



# SRI LANKA

Statement

by

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His Excellency The President on Human Rights**

at the

**Third Committee**

of the

**67<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly**

on

**Agenda Item 28: Advancement of Women  
Sub Items (a-b)**

United Nations, New York.  
16<sup>th</sup> October, 2012

(Please check against delivery)

Mr. Chairman,

Allow my delegation to congratulate you on your election as the Chair of the Third Committee. The delegation of Sri Lanka associates itself with the statement made by Algeria on behalf of the G77 and China.

Sri Lanka has consistently reaffirmed its support for the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as the overarching framework of principle and policy for the achievement of women's development and gender equality, the full realization of their rights and the socio-economic empowerment of women. Discrimination based on gender is one of the most enduring forms of human rights violations that needs constant attention and concerted action. My country is proud of its record in promoting and protecting the rights of women, their advancement in many spheres of activity and their contribution to national development. Yet we are conscious of the need to continually focus attention on women in order to build the just social, political and economic order that we all strive to attain.

Sri Lanka has long accepted the normative framework guaranteeing equality and equal protection under the law. Sri Lanka's Constitution guarantees equal rights without discrimination on grounds of sex and furthermore provides for affirmative action to ensure full equality. Sri Lanka adopted a "Women's Charter" in 1993 to give national expression to the goals envisaged in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to which Sri Lanka is a party and as a measure to provide greater policy coherence on women's issues. We take equal pride that this Charter has been accepted as the cornerstone of all policy decisions on women by successive governments.

Mr. Chairman,

Sri Lanka noted the Report of the Working Group on Discrimination against Women in Law and Practice, presented at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in June 2012 and pointed out that there has been a significant improvement in the status of women in our country over the years as demonstrated by impressive attainments in education, health and economic empowerment. The delegation noted that this has been possible due to increased sensitivity to women's issues and a firm Government policy that has sought to empower women and address their specific grievances. Detailing the concrete steps taken to address the issue of violence against women, we indicated that the Government has enacted relevant legislation and has taken measures to improve its implementation. We also emphasised that Sri Lanka, as a State Party to CEDAW, had presented its latest Periodic Report under Article 18 of the Convention in 2010 which was reviewed in 2011.

Our engagement with the CEDAW Committee in 2010/2011 identified areas of concern and gave us clear targets to achieve in formulating our policy oriented national plans of action for women which is in preparation. The Committee acknowledged that Sri Lanka is on track towards achieving Millennium Development Goals 2 (achieving universal primary education), 4 (reducing child mortality) and 5 (improving maternal health). Moreover, the Committee welcomed:

- the enactment of the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act in 2005,
- the enactment of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2003 enabling a Sri Lankan woman to transmit her citizenship to her child,

□ the Penal Code (Amendment) Act of 2006 which includes a new definition of the offence of trafficking in persons in line with the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocols,

□ and also the establishment of the Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare, and

□ the adoption of the Sri Lanka National Policy on Labour Migration which focuses on concerns of migrant women workers.

The Committee also commended Sri Lanka's commitment to formulate a National Action Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights including a thematic section on women. The preparation of the National Plan of Action for Women is nearing completion by the line agency, i.e. the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Affairs. The National Action Plan for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights specifies 10 focus areas under the specific thematic section on women. Three of the focus areas are cross cutting and are captured in thematic sections on IDPs, economic, social and cultural rights and migrant workers. Moreover, the National Committee on Women also is addressing some of the key areas for attention under its annual programme of work. The National Committee on Women together with the Women's Bureau are part of the institutional structures functioning under the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Affairs that implement programmes and make policy interventions for the realization of the advancement of women.

Mr. Chairman,

Sri Lanka has integrated the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) into the national development agenda and is on track in reaching most of the indicators while some have been already achieved at the national level. Among the notable achievements are those relating to equitable primary education, child mortality and maternal mortality, access to safe drinking water and literacy. Challenges remain, particularly in the context of achieving MDG 3. Of the 3 component elements of MDG 3, while the gender ratio in education is on track, greater effort is needed to achieve targets with regard to the other two components. More focused attention is needed in relation to the share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector and the proportion of seats held by women in national parliament. Efforts have been taken to increase representation at the local government in the recently held elections to build up a base of female leaders who can then compete for national office in subsequent elections. One of the main socio-economic targets we have set ourselves is increasing the number of women in the labour force from just over 31% in 2011 to 40% by 2016. Strategies need to be developed to increase employment opportunities for women with secondary and higher levels of education in all districts. Better working conditions and protection are needed for women working in the Free Trade Zones, migrant workers and women in the plantation sector.

