Ethno-Religious Nationalism and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Sri Lanka: A social media, print media and policy review

Building New Constituencies for Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR): Interlinkages between Religion and SRHR

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Women and Media Collective
Established 1984

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NATIONAL REPORT

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ARROW	Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women
BBS	Bodu Bala Sena
BQBBS	Buddhists Questioning Bodu Bala Sena
CEDAW	Conventions on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
FBR	Family Background Report
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
LRT	Laparoscopic Radical Trachelectomy
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MDSR	Maternal Death Surveillance and Response
MFEPW	Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare
MMR	Maternal Mortality Rate/Ratio
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PHM	Public Health Midwife
SLBFE	Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
WMC	Women and Media Collective

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Women and Media Collective (WMC) partnered with the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW) to conduct a national research study on Religious Fundamentalism/Extremism and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) of women and girls in Sri Lanka in a post-war context. It was conducted over the period October 2014 to April 2015. The purpose of the study was to contribute to the knowledge base on factors that influence SRHR policy and practice and develop a strong evidence-base on emerging challenges that impede women from achieving their sexual and reproductive rights and accessing related services. The evidence-base generated will be subsequently used to advocate for the SRHR agenda to advance sustainable development while addressing the challenges brought on through the use of religion in marginalising women from national to international spaces.

The key challenge when addressing this topic in the Sri Lankan context was to develop the definition of religion, as it is closely tied to ethnic and nationalist discourses in the country, with a focus on Buddhism as the belief system of the majority. Given this close inter-relationship, this study adopted a framework of "ethno-religious nationalist sentiment" throughout research design, data collection, analysis and reporting. The research study in Sri Lanka was mainly conducted through discourse analysis and was divided into three reviews so as to gain a rounded perspective on how these issues are depicted through national policy, in the print media, and in social media. Each review adopted a suitable methodology and related research questions that asked what national policies and policy related changes took place; how SRHR concerns were represented in the mainstream print media in the 2009–2015 period; and what the online discourse was on religion and SRHR. It also sought to identify avenues for a positive change in relation to ensuring these rights. Each review was presented as a separate review paper, and these have been compiled into this report.

This study looks at a defined time period—between May 2009 (when the government in power declared victory in the civil war between the rebel forces and the Sri Lankan forces) and December 2014 when this research was undertaken (defined as the present in relation to the study timeline). On May 19, 2009 the Sri Lankan forces declared victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), claiming to have ended the civil war that was fought over a period of 26 years. The post-war period considered here was governed by the regime that defeated the LTTE until January 2015. This period was an era of rapid infrastructural development, with an increase in the engagement of the military in civil administration, as evidenced in the merger of the Ministry of Urban Development with the Ministry of Defence (as per Extra Ordinary Gazette No.1681/03 dated November 22, 2010). There were also ad hoc attempts at reconciliation (such as the setting up of and inquiry by the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission and the UN Human Rights Council resolution on reconciliation, accountability and human rights).

Victory in the war against militant ethnic Tamil groups created space for ethno-religious nationalist discourse of the majority Sinhala-Buddhist population to shift its focus to perceived threats by religious minorities; i.e. the Muslims and some Christian Evangelists. These discourses appeared to be driven by ideas that the Sinhalese race is under threat of being diminished, relative to an increase in Sri Lanka's Muslim population; that Sri Lanka's identity as a Sinhala-Buddhist nation is being challenged, with forces conspiring to destroy it. There was an emergence of ethno-religious and nationalist groups and attacks on religious places of worship of minorities (mosques and churches) and on communities of other religions and ethnicities (sporadic violence in minority communities). In the ideologies and argumentation used by these groups, women's role in society and reference to their bodies were to perpetuate statements of hate. These included framing

women as bearers of culture and national identity, and being instrumental in producing a new generation of Sinhala Buddhists.

There were several key national policies developed following the ending of the war in 2009. Generally, when policy documents express ethnic, religious or nationalist sentiments it marginalises the minority ethnic and religious groups. This marginalization leads to deprive a segment of the society from enjoying their rights as citizens of the country. The review of national policies, however, did not find any overt indication of a direct influence over reproductive rights of women and girls due to the expressed ethnic, religious and nationalist sentiments. When considering the print media, there were many articles carrying ethno-religious and nationalist sentiments. Articles mostly contained news items and reports of incidents as they occurred quoting statements made by religious or other persons of authority. As the print media in Sri Lanka has a wide readership and reaches the masses, it compels them to think and act upon the news items and the ideologies carried within them. This is more so when the quotes and statements are spoken by religious leaders, politicians and other persons of respect and authority, and especially when the public may not have access to other verifiable sources. This may result in ethnic and religious tensions and when the comments are directed towards women, they may undermine women's rights and respect for women. Though the online discourse appears to be based on a clear hierarchy of liberties between men and women, women and girls are venerated for their roles, for instance as mothers who by rearing their young guarantee the continuation of the Sinhala-Buddhist nation. However, where their behaviour deviates from narrowly defined religious and moral norms, women are denigrated with equal fervour. Furthermore, the online space remains a difficult one for women to seek meaningful redress and demand accountability, despite the fact that perpetrators of online hate speech are often identifiable to the extent of their associated personal accounts.

Some of the main recommendations of this research highlight the need for a more inclusive process where health experts, women's organisations and civil society are consulted in the drafting of policies from a secular, rights-based and gender sensitive perspective, and to make public such documents. The general public and the media also need sensitization on gender concerns and issues pertaining to women's rights and gender equality as well as on co-existence, tolerance and ethnic and religious harmony. There is also a need to hold accountable, by public condemnation, all those who make offensive and racist statements that incite hate.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report was prepared by the Women and Media Collective (WMC), Sri Lanka, during the period October 2014 to May 2015, in partnership with the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), Malaysia, with the financial support of the European Union. This study broadly fits in with ARROW's objective of creating an evidence base that critically analyses the inter-linkages between religious extremism and fundamentalism and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and its influence on women's and young people's lives. This study will also be used for national advocacy that will facilitate cross-movement building and stronger regional alliances, and counter the closing spaces for women's groups due to increasing religious fundamentalism and extremism (ARROW 2014).

