

Post-war vulnerabilities

Women in fisheries in the North and the East region of post-war Sri Lanka continue to face serious safety and livelihood challenges

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When the war between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam ended in 2009, the Northern and the Eastern province of Sri Lanka resembled a disaster zone. Homes and infrastructures were damaged; many civilians were killed; many others had fled, and society was in complete disarray. Even today, military control continues in a few areas, along with settlers occupying houses and lands. This has prevented many from either returning home or regaining rightful access to their land.

Women and female-headed households have been amongst those most adversely affected by the war. Both are vulnerable groups in terms of the everyday challenges they face. The war has only made things worse. During my study, I analyzed the socio-economic challenges confronting women in fishing communities and the impact of these challenges on their quality of life. Three of the most serious challenges that women and female-headed households face are discrimination and violence, lack of access to education, and financial debt. These are a consequence of both the war and the lack of government action towards protecting these two most vulnerable groups.

Discrimination and violence are serious problems for women in the North and the East. Socio-cultural norms highly influence the way women are treated as well as perceived in sites such as the workplace. Studies have shown that women who have minority identities have to deal with many more incidents of discrimination and harassment. For example, Sinhalese women have more freedom, in terms of employment, than do Sri Lankan Moors women because Sinhalese is the dominant ethnic group. In fisheries, women are only allowed to partake in fish production processes, marketing and small miscellaneous jobs, such as net repairs. Only men can go out to sea to fish; it is regarded as taboo for women to do so. Such factors constrain women's ability to apply for jobs and go out to work.

In addition to the poor rate of participation of women in work, they also do not get the same wages as men. As in the case of most third-world countries, women in Sri Lanka too are paid a lower wage than men. Women in every stage of the supply chain receive wages that are insufficient to survive on, and as a result, they must work long hours or find additional work elsewhere. Female-headed houses have it worse, and women in such houses must work twice as

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Mullathivu fisherwomen in Northeast, Sri Lanka. Issues of indebtedness are significantly higher in post-conflict areas, and in the North and the East, women are suffering from what they call the household debt crisis

hard to make ends meet. As a result of limited employment and growth opportunities, women are pushed deeper into poverty.

Poverty also limits women's access to much-needed social support services. Daycare and childcare facilities are some of the essential services that women need but lack access to. The war destroyed many daycare centres, and when they were later restored, post-war, they were too expensive for women to afford. Today, with Coronavirus travel restrictions and lockdowns, many daycare centres are closed either temporarily or permanently. This has made it harder for women who relied on these centres to keep their children safely engaged during the workday.

The lack of childcare support significantly limits women's job opportunities. Women with children often cannot leave the house because there is no one to look after the children in their absence. Some find ways to make an income at home, such as weaving coconut leaves, while others will look for a job near their homes. Only those with proper childcare support are able to travel to another city for employment or to work longer hours, and thus enjoy stability at work. Therefore, adequate access to social support services is crucial for gender equality and to give women a better life.

In terms of financial debt, 2.4 million women are currently suffering from the indebtedness that patriarchal financial institutions have forced upon them. Issues of indebtedness are significantly higher in post-conflict areas, and in the North and the East, women are suffering from what they call the 'household debt crisis'. Due to the war, over 100,000 homes were destroyed which led to many people, including women and children, being forced into camps and settlements for internally displaced persons. Multiple organizations assisted in housing restoration in the North and the East by partially funding such reconstruction. However, those who received partial financial assistance still had to pay off the balance as well as grant installments in a timely manner. Many could not afford to do so. This led to further loans from financial institutions.

Many women had no option but to take loans at very high interest rates. They also faced many instances of corruption in financial institutions. The GoSL has failed to implement a standard interest rate and several financial institutions are functioning arbitrarily according to their own rules with differential interest rates based, in part, on the recipient's capacity. Women often lack financial understanding; they don't know how loan-agreements and credit work; this makes it easier for financial institutions to exploit them.

Additionally, women who borrow money are likelier to face harassment, and may even be driven to commit suicide due to the financial difficulties they face in paying back loans. COVID-19 has made matters worse with many women losing their jobs and income. Women reported that debt collectors seize valuable items

from their homes if loans repayment schedules are missed, and some demand bribes through favours, which in the case of these women were mostly sexual favours, either forcefully taken or given voluntarily.

To help women overcome these challenges, the GoSL must take strong corrective action and change the current legal frameworks that systemically discriminate against women. Sri Lanka ratified the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1981 but women's rights in the country instead of improving only seem to be getting worse. In 2017, CEDAW examined the rights of women in Sri Lanka and concluded that its laws and policies required amendment to ensure gender equality, and recommended greater involvement of women in decision-making processes for women's empowerment.

To resolve financial issues, such as the debt crisis, the government must work with financial institutions to evolve a standard agreement on loans. As mentioned, women are not aware of the current clauses that come with borrowing money from financial institutions, such as the increase in interest rates if loans aren't paid back on time. To reduce women from falling deeper into debt, the GoSL needs to actively monitor financial institutions to ensure that the proper guidelines are followed with respect to lending money as per the guaranteed standard interest rate.

Apart from policy and legal solutions, there are some practical steps that the government can take to aid women's livelihoods. Childcare services and daycare centres should be funded by the government and have longer operating hours to give parents, particularly single mothers, and among them, particularly those who work long hours in the fisheries, greater flexibility in terms of working hours. Free or subsidized daycare would help women manage their expenses and reduce their debts.

To summarize, women in fisheries play a significant role that fails to get the recognition it deserves. Their work fetches low salaries, and when they get home, they have additional unpaid work to do, often without the help of their husbands. Women cannot continue in this manner, and equality measures must be put in place to help improve their livelihoods and the future of their families.

Authorities, the GoSL and international bodies, who are all responsible for the protection of women's rights and to ensure gender equality, have failed. These institutions must work together to create a safe environment for women that offers equal opportunities and economic growth. The neglect of women's rights is a violation of the CEDAW and international laws on gender equality. The United Nations bodies must engage with GoSL to ensure that international law on gender equality and equity is applied in Sri Lanka. Without the assistance of international bodies, corruption is likely to continue in the government, and the wealthy are likely to prosper. ❏

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