

27 April 2006

DEFEND WOMEN'S RIGHT TO WORK

As persons who have always been committed to the principles of non-discrimination and of equality, we have noted with grave concern, the controversy around women working in non-governmental sector in the Eastern province.

We feel that this is a backlash against the tremendous social and economic contribution made primarily by Tamil and Muslim women of the Eastern Province to their families and communities as development workers, social activists and mobilisers. The role women have played, during the conflict years as well as in the aftermath of the tsunami has been remarkable, and recognized as such by local, national and international bodies.

The chronology of events should be set out here since there has been very little information available to non-Tamil readers regarding this issue.

On April 2, a leading Tamil language newspaper, the Veerakesari, carried a report on a speech made by TNA MP Mr. Ariyanendran at a seminar on 'Tamil Women and Culture' at Tirukkivil. In his speech Mr. Ariyanendran stated that he had information about a high rate of abortions in the Eastern Province; he quoted precise figures, 183 for Batticaloa and 163 for Amparai within the past year. He cited the employment of young women in NGOs after the tsunami as being responsible for extra-marital sexual relationships, pornography and the spread of disease and called on all NGO workers to respect their culture.

Some extremist groups picked up on the MP's statement and issued a call for women to cease working in NGOs, through the informal distribution of a leaflet. The leaflet apparently originated in Kalmunai, and bore the name of Affected Women and Women's revolutionary Army of Tamil Eelam (Batti/Amparai). It reiterated the MP's ideas that employment in NGOs would ruin young women's lives and future, and called on young women to leave their jobs by the 15th April 2006. The leaflet also held parents responsible for the actions of their daughter. The Veerakesari of April 7 carried a description of the leaflet and reiterated the demand that women leave their jobs by April 15 and linked this declaration to a Muslim Cultural Group. On April 20 articles in the Veerakesari and in the Thinukural newspapers granted women permission to work but warned that they would be watched.

A second leaflet was distributed subsequently, purportedly from Tamil Makkal Peravai (a hitherto unknown name), that explicitly threatened women with death if they did not resign by the 25th of April. This was published in the Eelanadam newspaper on 16 April 2006.

There has been a range of responses to this issue. Newspapers reported that the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies forwarded a letter calling for protection for their female workers to the law enforcement agencies. The NGO Consortium in Batticaloa was reported to have held a meeting with representatives of some NGOs with TNA MPs present, at which there was an assurance given by the MPs that women could continue to work. They urged that the Consortium and the women's parents would monitor their behaviour. Some NGOs have simply chosen to offer the female employees extended leave until the issue is resolved.

It is regrettable that a Member of Parliament has been responsible for generating such a controversy, in negation of his responsibility as a representative of his constituency. This represents a denial of all that our society has achieved in terms of equal rights for women to education, health and employment and undermines not only our Constitutional commitment to equality but also our obligations under international law. Sri Lanka is signatory to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women as well as to many Conventions of the International Labour Organization that guarantee women's right to work. Such attitudes, publicly held and disseminated also constitute a negation of the tremendous courage and sacrifice with which Tamil and Muslim women in modern Sri Lanka have advanced themselves and their communities. It also disregards the tremendous amount of work women from both communities have done among those affected by conflict, particularly among women and children who are the most affected. This component of work which is culturally sensitive could not have been possible if not for women workers in NGOs.

It is also regrettable that voicing a concern regarding women's safety in the workplace in such extreme and primitive formulations in fact masks the reality of exploitation and abuse that women and men workers may be exposed to in their working life. We believe that any form of violence and abuse against women, if any, in the workplace needs to be dealt with through a procedure set up to redress such situations. Such a mechanism should be gender sensitive and can include a procedure set up either within workplaces or in institutions such as the Human Rights Commission or the National Committee on Women.

We reaffirm our commitment to women's right to work, and extend our solidarity and support to women in the Eastern Province to confront this challenge with courage and determination.

We call on the TNA, as a leading political party, to issue a rebuttal of this

position and reiterate their commitment to the equality of women.

We call on the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Social Welfare to ensure that the rights of women who choose to work are protected and that whatever anti-social elements attempt to prevent women from leading a full and equal life are duly punished.

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