The study conducted in Sri Lanka however, extends the scope of ARROW's focus (on religious extremism and fundamentalism) and looks at SRHR in the context of ethnicity, religion and nationalism in the post-war context in Sri Lanka from 2009 to 2015, signifying the period from the military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009 to the ending of the Rajapaksa regime, credited with the defeat of the LTTE, in January 2015. This study attempts to document the changes and discourse that took place during this period through national policies that were developed, newspaper coverage in the print media and social media updates via Facebook, in order to find out how women's SRHR were discussed from an ethno-religious and nationalist standpoint.

On May 19, 2009, Sri Lankan forces defeated the LTTE by ending a civil war that was fought over a period of 26 years. A multi-dimensional post-war rebuilding process should have followed, broadly including: (1) security, (2) justice and reconciliation, (3) social and economic well-being, and (4) governance and participation (Keerawella 2013). Yet what followed were scattered attempts at reconciliation, an era

of rapid infrastructural development, an increase in military involvement in civil administration, and manifestations of ethnic and religious tensions. There began a discourse of fear articulated through, for example, some of the following developments and incidents:

- The **continued presence of the military in non-military spheres** of daily life caused serious concern internally and internationally (Ibid. 2013). Infrastructure projects relied heavily on the military and vast swaths of land in the North and East were acquired by the military for various purposes including commercial projects (Gunatilleke and Nathaniel 2014).

- An **upsurge in ethno-religious Sinhala nationalism**, saw the military victory being perceived as not merely the defeat of the LTTE by the State, but also a victory over Tamil nationalism and a victory for Buddhism. As such, this period saw a struggle over the identity of the State—as to whether Sinhala Buddhist interests should be given primacy over the multicultural identity of Sri Lanka (CEPA 2013).

- During the post-war era, there was a **rise in hate speech and violence** directed primarily at religious and minorities. An apparent lack of judicial willingness to protect and promote religious freedom with the inaction of law enforcement authorities was a common feature of the narrative on religious violence (Gunatilleke 2015).

- There was an **emergence of ethno-religious nationalist groups**, identifying themselves as Sinhala Buddhist and instigating attacks on non-Buddhist religious places of worship and on communities subscribing to other religions and ethnicities. Key among these groups was the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS, translation – Buddhist Power Force), inciting issues

ranging from the supposed decline of the Sinhalese community due to family planning, conversion, to the perceived increase in Sri Lanka's Muslim population (Amarasuriya 2015).

- The **increasing popularity and use of social media**, on the one hand, became a platform for infringing religious freedom and propagating hate (Samaratunge and Hattotuwa 2014) and on the other hand, it was used to successfully counter-balance state control over mainstream media (Gunatilleke 2015).

- The regime that defeated the LTTE, made ideological statements **framing women as bearers of culture and national identity** and as biological reproducers of the nation, instrumental in producing a new generation of Sinhala Buddhists (Kodikara 2014).

Two key features thus became evident in social and political discourses during the period under review: (1) Sri Lanka's post-war nationalist ideals were being equated to a hegemonic Sinhala-Buddhist identity, and (2) The role of women was being specifically conceptualised as that of upholding or shaping ethno-religious identity. The current research study attempts to relate these emerging ethno-religious and nationalist discourses and ensuing implications on women in Sri Lanka, particularly, on their SRHR.

Research Objectives

- Identify religious and nationalist discourse on multiple platforms (national policy, print media—namely Sinhala newspapers, and social media—namely Facebook) around SRH rights and services in Sri Lanka and analyse the same to identify its extent and influence.

- Build a strong evidence base with secondary information to trace the link, if any, of the influence of religion on the SRHR of people, including women, youth, sexual and gender minorities, and other marginalised groups.

- Based on the evidence generated, identify potential advocacy initiatives in order to change existing policy, inform programming and/or advocate for a paradigm shift through public awareness.

Research Questions

1. What are the national policies and policy related changes that have taken place in recent years that affect the lives of women and girls, especially with regard to SRHR? Do these have religious or nationalist roots?

2. How are SRHR concerns represented in the mainstream print media in the 2009–2015 period?

3. What is the online discourse on religion and SRHR, especially on Facebook? What is the general sentiment regarding these issues?

4. What are the avenues for positive change (stakeholders, laws and policies, etc.) and how can these be maximised?

The focus of this study is to map out these observations through a process of data gathering and analysis. The study is divided into three main areas as rationalised below:

1. **Review of National Policy:** National policies are the means by which a welfare state such as Sri Lanka prioritises and conveys its national goals and agendas. Therefore, it was decided that a review of policies developed since the end of the war would help identify any special reference to ethno-religious and nationalist sentiment, especially with regard to women's SRHR.

2. **Review of Print Media/Sinhala Newspapers:** Given the relatively high levels of literacy, local newspapers in Sri Lanka have a wide reach and readership and are a means by which many people keep up-to-date with current affairs of the country. Therefore, a review of newspapers was undertaken in order to understand the type of discourse around ethno-religious and nationalist

issues and how these are depicted and presented to the masses who read these newspapers.

3. **Review of Facebook as a Social Media Platform:** In recent years, social media platforms have become a means by which mostly urbanised young people in Sri Lanka keep up-to-date, become informed and connected to the world around them. Facebook was selected among these platforms for this study for three specific reasons: high user base, length of discourse and commentary on posts, and extent of hate speech related content. This method also helped identify ethno-religious and nationalist groups and their reach and influence, particularly on women's SRHR.

