

We, Women - On the 70th Anniversary of Sri Lanka's Independence

On the historic occasion of Sri Lanka's 70th year of independence from British rule, we - as women and as those working to further the rights of women across Sri Lanka - wish to celebrate the significant and hard-won victories of Sri Lankan women's movements since 1948. We also take this moment to recall the continuing challenges and obstacles to achieving full equality, justice and development for women, irrespective of caste, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity, disability, geographical location and so on. We reflect on what 'independence' means for us as women and in relation to constitutional reform, reconciliation, democracy, rule of law and development.

Remembering hard-won milestones

Women were the co-architects of Sri Lanka's post-independence welfare state, which ensured free public healthcare and free education for generations of Sri Lankan citizens. These policies secured a favourable physical quality of life for women together with men (even while not all communities benefited equally). Other gains in the last 70 years include the establishment of a national gender machinery, new or stronger laws to address violence against women, including rape, sexual harassment and domestic violence, and a 25% quota for women in local government. Yet, women's struggles in many other spheres, including for labour rights, land rights, political rights, social security, reproductive health and rights, and for justice, transparency and accountability have had limited success, though women have been fearlessly leading these struggles and mobilizations, while also facing consequent backlash. Women have provided encouraging examples of working together, collectively pursuing struggles, during times of civil war.

Ongoing struggles

Almost 9 years after the war, women are still resisting continued **militarization**, struggling to regain control of their lands and searching for **truth and justice** in relation to human rights violations. Many families, and in particular women-headed households in the north and east face innumerable economic challenges, including lack of livelihoods, rising indebtedness and lack of reparations for economic and other losses caused by the war. Women in particular are expected to make a living from extremely precarious self-employment ventures and meagre income sources. Regardless, women continue to make decisions for and support to sustain themselves, their families and communities.

On basic aspects of **sexual and bodily autonomy** there have been almost no gains. Women are on the back foot, advocating for the decriminalisation of abortion and same-sex relationships, repeal of the Vagrants Ordinance (an archaic and colonial law used to harass and degrade sex-workers), criminalisation of marital rape, and even recognition of the right to purchase, manufacture and serve alcohol.

The state discourse on **labour** discounts the insurmountable portion of unpaid care-work which women do in their homes and for their families. The state's increasing shift towards neoliberal policies have affected women disproportionately. Scores of Sri Lankan women are working overseas, and in the plantation and garment industries, with practically no protections regardless of the significant profits earned for the state. Still, the state continues to parrot development indicators which claim that a large proportion of women in Sri Lanka are 'economically inactive'. The rights and protections guaranteed by the state to women, are immensely disproportionate to the contributions of women, over decades, to the project of nation-building and to the economy.

Moreover, state development policies and plans have led to the mass-scale displacement of entire communities. The priorities of the government are unfairly stacked at best, favouring the already privileged, and ignoring the rights of low-income communities, all kinds of minorities and the historically marginalized.

Violence against women and girls and sexual and gender minorities continues with impunity, at the hands of our families, our communities and within state structures. Women are also increasingly experiencing violence in digital online spaces without a means of redress. Violence directed at women candidates in the current local government campaign, bolstered by the rhetoric that 'women are not fit for politics', is a stark reminder of the backlash against the increasing visibility and audibility of women's agitations against discrimination and oppression. Serious barriers still remain to **increasing the political representation of women, particularly at provincial and parliamentary level**. The pushback against the reform of the discriminatory **Muslim Marriages and Divorce Act (MMDA)**, reveals the sexism and misogyny of political, religious and community leadership.

Increasing **ethno-religious violence and extremism** affects women uniquely; overall, we see an ideological regression, at the level of the state and the society. A troubling, patriarchal, heteronormative gaze is pushing women back into archaic gender roles and stereotypes. It is deeply concerned with the 'woman' as 'mother', as the keeper of the 'family', and as the carrier of the honour of her community and nation. Notions of 'culture' are used in ways which are convenient and always redemptive for men, and always restrictive of women's liberties and rights.

Moving forward

What does 'Independence' mean to us as women, in a so-called 'Independent' state, where women's autonomy is still restricted socially, culturally and structurally, and where, under some customary laws women are still perceived as minors in the eyes of the state, unfit for decision-making?

Independence for us means transparency and accountability in state praxis; consultation and participation in democratic processes, including in constitutional reform and transitional justice processes; it means the guarantee of our right to autonomously and equally engage in all these

processes. Independence means the strengthening of the social welfare policies which our foremothers fought for, and the enshrinement of economic, social and cultural rights as fundamental rights. It means the establishment of an independent Women's Commission, the repeal of Article 16 of the Constitution, (a law that protects a host of discriminatory laws from judicial scrutiny) and constitutionally recognized protections for women including sexual and bodily autonomy.

At a moment where we see the state increasingly investing, both ideologically and practically, in a neoliberal market economy and in neoliberal policy - where human rights have become a mere tick-box - Independence would mean the meaningful implementation of human rights, taking into account the diverse range of lived realities of all Sri Lankans.

Finally, we acknowledge and celebrate the long line of women in Sri Lanka, who through times of war and times of peace, have worked together across borders, for peace, justice and equality. We commit to continue the struggle and draw inspiration from women's continuing struggles around the world. We see this as an important and interesting moment locally and globally, where women are challenging entrenched misogyny, resisting patriarchy, breaking silences, disrupting power and are continuing to achieve important milestones in their struggles NOT BECAUSE of but IN SPITE of their governments, which continue to oppress and discriminate.

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