

## International Women's Day Declaration 2008

*“Women unite to keep alive the light of humanity and carry it in to the future”*

International Women's Day is of significance not only to women but also to all those who have taken on the struggle of creating a just and free society in which people can live in peace and harmony.

The movement to eliminate oppression, discrimination and subordination of women, has over the last two centuries, evolved into a formidable force indispensable to the future of humanity in its quest for a just and humane society. Women all over the world, based on the experience and realities of their subordination and oppression are contributing immeasurably towards a just and equitable social transformation. The women's movement in Sri Lanka too is an integral part of this global phenomenon, kindling hope and optimism in all those who aspire for a better future amidst the multitude of crises currently facing the country.

Women have borne the brunt of the political, economic, social and cultural erosion inherent in Sri Lankan society today. Sixty years of post independence history has not seen Sri Lanka making any meaningful headway towards achieving social and political justice. Instead we have marched backward towards regression. Political institutions and state machinery are replete with undemocratic elements resulting in a severe erosion of the values and ethos of representative democracy. In a context where the credibility of politics is rapidly deteriorating and the representation of women at the highest level of politics has remained a mere 5% for over sixty years, political restructuring and transformation remains a fundamental and immediate challenge.

In the sixty years post colonial rule, women who constitute over half the Sri Lankan population, still remain prey to discriminatory and gender-insensitive laws, policies and practices as well as to political, ethnic, societal and domestic violence. Women also continue to be oppressed by patriarchal attitudes, and are still not given real recognition and value for the contribution they make to society and to the economy.

In the economic front, neo-liberal policies have plunged the country into deeper crisis fast depriving farmers and fisher communities their right to land and natural resources. The labouring classes working in industry, trade, agriculture, plantations, as well as the informal and service sector is faced with serious challenges to their right to work, to livelihoods, to just and equitable wages and the security of employment. The labour market is also increasingly 'feminised' with the

exploitation of women in both the formal and informal sectors with women often receiving the unequal and low wages and the most insecure of jobs. Yet paradoxically it is the labour of women, in the plantation sector, the apparel industry and overseas migrant work that contributes to the highest percentage of foreign exchange to the country.

Women also bear the brunt of protracted armed conflict and war disproportionately. They are widowed or deprived of family and often take on responsibilities as either *de jure* or *de facto* heads of household with little recognition or respect. They are forced to watch their children being conscripted by armed groups or join the military and go to war. They suffer the degradation of harassment at checkpoints, are arrested, detained and tortured and are also disappeared or killed. They and their families are displaced in large numbers and deprived of land and livelihoods. As war ravages their communities, they are forced into poverty and at times are forced into or resort to sex work to keep home fires burning. Despite these travails however, women keep the fabric of society intact bearing the burden of care and solace for individuals, families and communities wracked with the violence and trauma of war.

The years of ethnic conflict and missed opportunities for its just resolution have again brought to life the mirage of a military solution that can bring a quick end to the war. This has failed to meet the challenge for genuine political restructuring and need for social dialogue to heal the impact of war; the collapse of social values, and the all pervasive culture of violence and militarism that has plagued society and placed unbearable pressures on women.

A clear manifestation of this is the increased incidence of violence against women which is a continuum from war to social violence and violence in the home. Domestic and sexual violence is on the rise and the culture of impunity and militarism is putting women at further risk spawning a trend of societal violence against women and girls. In the resulting social and cultural crisis, the need for a realistic social programme for redress is overshadowed by false value systems promoted by repressive cultural and religious institutions that seek to further curb and oppress women. Religious movements with ulterior commercial motives have invaded society as a result of the breakdown in moral authority making women its most vulnerable pawns.

Despite this onslaught on their lives, protracted ethnic conflict and economic crisis, women continue to build solidarity and support across ethnic, cultural, religious and regional barriers working to unite divided communities and continue their efforts at peace building, reconciliation and the respect for difference in a plural and culturally diverse Sri Lanka.

The ethnic conflict has again reached a stage characterized by escalating violence, war, destruction and loss of life. We believe that this senseless spiraling into war must immediately cease. Peace making is not easy, war is. However there is no

easy way out when faced with the challenge of peace. The resumption of all out war has again brought untold hardship and suffering to the majority of Sri Lankans and this toll will only escalate further unless sanity prevails. We, Sri Lankan Women, cannot abdicate our responsibility to bring about peace. Let us unite in our aim. We therefore call upon all parties to ensure that space is again created for the de-escalation of violence, the protection and promotion of human rights and the re-commencement of a search for a just and peaceful solution to the ethnic conflict.

8<sup>th</sup> March 2008

Women's Organizations United to Celebrate International Women's Day:

*Association of War Affected Women, Centre for Policy Alternatives, Center for Women's Development, Devesarana Development Centre, Home for Human Rights, IMADR, Inform, Kantha Shakthi Organisation, Mannar Women's Development Foundation, MONLAR, Mother's and Daughter's of Lanka, Muslim Women's Research Action Forum, National Women's Coalition, National Fisheries Solidarity, Red Flag Movement, Rural Women's Front, Savistri, SSA Gender Unit, Suriya Women's Development Centre, Vikalpani, We Women, Women and Media Collective, Women in Need, Women's Centre, Women's Development Foundation, Women's Resource Centre, Women's Education and Research Centre*