Research Methodology

This research study was conceptualised following several brainstorming sessions with selected experts in the fields of women's, religious, nationalist, post-war and SRHR studies and work. It was decided that the study would focus on the post-war era and would examine three sources (government publications, traditional media and new/social media). These sources would be perused to explore the articulation of ethnic, religious and nationalist sentiments and in relation to SRHR of women and girls. These reviews were undertaken from February to April 2015 and presented separately in the Findings Section, adopting slightly differing techniques and methodologies with the same overall objectives.

Methodology for the National Policy Review: This paper was written mainly through a review of selected national policies and Government circulars published since 2009 in Sri Lanka. Specific ones were selected under themes that have greater impact on SRHR of women and girls, and included policies on health, employment, youth and migration related policies. They were sourced from online platforms of the relevant ministries and departments. While these documents are available in all three languages, English versions were selected for this study.

Methodology for the Review of Sinhala Newspapers: It was decided that local language newspapers in Tamil and Sinhala with a wide reach and readership would be reviewed for this study. However, due to limited human resources, only Sinhala language newspapers were looked into. While initially, the Divaina newspaper (Sunday/Daily) was selected, once data collection began, it was felt that the articles were insufficient to provide in-depth analysis for this study. Thereafter, the Lankadeepa newspaper (Sunday/Daily), which reportedly has the highest circulation among Sinhala language mainstream newspapers, was also reviewed. About 150 selected newspaper issues published from June 2009 to December 2014 were reviewed. As this covered a wide timespan, the months of March (as it coincides with International Women's Day) and May (as it holds the celebration of the victory of the war) were selected. Further details can be found in Appendix 2.

Methodology for the Review of Facebook: Representation and conversation around three thematic areas were selected on the basis of: a) a review of literature and observations of the discourse online, b) informal conversations with individuals working in the field of women's rights, and c) coverage and commentary in mainstream media. An attempt was made to collect data across all three languages—English, Sinhala and Tamil. To collect the data, a manual search of the timelines of multiple accounts was undertaken and additional material gathered through employing the search tool provided by Facebook itself, as well as Google searches using key terms which sometimes highlighted relevant accounts. The selection of pages itself included those of hate groups, prominent media or civil society organisations as well as publicly known individuals or activists. Some posts were originally in Sinhala and translated into English. A snowball method was used to identify relevant pages. Screenshots of select posts and comments and a matrix containing a breakdown of relevant data (number of likes and shares of the posts and fans of the main page) was developed.

Analytical Framework for the National Policy Review:
When analyzing policy documents it is crucial to pay attention to the terms/words used and also the language of policies in general. A first level analysis was conducted through a technique of word search to see how frequently certain words/terms were used in these policy documents. Gauging the frequency is a pragmatic method to engage in a comprehensive analysis of policies as it gives an overview of the sentiments that it aims at putting forward. The terms searched to determine ethnic, religious and nationalist sentiments were: ethnic/ethnicity, religious, national, Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, minority, Buddhist, Hindu, Islam, and rights. The second level analysis looked at the policy documents to examine how the State deployed these policies to exercise control over populations, who gets marginalized in the process and also the politics of not using certain words/terms in policies. A brief historical background to the welfare policies of Sri Lanka was given in order to understand how citizenship has evolved in the country.

Analytical Framework for the Review of Sinhala Newspapers: Newspaper articles that were gathered around the topics of religious issues, women's rights, health, sexuality and reproduction, were categorised under two broad themes for analysis. Themes included family planning, contracption and the size of the family; and abortion related issues. These were then analysed for common trends and written out accordingly.

Analytical Framework for the Review of Facebook:
Compilation of the data matrix was done in advance of conducting the analysis and writing the report. This matrix was then used to identify common trends in discourse under the pre-selected themes. Subsequently, every post that was collected, even if not utilized, was included in the final matrix in the interests of documentation. Pre-selected themes included: 1) Reproductive rights and economic facets in ethno-religious discourse; 2) Government policy on migrant women; and 3) The "Buddhists Questioning Bodu Bala Sena" candlelight vigil and the resultant fallout.

Limitations

- It was apparent during the course of the research that there are limited experts in this field of this study making it difficult to locate persons with the subject knowledge (religion, conflict, SRHR) and well as language skills (conduct research in local languages and report in English), proficient translators, and reviewers.

- The identified time frame for the study was "post-war", which establishes a six-year timeline. In social media terms, especially on Facebook, this is a long period as material can be lost, removed, blocked or otherwise altered. An attempt was made to access archived material where available. Manual searching for discussions is necessary in some cases to examine the entire timeline of an account to unearth relevant posts. Keeping these constraints in mind, it became necessary to study specific thematic areas around which discourse occurred over an extended period.

- The approach of manually scanning Facebook accounts proved to have its limitations –demanding a great investment in time and personnel that was not available. In addition to difficulties identifying appropriate accounts and pages, it was found that many accounts had been taken down, posts had been edited or deleted, and there was a need to rely on archives of individuals, some of whom were personally affected by the incident under discussion.

- Where numbers of Facebook page fans have been shared, the numbers are as of March 2015. It was not possible to gauge the number of fans at the time of posting.

- There were difficulties locating posts in the Tamil language on Facebook although it was expected that the topics of this study would be part of the discussion among the online Tamil community. This may reflect issues with the search method employed or the need to use more colloquial search terms or seek word of mouth references.

- Recently, hate groups have become more aware of the need to propagate their ideologies in a covert manner, which does not obviously come across as religious extremist/racist. These sites often use subtle language, messages hidden beneath multiple examples and narrow statistics that confirm negative stereotypes about particular groups in the absence of other information. It is possible that the evolution of pages in this way also contributed to the difficulty in sourcing/tracking down relevant pages in all three languages.

- During the process of translating the posts and comments from Facebook, direct translation of the strong language and expletives were not used. While we acknowledge that it is important to reflect on the kind of language and the spirit in which it was used, we felt that in the prevailing socio-political environment relating to ethno-religious nationalism, paraphrasing statements in some instances would better serve our readers.

