



Women's Centre Sri Lanka

Methodist and Presbyterian Women's Special Project
2013-14 in association with Christian World Service

“Hello”

ஹலோ (Tamil)

ආයුබෝවන් (Sinhala)

The Women's Centre provides:

- * **Human and Legal Rights Advocacy:**
Celebrations on International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and International Women's Day; street drama campaigns; *Shramika* newspaper; legal support and national campaign on human rights for women; women's health and reproductive rights; provision of childcare for women workers; legal advisory support; better wages and working conditions.
- * **Women's Empowerment Activities:**
Leadership training programmes
- * **Women's Livelihood Programmes:** training and awareness programmes on human and minority rights for women affected by war in North and East of Sri Lanka; training and capacity building for women in previous war zones; business entrepreneurship support.
- * **Institutional Development Sector Activities:** Training of staff on project planning (related to donor organisations); training of staff in language and literacy (English/Tamil); communications skills; computing and desktop publishing.

“Our task is to build a somewhat better future for the women workers, endeavouring for a society that ensures the dignity, equality and rights of women.”

Major economic expansion in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s brought with it the creation of Free Trade Zones. Many women employed in the FTZs suffered under oppressive and extreme exploitative conditions. It was against this background that the Women's Centre was founded at Tudella in Ja-Ela in 1982 to protect women's human and labour rights. They pressured landlords into improving the overcrowded and poorly provisioned living conditions. The Women's Centre has stood at the forefront of campaigns in the Ja-Ela (north of Colombo) and other districts, campaigning for women's freedom from violence and exploitation. More recently, support has been given to Tamil women garment workers who suffer from racial discrimination within their own country.



The Women's Centre in Action

From a single focus on the poor working conditions for primarily Sinhalese Free Trade Zone (FTZ) workers, the Women's Centre programme has expanded. It has successfully achieved better working and living conditions for vulnerable women workers as well as demanding an end to violence against women. It has done this against a backdrop of a 26 year old civil war and an ever-changing job market. With jobs in short supply and a new, vulnerable workforce of young Tamil women who are generally paid at a lower rate than their Sinhalese sisters, they are finding ways to work around prohibitions that ban union organising with Tamils.

Although the civil war ended four years ago with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the incidence of human rights violations, extra-judicial killings and abductions has been increasing making it more difficult for non-governmental organisations to work. Against this backdrop the Centre has made a deliberate effort to foster greater understanding among people and to help rural, plantation and fishing women.

Fostering Peace and Understanding

The seeds of a new programme that involved a great deal of risk began when staff concerned about the suffering of Tamil sisters in the north began discussions. Many Sinhalese women said they did not know Tamil women. So they established links with Tamil tea estate workers, and with Tamil women from the north. Their initial meetings involving discussion and the sharing of food and small gifts developed into formal exchange visits and training programmes.

The Women's Centre joined national NGO peace-building initiatives. For many years and during the height of the conflict, Women's Centre staff and members visited the camps for internally displaced people (IDP), offering support and advocacy.

After the war ended in May 2009, the Women's Centre was able to support women affected by the



war, in and outside the camps. Contact was facilitated by Catholic Sisters working in the camps, where entry was tightly controlled by the Sri Lankan military. The courage, strength and sensitivity displayed by the Women's Centre during this period has led to lasting relationships.

Since that time, there has been an influx of Tamil women from the north seeking employment in the FTZ factories. Employers reduced wages and lowered working conditions while boarding house operators pushed up rental for overcrowded accommodation and hiked food prices. The Women's Centre is campaigning against this unjust exploitation of vulnerable Tamil workers including in the newer garment factories in the south.

Other Tamil women displaced by the conflict have settled in rural areas, but without resources. The Women's Centre working with these women, and with support from CWS, was able to provide household utensils, gardening tools and water gathering resources for the women and their families.

The Tsunami Record

Following the December 2004 South Asia tsunami, Women's Centre staff travelled to the border areas of conflict zones in the north and east where they encountered Tamil and Muslim women. They provided food, clothing and the construction of more than 100 new houses as well as helping to repair classrooms and other community buildings. The ability to take new initiatives, build strong alliances and networks and their commitment to uphold the rights of women has seen the Women's Centre grow in strength and stature.



