continues to empower young citizens to move beyond passive voting and become informed, responsible and active changemakers within the democratic framework.



# Women, Youth and Faith Leaders Shape an Inclusive Nation

NPC's Plural Action for Inclusion, Reconciliation, and Social Justice (PAIRS) project, funded by Misereor and co-funded by CAFOD in partnership with a wide network of partner organizations, held several activities for future advocacy.

A dedicated market platform for Persons With Disabilities (PWD) was launched in Puttalam in partnership with Women Organization for Development, Equality, Peace (WODEPT) Puttalam and local women leaders. The initiative was born from a critical need identified by community leaders: despite possessing valuable skills, the PWD community in Puttalam faces significant barriers to accessing local markets, leading to economic marginalisation and social isolation. The actualisation activity addressed that gap by creating a space for artisans and producers to showcase and sell their goods directly to the public.

Participants saw their products and their potential recognised by the wider community. The initiative fostered linkages between local authorities, civil society and the PWD community, proving that when opportunities are accessible, everyone benefits. By promoting self-employment and social inclusion, the market platform was a significant step toward building a more equitable and harmonious district where ability, not disability, defines one's contribution.

“In my family, both my elder sister and I are people with disabilities. To earn a living we sew rugs at home and take them to the Divisional Secretariat and local markets to sell. Today all my rugs were sold and I am very happy about it. I request that this market initiative continues so that we can regularly sell our products and support our livelihood,” said Parida Thiadiya.

In the rural village of Wannikudawewa, the dream of a better life through foreign employment has often been shadowed by the risk of exploitation. Recognising this, NPC partnered with local authorities and the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment to host an awareness programme that brought together 108 community members, police, legal experts and government officials. The goal was to equip women with the knowledge they need to navigate the migration process safely. The session addressed the issues faced by potential migrants from exorbitant broker fees and fraudulent schemes to a lack of awareness about legal protections.



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By connecting the community directly with institutional support systems, the initiative transformed fear into empowerment. Women left the discussion not just with information but with a clear understanding of their rights and the formal channels available to them. The actualisation activity stands as a powerful model for reducing vulnerability and ensuring that the pursuit of economic opportunity does not come at the cost of personal safety and dignity.

For a Hindu student attending a school administered by a Christian mission in Jaffna, the morning routine involves a small but significant act of faith: applying a pottu on the forehead. But for years, in some institutions, that simple expression of devotion has been a source of anxiety. School rules, designed to uphold the religious identity of the institution, have often restricted visible symbols of other faiths such as the pottu, sacred ash and the food students bring for lunch. It is a tension between institutional tradition and personal belief and for too long students have simply accepted it.

At one Catholic school that silence was finally broken when NPC in partnership with Social Organizations Networking for Development (SOND) convened a local government authority women leaders' actualisation activity that brought together 75 voices rarely heard in the same room: students, teachers, the zonal education officer, principals and religious leaders from the District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC). The goal was not to erase the identity of the school but to expand its understanding of inclusion.

During the discussions participants explored a powerful idea that a school can maintain its religious foundation while also creating space for the diverse beliefs of its students. Students were not just spectators; they were active participants. Through interfaith learning sessions, they discovered that while rituals and customs may differ, the moral core of every religion - compassion, gratitude and respect - is the same. Religious leaders delivered speeches that emphasised these shared human values, turning a potentially divisive topic into a celebration of unity.

A memorandum was drafted and submitted to the provincial education department, formally requesting recognition and regulatory support for students of all faiths to practice their religion freely within schools. It was a concrete step toward ensuring that no student had to choose between their faith and their education.

In the border villages of Vavuniya, a dangerous cycle has taken hold. Marginalised youth, vulnerable to unemployment and peer pressure, were increasingly falling into substance abuse. What makes this crisis even more volatile is its ripple effect. As drug use rises so do ethnic tensions with communities pointing fingers and accusing each other of fuelling the trade. Conflicts have become commonplace, threatening the fragile harmony of the district.



NPC brought together 200 youth leaders to break this cycle, assembling a coalition of resource persons from the District Drug Prevention Officer to counselling experts and religious leaders to confront the issue. The message to the youth was clear: awareness is power. Through interactive sessions, participants learned about the devastating health, social and legal consequences of drug use. The programme equipped young people with essential life skills such as decision making, confidence and the ability to resist negative peer pressure, transforming them from potential victims into active agents of change. By empowering these youth leaders to champion drug-free environments in their schools and communities, the initiative is building a network of resilience.

In an era where social media dominates public life, a new battlefield has emerged for women, especially those in leadership roles. From cyberbullying and character defamation to the misuse of personal images and organized online attacks, women in Colombo are increasingly finding themselves targets of digital abuse designed to silence and shame them.

Recognising this growing crisis, the Colombo DIRC convened a local government women leaders' actualisation activity bringing together 60 participants, including local government women leaders, civil society representatives, religious leaders, teachers and lawyers. Resource persons from FACT Crescendo and Hashtag Generation provided practical guidance on digital literacy, fact checking and legal protections. Several women leaders committed to organizing awareness sessions within their own divisions and a consensus emerged to strengthen district level coordination for supporting victims.

For two years, DIRCs have worked quietly but persistently to build bridges between communities. NPC, in collaboration with the Darmashakthi Organization and the Colombo DIRC, convened a meeting of senior religious leaders from across the Western Province.

Presided over by the Most Venerable Amarapura Maha Nikaye Mahanayaka Assaji Thissa Thero and the Most Venerable Professor Pallekande Rathanasara Thero alongside leaders from Hindu, Christian and Anglican religions, the meeting transcended mere dialogue. It was a declaration of shared purpose.

"Joining the DIRC changed the way I see society. Today, I am able to treat people of all religions equally, with respect and understanding," said Chandrika de Zoysa, a political leader.





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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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