The report is set out as follows: The next section, Section 2 presents a profiling of Sri Lanka within a framework of SRHR and ethno-religious nationalism which was a dominant discourse during the period under review. It includes an overview of SRHR indicators and key elements in the articulation of a form of ethno-religious nationalism in selected areas, policy role of women in a post war context, and controversies that were articulated around SRHR policies and ethnic identities in the mainstream discourse in the country. Section 3 is presented in three parts to include the findings of the review of selected national policies on SRHR during the post-war period, the findings from the Sinhala newspaper review to gauge the situation as portrayed through selected newspapers and, a review of social media through Facebook in order to identify online discourse around the topic. Section 4 presents the Conclusions on these findings followed by Section 5 which offers Recommendations. Sections 6 and 7 list out references and appendices respectively.

2. PROFILING SRI LANKA: SRHR AND ETHNO-RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

A Profile: Sri Lanka	
Total population estimate (2013)	20,579,000
Population of women (2013)	10,616,000
Population of young people (10–24 years/2013)	4,869,000
Ethnic groupings	Sinhalese, Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils, Moors, Burghers and Malays
Religious groupings	Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity
Official languages	Sinhalese and Tamil
Type of governance/form of government	Democratic republic
Poverty Headcount Index (2012/13)	6.7%
Population growth rate (2012)	0.71
Literacy rate among females (2012)	94.6
Maternal mortality ratio (2013)	32.5 per 100,000 live births
Total fertility rate (2006/07)	2.3
Adolescent (15–19 years) birth rate (2006/07)	28 per 1000 women
Contraception prevalence rate and (2013)	64.9
Unmet need for family planning (2013)	7.1
Access to modern contraception (2013)	55.4

Sources: Department of Census and Statistics 2012 and Family Health Bureau 2012 and 2014

Figure 1: Population by Ethnicity
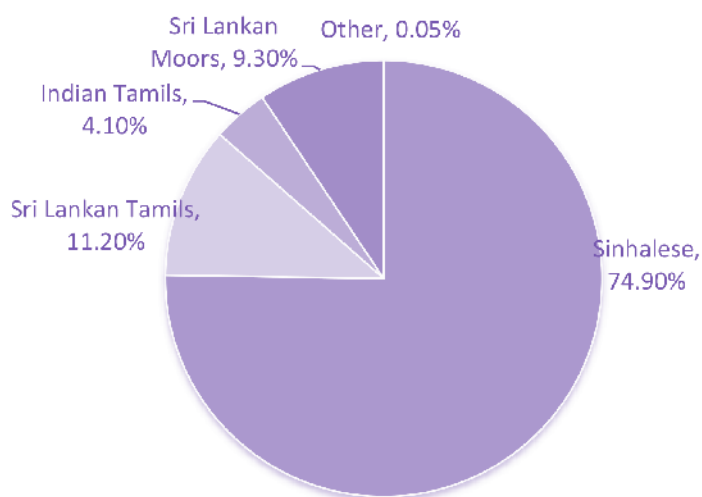
Source: DCS 2012

Figure 2: Population by Religion
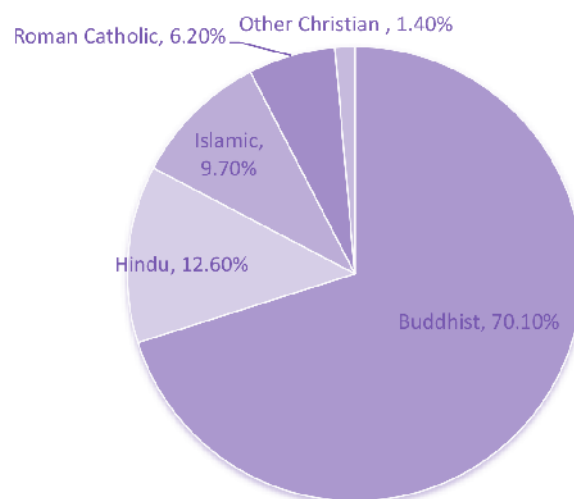
Source: DCS 2012

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country as illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2. 74.9% of the total population is comprised of Sinhalese, yet not all Sinhalese are Buddhists as a certain proportion follow Christianity, which is why the percentage of Buddhists in Figure 2 is less than 74.9% (DCS 2012).

Women in the reproductive age group of 15 to 49 years comprised 27.8% of the population (FHB 2012). Although the total fertility rate is 2.3 (DCS 2009), a closer look at trends in fertility rates noted that there has been a decrease from 3.4 in 1974 to 1.9 in 2000 (DCS 2009). Many reasons can be attributed to these fluctuations in fertility over the years, ranging from progressive government policies on population and changes in socio-economic conditions to high proportions of unmarried women and economic underdevelopment (Gunasinghe 1977).

The life expectancy at birth for females in 2011 was 77.9 years, while it was 70.3 years for males. The literacy rate for females was at 94.6 in 2011 whereas it was slightly higher at 96.8 for men (DCS 2012). Net school enrolment rates were however, higher for females at school and college levels. Although education data indicates that women fare better than their male counterparts, employment data indicate that there are significantly lower proportions of females in the workforce. National data indicate that only 34.7% females (15 years and over) were economically active whereas it was 74.6% for males (DCS 2014). For the population over 20, labour force participation was 37.3% for females and 81.2% for males (DCS 2014). Female departure for foreign employment has declined from a range of 75% to 62% during the period from 1993 to 2004 to 49.07% in 2012, although the number of departures has been increasing gradually, reaching 138,547 in 2012; 86% of these women migrated for employment as housemaids (SLBFE 2012). Sri Lanka's Human Development Index (HDI) value[1] for 2013 was 0.750, positioning it at 73 out of 187 countries (UNDP 2014). It must be noted that although Sri Lanka's performance through such indices and national level data is positive; it hides the vulnerabilities faced by women across

the lines of region, caste, class and sexual orientation. It also hides aspects such as informal or precarious work of women and do not effectively capture the nuances of women's socio-economic indicators.