Mr. Chairman,

The Government through the Equal Access to Justice Project, executed by the Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration, has undertaken various initiatives to train judges of the Quazi Courts, in particular on women's issues. The need for reforms to existing laws affecting the Muslim community in Sri Lanka is also being considered through this project with the aim of identifying practices and procedures which are gender discriminatory. Sri Lanka is proud of its multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious heritage. Our legal system reflects this diversity. Extended dialogue with the respective communities will in time lead to acceptance of universal norms in the areas of human rights through fostering attitudinal change. In the absence of this change, enforcement of human rights norms by legislation will only serve to alienate those communities and could, in the long run, defeat the well

intentioned initiative of the legislature. We need to uphold the rights of those perceived as being disadvantaged but at the same time respect the socio-cultural diversity of our multifaceted society. It has been our position that the calls for reform must be encouraged from within the respective communities.

Also, at the national level, many government and civil society initiatives have been launched to empower women economically. Micro-credit schemes, support for small and medium scale industries, women's collectives at the sub-District Divisional level supported by Government appointed Women's Development workers are all initiatives that have been launched. I must place on record that many community based organizations and non-governmental organizations are working with dedication to uplift women and to guarantee their essential human dignity. Larger scale projects such as the "Improving Connectivity to Support Livelihoods and Gender Equality" are being implemented with donor assistance. The objective of the project is to improve the quality of life for conflict-affected and isolated rural poor communities, especially women, through a community-driven, participatory livelihood development program linked to the rehabilitation and maintenance of rural access roads. It is expected that gender-sensitive development projects such as this will improve post-conflict reconstruction and also benefit those marginalized and or deprived by the conflict

Mr. Chairman,

In the post conflict scenario, the resolution of issues relating to women is critically important. While addressing their economic empowerment needs, we must be conscious of the need to prevent exploitation and abuse of women. In fact in a recent engagement with civil society representation in Colombo, several issues and allegations were brought to our attention. Many of the allegations cited did not include information as to the identity of the victim, specific location, date and time of incident and the alleged perpetrators. We invited the civil society organizations represented to provide us with these details as well as urging them to take measures to reach out to local avenues of assistance – the Police and other organizations which should be the first resort of persons – especially women - facing any difficulties. If there are any shortcomings or lack of responsiveness, the national Government will take steps to investigate and take corrective measures. We have taken special measures to expand women's and children's desks in local police stations, especially in the former conflict affected areas to which these complaints could have been made. The phenomenon of female headed households in the aftermath of the conflict poses unique challenges. The Ministry of Child Development and Women's Affairs is also working with UNDP and UNFPA on issues under Security Council Resolution 1325 which are also to be incorporated within the scope and ambit of the National Action Plan on Women. Within the law enforcement process, when a child under 18 years or a woman is being arrested or detained, a person of their choice must be allowed to accompany them to the place of questioning. As far as possible, any such child or woman arrested or detained should be placed in the custody of a Women's Unit of the Armed Forces or Police or in the custody of another woman military or police officer. Such simple guidelines on arrest and detention issued by the President, go a long way towards protecting the rights of women and children.

In Sri Lanka's experience – both in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 and in the present post-armed conflict phase – is a problem of land title for those returning to their original places of habitation after the lapse of a period of time. The old concept of the "head of the household" (usually the male) has been found to be an impediment when a widow of a deceased or female spouse of an untraceable person claims restitution, relief or compensation. Remedial measures are being formulated to address these problems.

One other notable result of the ending of the armed conflict and the defeat of terrorist forces is the large number of ex-combatants that had to be dealt with. In many cases recruitment was forced. In others false

propaganda and other forms of manipulation and coercion were utilized to boost the cadre of the terrorists. After the end of the conflict, it became the responsibility of the Government of Sri Lanka to take over nearly 12,000 persons who surrendered or were taken into custody. Pursuant to a proper legal framework being put into place, these ex-combatants – with varying degrees of involvement in the conflict – were screened and the vast majority submitted to rehabilitation programmes. It is with a degree of satisfaction that I am able to inform this Committee that we have been able to process, rehabilitate and reintegrate 10,985 ex-combatants. This includes 2,240 women ex-combatants. The remaining number of female ex-combatants undergoing rehabilitation as at 01 October was a mere 27. Our programme was not merely aimed at weaning them away from seeking to gain their objectives through the force of arms. Our approach was predicated on giving them suitable education and training – opening up choices for them to follow a productive life within their communities.

Mr. Chairman,

To conclude, I have mentioned a few of the steps being taken to bring about a transformation in the manner that women's rights, their right to equality, equal protection of the law and the maximization of the options and choices available to them are sought to be promoted. Sri Lanka appreciates the consolidation of the 4 UN gender entities into a single strengthened UN Gender Machinery. We do so in the belief that this consolidation will strengthen the UN systems' work on gender equality and the empowerment of women at the national and international levels. Similarly, at the domestic level, we in Sri Lanka are contemplating draft legislation aimed at the creation of a National Commission on Women which will be the apex body for coordinating and implementing national plans and policies and will serve as the focal point for activities concerning women's rights, empowerment and development. We are confident that, as one nation and one united people, we can move forward in this new era of peace harnessing the talents and efforts of all Sri Lankans – especially women – to build the new Sri Lanka.

I thank you Mr. Chairman,