Spreading the Word

A major part of their work is informing women workers of their rights, passing on important information and advocating on their behalf. They do this through publications including their newspaper *Shramika* (launched in 2006). The street theatre troupe of the same name also attracts wide support. It is made up of women garment factory workers from the FTZs, both Sinhalese and Tamil, and in recent years men have joined the troupe. Accompanied by musicians the troupe brings the problems and experiences faced by workers into the public arena. In addition to being educative, their performances instil strength and liveliness in the workers' struggles through artistic dramatization.

Working Together

Noticing the impact that Women's Centre advocacy and education has had on women in

Buddhika began work at Star Garments IGS as a supervisor and became involved in the Women's Centre at Katunayake. She completed her 'A level' examinations and gained 256 marks out of a possible 300. Two hundred marks constitutes a pass and 240 qualifies the candidate for entrance into university. However, Buddhika was required to sit three further tests in order to gain entrance due to the fact that one of her topics was drama which was not considered academic. She was unable to attend the third test so missed the opportunity to gain entrance into university but is now working on an external university qualification as finances allow.

As a supervisor, Buddhika is required to ensure her workers meet their targets and is compelled to scold workers if they do not. The factory management have on occasions asked her to leave unless she can meet the targets. She promises to achieve this and has been required to sign a statement in blood to that effect. She is fed up with the factory and wants to leave.

the FTZs, tea estates and rural plantation areas, men are now actively involved. Poor employment conditions and racism also affect the men. By working together to advocate for improved workplace practices and conditions, and bringing to light the effects of racism, both women and men reap the benefits. The men are conscientised and do not presume to lead the organisation. Women continue to hold the leadership positions. The Women's Centre works closely with the Mothers and Daughters of Lanka, the Apparel Industry Labour Rights Movement (ALaRM) and the Committee for Asian Women.



About Sri Lanka

The island of Sri Lanka – formerly known as Ceylon, is located in the Indian Ocean, to the southeast of India. It was populated by the Vedda in ancient times, and was successively invaded by the Sinhalese, Indo-Europeans and Tamils, who laid the foundations of an advanced civilisation. Various colonists – Portuguese, Dutch and British – have ruled over the country since 1505. Ceylon declared its independence in 1948, becoming a member of the British Commonwealth. In 1972 it was declared a republic under the name Sri Lanka, and withdrew from the Commonwealth.

Sinhalese are the majority ethnic group while Tamils represent the largest minority ethnic group. Traditionally centred in the north (Jaffna peninsula) and eastern part of Sri Lanka, Tamils have sought independence (political and economic) from Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lanka. Political and ethnic tensions between these two groups were particularly strong during 1980-2010.

Some Facts and Figures

Population: 20, 263,725 (Sinhalese 74%; Tamils 22%; Other 4%)

Religion: Buddhist 70%; Hindu 15%; Christian 8%; Muslim 7%

Languages: Sinhala (national and official language) 74%; Tamil 22%; Other 4%;

Area: Land 64,740 sq km; Water 870 sq km; Coastline 1,340 km

Land Use: arable (14%), permanent crops and pastures (22%); forests (32%); other (32%)

Climate: tropical monsoon; northeast monsoon (Dec-Mar); southwest monsoon (Jun-Oct)

Natural Resources: limestone, graphite, mineral sands, gems, phosphates, clay, hydropower

Environmental Issues: deforestation, soil erosion; coastal degradation from mining activities and increased pollution; freshwater resources polluted by industrial waste/sewage runoff;

Government: democratically elected Republic

Industries: processing of rubber, tea, coconuts, and other agricultural commodities; clothing, cement, petroleum refining, textiles, tobacco, telecommunications

Major Exports: textiles and apparel, tea, diamonds, coconut products, petroleum products



Scripture for Devotions

Matthew 15:21-28 The Canaanite Woman's Faith
Matthew 20:1-16 Parable of Vineyard Labourers
Matthew 25:31-46 You did it to the least of these
Luke 4:16-21 Sent to bring Good News
Luke 10:25-37 Parable of the Good Samaritan
Luke 18: 1-8 Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge
Acts 4:32-37 The Believers Share their Possessions
Psalms 10/82/103/ 146 God cares and will bring justice



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