Overview of SRHR in Sri Lanka

SRHR and services prioritized in Sri Lanka mainly focus on maternal and child health and family planning. According to the Family Health Bureau, 64.6% of the eligible families registered under care of the Public Health Midwife (PHM) had been using any method of contraception at the end of 2012. The proportion using modern and traditional methods were 55.1% and 9.2% respectively, while 35.4% did not use any form of contraception, and the unmet need for family planning was 7.4 (FHB 2012). Sri Lanka's Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) stands at 32.5 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births (FHB 2014). Every maternal death in Sri Lanka is investigated through the Maternal Death Surveillance and Response (MDSR) system that includes a Maternal Death Audit. Sri Lanka is currently targeting zero preventable maternal mortality. Further, 99.9% of all births were institutional deliveries and only 0.07% of all deliveries were conducted by untrained personnel (FHB 2012). Sri Lanka is classified as a country with a low prevalence level of HIV/AIDS in the South Asia region with an estimated 3,000 (2000-5000) people living with HIV and an estimated prevalence rate of less than 0.1% as at 2014 (NSACP 2014). However, favourable national level data hide regional and sectoral differences with conflict-affected areas in the North and East, economically underperforming districts, and the estate sector showing rates below national averages.

Sri Lanka has signed and ratified many international laws and conventions that attempt to address the empowerment of women, combat gender-based violence and forms of discrimination, improve the health and wellbeing of women and girls and ensure gender equality. Some of these include: International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights (1980) and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1980); International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1982); the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against

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1 A summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and having a decent standard of living.

Women (1981) and its Optional Protocol (2002); Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1994); and the United Nations International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1996). Sri Lanka is committed to the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action (1994); the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995); and the Millennium Declaration (2000).

The Country Profile on Universal Access to Sexual and Reproductive Rights: Sri Lanka (WMC and ARROW 2015) notes that there have been many measures to address SRHR at a domestic level. These are mainly through the Population and Reproductive Health Policy (1998) and the National Maternal and Child Health Policy (2008). Gender-based violence (GBV) is addressed through various legislation, policies and programmes. For example, Intimate partner violence is addressed through the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act No. 34 of 2005 of the Penal Code and Act No. 22 of 1995 (Amendment) of the Penal Code; and rape (heterosexual) is addressed through Section 363 of the Penal Code as amended by Act No. 22 of 1995; and statutory rape (below 16 years of age, with the exception of married Muslims) through Section 363 (e) of the Penal Code as amended by Act No. 22 of 1995. The legal age of marriage in Sri Lanka is 18 years of age for both males and females while the age of consent is 16 years and the median age at marriage is 23.3 years (DCS 2009). Abortion is illegal and considered a criminal offence except if the pregnancy puts the woman's life at risk, as stipulated by Section 303, Penal Code of Sri Lanka (1833). Amendments proposed in 1995 to decriminalise abortion on the grounds of rape, incest or where foetal abnormalities existed, were not recognized due to religious and cultural pressures. The National HIV/AIDS Policy of Sri Lanka (2011) addresses non-discrimination of people living with HIV in health and education sectors and in reproductive and family life. In addition, there is a National Policy on HIV and AIDS in the World of Work in Sri Lanka (2010), which prohibits discrimination against people based on real or perceived HIV status for purposes of recruitment or at any other stage of employment. Areas with little to no progress in recent times are those pertaining to sexual orientation and sexual

identities. Same-sex relationships are seen as a criminal offence in Sri Lanka under Sections 365 and 365A of the country's Penal Code. Transgender persons can also be criminalised under Section 399 of the Penal Code of Sri Lanka (1833) with reference to "cheat by personation" and the Vagrancy Ordinance of 1842.

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Issues in Sri Lanka[2]

The reproductive health policies currently in place lack a rights-based approach, and need to be strengthened through the development of inclusive SRH policies that ensure availability of services without discrimination on the grounds of sex, gender, age, religion, race, marital status, sexual orientation, and other factors. There is also a need for legislative reform on abortion, marital rape, sexual orientation and gender identity and aspects of gender-based violence that are currently addressed through archaic laws or not addressed at all. There is a need to explore the concept of "family" and "eligible couple/family" which despite being defined to include "a family with a pregnant or cohabiting woman irrespective of marital status and age and single women (widow, divorced, separated)" (FHB 2014, 11) most often remains confined to women living or associated with marriage/heterosexual relationships.

Segments such as female-headed households (for example, post 2004 Tsunami and post-war widows), gender diverse groups, single women, sex workers and other groups such as adolescents do not fall within the traditional societal definition of a "family" and hence tend to be discouraged from accessing reproductive health related services (Perera and de Silva 2011). Formal data gathering systems on SRHR for evidence-based policy and programming that include such marginalized groups are also required to collect, organise and analyse SRH related data. Such systems need to target areas where there are considerable data gaps related to gender-based violence, SRH of men, sexual dysfunctions and SRH of those beyond the reproductive age group.

2 Based on recommendations made through the WMC and ARROW. Country Profile on Universal Access to Sexual and Reproductive Rights: Sri Lanka, Colombo: Women and Media Collective and Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women, Malaysia, 2015.

Political Climate and Ethno-Religious Nationalism in Sri Lanka

Background to the civil war in Sri Lanka and the post-war context

Ethnic riots involving Tamils and Sinhalese occurred in 1956[3], in 1958, 1977 and in 1981, with the most violent and destructive riots taking place in July 1983, are seen as the beginning of the ethnic conflict (Tambiah 1984). The ethnic conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, Tamil Tigers) resulted in a 26-year war that was pegged on the long-term inequalities faced by the largest minority group—the Tamils—during the post-independence period. During its course, it cost the lives of an estimated 80,000 - 100,000 of people (Poloni-Staudinger and Ortbals 2013). Attempts at peace talks were made including with foreign mediation and with the unsuccessful deployment of the Indian Army, the Indian Peace Keeping Force. Fighting escalated in the latter part of the war with the Sri Lankan military forces defeating the LTTE in May 2009 and claiming Sri Lanka as the first country in the modern world to eradicate terrorism on its own soil. In May 2010, Mahinda Rajapaksa[4], the President of Sri Lanka, appointed the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) to assess the conflict between the time of the ceasefire agreement in 2002 and the defeat of the LTTE in 2009.

Post-war Sri Lanka entered into a new era with a vision of becoming the "emerging wonder of Asia" as noted in the development ideology promoted by the State. Mahinda Rajapaksa's election manifestos in 2005 and 2010, the Mahinda Chinthanaya, became the central development policy document for this declared development ideology. According to Uyangoda (2011), the Sri Lankan State had two options after its military victory: either "reconciliation with the Tamils" or "consolidation of the regime". From the weight given to economic and infrastructure development over reconciliation attempts, it is apparent that the

Rajapaksa government chose consolidating the regime over reconciling with the Tamils. To consolidate the regime, the then government undertook massive infrastructure development projects, especially deploying military labour to facilitate their implementation, and promoted a Sinhala-Buddhist ideology claiming the entire geographical space of the island as its territory (Dewasiri 2013). In other words, the Post-war State's approach to develop the country—mainly by developing the infrastructure of the country and promoting Sinhala-Buddhist ideology—led to the alienation of minority ethnic groups, forcing them to become mere beneficiaries of the state patronage (sometimes military patronage) rather than being included in the reconciliation and rebuilding process. In this context, it was economic development and related policies rather than political power-sharing that was seen as the principal and most important driver of political reconciliation (Senaratne 2014).

Ethno-Religious Nationalism in Sri Lanka

In order to understand the religious influence in present day Sri Lanka, it is important to explore the historical role and relationship between Buddhism and the other religions vis a vis the State, and the extent to which the laws and policies that govern the country are secular. Although the Constitution of Sri Lanka guarantees each of its religious traditions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity) equal protection under the law, Buddhism is given the "foremost" place among the religions through the privileges it received under Article 9 of the 1972 post-independence constitution. Interrelations of religion, ethnicity, nationalism and social and political power in Sri Lankan society make it difficult to look at religion as an influencing factor in isolation. It is due to these interlinkages that this report discusses religious fundamentalism within an ethnic and nationalist context, referred to as Ethno-Religious Nationalism (Kodikara 2013).

The following points discuss some of the key features of ethno-religious nationalism observed during the years following the end of the war that were considered for this study. This section also provides a brief background to understand specific points discussed in this report.

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3 The adoption by the then government of the "Sinhala Only" bill, which effectively positioned the Sinhala language hierarchically above the Tamil language as the official language of communication.

4 Mahinda Rajapaksa governed Sri Lanka as President from November 2005 to January 2015.

Women's role in the post-war context: The procreating ability of women has identified them historically with the "nation". This is evident in independence movements and nationalist movements in South Asia. Feminists such as Kumkum Sangari (1990), and Floya Antias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1992) have shown how the State deployed women's bodies to foster a national identity among its people, and also to maintain the State's position as a patriarchal father figure. The danger that these scholars warn is the impact that such sentiments could have on the rights of women and girls in general and their sexual and reproductive rights in particular. In Sri Lanka, the key features of a frame that defines how women's SRHR in the context of the country's popular nationalist ideals, include the familiar trope of the heterosexual nuclear family as being the foundation or primary building block of Sri Lanka's nationhood. Within this are clear notions of what women's roles and men's roles are, and what it means to be a "good" wife and "a good" mother. Therefore, women's bodily integrity, autonomy and agency are seen as secondary to the collective good of the family, and by extension, the state (Kodikara 2013).

> **❝**In Sri Lanka, the key features of a frame that defines how women's SRHR in the context of the country's popular nationalist ideals, include the familiar trope of the heterosexual nuclear family as being the foundation or primary building block of Sri Lanka's nationhood.**❞**

Policies developed in the post-war period: An analysis of the political economy of post-war Sri Lanka noted the conflict as "failed State-society relations" rather than a conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils, thus proposing to reform the State by accommodating plural identities at the level of structures, public policy and identity of the State (Bastian 2013). Bastian argues that the Sinhala-Buddhist ideology promoted (without accommodating plural identities) in its new structures, policies and identity, resulted in excluding minority groups from a dialogue between the State and society. Policy is identified as one of the crucial measures where plural identities could be accommodated for reconciliation. However, the author critically notes that the policies developed following the war were mainly around rapid economic development and physical infrastructure development rather than including a focus on building inter-ethnic reconciliation. Economic development was strengthened and promoted as the end of the war was seen as the ideal platform to construct a discourse giving primacy to economic development, to regain past economic losses and become the "Miracle of Asia" or the "Wonder of Asia" (Senarathne 2014).

Emergence of Buddhist fundamentalist groups: This post-war period also saw the start of Buddhist fundamentalists groups such as the Ravana Balakaya and the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS)/Buddhist Power Force. The latter has emerged as a prominent hate group in post-war Sri Lanka and claims to be guided by a Sinhala-Buddhist ideology. It works with the tagline of "Protection of Buddhism for Future Generations". The BBS held its first national convention in 2012 and passed five resolutions which, amongst other things, called for a ban on vasectomy and tubectomy in government health facilities, replacement of the various legal systems used in the country with a single legal system, preferential treatment in university admission for students who attended Buddhism classes, use of monks in government schools to teach history and other classes, and the avoidance of any race or religion-based solution for the country's ethnic problems (Edirisinghe 2012). It is also important to highlight that support for BBS was mainly among young, Sinhala males that attended their rallies in scores, creating a certain type of "Sinhala-Buddhist masculinity." Many of the incidents discussed in this report are also centred on this group and their growing influence.

Anti-Muslim riots and tensions: The Secretariat for Muslims (SFM) noted that fuelled by globally circulating discourses, hate speech and false propaganda against Muslims quickly escalated in the post-war context, with the BBS often at the helm. There emerged a campaign targeting the "Halal" certification and sale of Halal food in supermarkets, wearing of the niqab/abaya by Muslim women as well as other Muslim practices (in relation to

marriage, treatment of women and family planning). It also called for the boycott of and violence against Muslim businesses and the desecration or destruction of mosques, leading to widespread anti-Muslim violence in Aluthgama in June 2014 (SFM 2015 a.). The SFM also documents other tensions in the areas of Kuragala/Jailani and Devanagala in Ratnapura (Uva Province) and Kegalle (Central Province) districts respectively, as well as sites in Deegavapi in Ampara district (Eastern Province) and in Dambulla in Matale district (Central Province) (SFM 2015 a., b.).

Controversies over reproductive rights: Drawing from figures in the 2012 census, BBS argued that the Muslim population was increasing, threatening the dominance of the Sinhala-Buddhist majority. The latter claim has been challenged, as the Sinhala and Muslim populations had increased at the rate of 1.04 and 1.87% respectively between 1981 and 2012, and hence was not a 'threat' to the Sinhala people (Edirisinghe 2013). However, the perceived threat led groups with ethno-nationalist motivations to begin actively campaigning against the use of the contraception among the Sinhalese community. In early 2014 there were reports of rumours that Muslim shops were allegedly selling women's undergarments tainted with chemicals that would cause the wearer – presumably a Sinhala-Buddhist woman – to become infertile (IQNA 2014). This was part of a growing focus on the ethnic composition of Sri Lanka's population by hate groups. The BBS asked State authorities to take action against Marie Stopes International and Population Service Lanka, accusing the two of encouraging Sinhalese women to undergo Ligation and Resection of Tube (LRT) operations, "with the intention of reducing the Sinhalese community from a majority to a minority community in Sri Lanka" (Wijenayake 2013). The government appears to have reacted to these claims subsequently and instructed government hospitals and private institutions to halt all irreversible birth control procedures (Christopher 2014).

Online hate speech around ethno-religious tensions:
Online hate speech appears to have found expression and a ready audience on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs. These platforms have been used as a space for expression, debate and discussion,

a means to mobilise and organise people to take some physical action such as a protest or to sign a petition, as well as for retaliatory attacks against others (discussed further in the Section 3 of this report). In many instances, the retaliatory action and even discussions were focused on women, their conduct, their bodies, and their perceived roles and responsibilities in and to society, within Sri Lanka's larger nationalist agenda. One of the most used platforms in this context is Facebook, with a rapid growth of content generation and consumption online. It has thus created low risk, low cost and high impact online spaces to spread hate, harm and hurt against specific communities, individuals or ideas (Hattotuwa and Samaratunge 2014).

Legal framework for incidents of hate speech: Under the Sri Lankan Constitution, it is possible to prosecute those accused of hate speech. In Sri Lanka the tenets of religious freedom for instance are upheld in the Constitution under Article 9, 10 and 14. Provisions in the Penal Code such as those under Section 291A allow that any person who utters words with deliberate intent to wound religious feelings of any other person, utters any word or makes any sound in the hearing of that person, or makes any gesture in the sight of that person, or places any object in the sight of that person, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to one year, or with fine, or with both. Under 291B it is stated that, "deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of persons, by words either spoken or written, or by visible representations, insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment..." (Ibid. 2014, 19).

3.   UNDERSTANDING THE INTERLINKAGES

Review of National Policies: Ethnic, Religious and Nationalist Sentiments in National Policies and its Influence on the Sexual and Reproductive Rights of Women and Girls

"The final element of the current regime is the hegemonic position occupied by Sinhala- Buddhist nationalism. The Rajapaksa regime projected the military campaign against the LTTE as a patriotic war. Given the nationalist history of Sri Lankan politics, this patriotism is about defending the country of Sinhala-Buddhists. It is a patriotism that defends a sectional interest. Rajapaksa mobilised support from parties holding more extreme Sinhala nationalist views. The defeat of the LTTE and consolidation of the centralised state has strengthened the supremacy Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. With this supremacy there are new articulations of the nationalist discourse. This nationalist ideology provides a strong social base for a state buttressed by a powerful military machinery and controlled by a strong presidency."

(Bastian 2013, 9)

It was noted at the onset of this report that national policies are the means by which a welfare state such as Sri Lanka prioritises its national goals and conveys its agenda to its people. It was also noted that the main focus of post-war development in Sri Lanka was constructed around economic and physical infrastructure development, in order to transform it in to the "Wonder of Asia". This section will therefore attempt to identify the interlinkages, if any, on the SRHR and development related national policies developed during the post-war era, the wider priorities of the then ruling regime, the ethno-religious nationalists sentiments within these, and the implications of these on the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women. The following section will briefly introduce the welfare state policies in Sri Lanka and discuss the placement of women in this context. It will then look into each of the following policies to find out if post-war Sri Lanka promoted discourses of a specific ethnic, religious or nationalist sentiment through these policies as a mechanism to regulate and exercise control over its populations and its impact, if any, on the SRHR of women and girls:

1. Mahinda Chinthanaya – Vision for the Future (2010)
2. National Policy on Maternal and Child Health (2012)
3. National Policy on HIV AIDS in the World of Work in Sri Lanka (2011)
4. Sri Lanka National Migration Health Policy (2012)
5. National Youth Policy (2014)
6. Human Resources for Health Strategic Plan 2009-2018 (2009)
7. National Policy Framework for Social Integration
8. Family Background Report (2013)- Circular

The welfare state policies in Sri Lanka were introduced during the last decades of the British colonial regime in the early nineteenth century through the introduction of public health policies (Jones 2002). The roots of public welfare in fact go back to the 1830s where the British state focused on issues related to destitution, sickness and squalor. In other words, public welfare, in modern times, did not have a clear existence before the emergence of the modern British state (Hewitt 1983).

With decolonisation after the Second World War, former colonies worked towards developing their countries and establishing their new national identities. Welfare policies seemed the best method to deploy people towards the development of the State/Nation. Sri Lanka designed the first national development plan—The Ten Year Plan of 1959 with the assistance of Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal and his team. By the 1970s, internationally renowned demographers, development economists and health experts hailed Sri Lanka as a "development model", based on low fertility and mortality levels, increasing life expectancy, commendable women's literacy rates, and sound public health services (Kirk 1969 and Cadwell et al. 1989).

A number of Scandinavian studies explored the relationship between the welfare state and women in the 1970s. Leira (1992) noted that feminist scholars, conceived the welfare state as "patriarchal" and inherently oppressive because it organises social reproduction by assigning childcare and upbringing to women (p. 167). They see it as perpetuation of men's dominance and women's subordination. While Sri Lankan women are also subjected to patriarchy depending on their social status, class and caste, curiously, families in Sri Lanka, regardless of ethnic or religious background are, at the same time, both patriarchal ideologically and functionally mother-centred. The mother is venerated as "Gedara Budun" (Buddha of the home in the case of Buddhist families) and the father as the head of the family, which is seen across religious groups.

The issue of interest in this study is also that the patriarchal framework of the State as the provider of free education and health services is manifest in a form of paternal tutelage towards women, particularly when the issue of women's sexual and reproductive rights are concerned. The welfare policies (over a period of 70 years—from 1930s to date), mostly seen through the education and health sector, have created a group of beneficiaries in Sri Lanka rather than a group of citizens with capacity to initiate a dialogue between the State and society (Thoradeniya 2014). This in turn would affect the ability to demand for accountability and ensuring of rights for all citizens.

Within this historical backdrop of welfare and social policy and the placement of women in it, this study will now look into the post-war national policies of Sri Lanka. It will attempt to gauge if the government under the regime that defeated the LTTE was promoting a specific ethnic, religious and nationalist sentiment through selected national policies developed during the period and gauge its influence if any, on the SRHR of women and girls.

Mahinda Chinthana—Vision for the Future (2010)

This section reviewed The Development Policy Framework of the previous Government of Sri Lanka titled Sri Lanka the Emerging Wonder of Asia. The Department of National Planning of the Ministry of Finance and Planning derived this policy framework from the Mahinda Chinthanaya. The Mahinda Chinthanaya was the development ideology put forward by the then ruling regime led by Mahinda Rajapaksa in his election manifesto that later became the central development policy document of Sri Lanka. Even though the document does not explicitly promote any specific ethnic sentiment, it is framed within a majoritarian national development discourse. Given the absence of, reference to or, inclusion of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious identities of the population, the document can be read as addressing only the Sinhala majority community of the country. In addition to leaving out communities of other ethnic identities and minority groups such as internally displaced people (IDPs), those who identify themselves through their sexual and gender identities are also excluded in the policy document. The review of the Mahinda Chinthanaya in the context of this study brought out two key observations:

- **Conceptualisation of the "woman"**

The document has little indication of an understanding of or problematising of the concept of "woman". The two aspects that dominate this discourse are that of women as mothers and as widows. However, it also must be noted that the policy document briefly mentions promoting an entrepreneurship culture for women, expanding women's skills in non-traditional areas of education and labour, increase women's participation leadership/ decision-making positions (p. 187) as well as sports (p. 146).

The policy document highlights the role of the mother in maintaining and providing for the wellbeing and moral upbringing of the children and family. It notes that the woman "holds the prime place in the family and is considered as the pioneer who drives the family towards a disciplined society" (p. 186). Women's health needs are discussed and addressed mainly through maternal health and the health and nutritional needs of expectant mothers.

Under the subheading "Creating a Supportive Institutional Framework" (p. 188), the policy document discusses the need to provide support for "destitute groups of women such as widowed, disabled and elderly" (p. 188). It recognizes that "women are the worst affected by the violent conflict" (p. 188) and proposes initiatives to ensure that these women are recognized as heads of households and in their access to productive resources such as land. This section however, does not discuss the security issues faced by these women, their health needs or ensuring that they have specialized means for productive employment or income generation.

Women migrant workers form a unique category in the context of Sri Lanka due to their economic contribution to the country. Yet the only mention of migrant workers in the policy is to implement measures to protect them from economic and sexual exploitation (p. 194). Children of migrant mothers are also seen as a vulnerable category that needs special care (p. 188). This places female migrant workers in a negative light; women who neglect their children/who are easily exploited and taken advantage of. This is also the only meaningful attempt to discuss gender based violence, thus excluding other aspects such as street harassment, violence in the workplace and public places, domestic violence and other types of violence against women and girls.

- **Silence on ethnicity and nationalism as an attempt to erase the memory of war**

A review of this policy document shows that there may have been an attempt to erase the war from public memory by not using the term in the policy document. The document makes very few references to the conflict and its devastating effects over its course. Erasing a past memory and instilling a new ideology can be interpreted

as a way of disciplining the population through promoting and organizing public knowledge. This may impact on the mindset of the people and direct resources of the country towards reviving the ancient civilization of Sri Lanka as a means of instilling "confidence" among the majority of the population.

It is ironic to exclude certain groups from the post-war development plan of Sri Lanka, because it infers that State policy and planning does not address everybody's concerns, but favours a particular group. The policy document devoted a section for housing under the theme "Housing for All" (p. 172), but a housing plan for IDPs and war widows was absent in this section. There are, however, two points about resettling of displaced people and rebuilding and restoration of fully and partially damaged houses in the section on Uthuru Wasanthay (Northern Spring) in the last sub section of the policy document titled "Towards a Balanced Regional Development with Diversity" (p. 241). Under the sub-heading of "Housing Needs of Vulnerable Groups" (p. 173), the policy specifically mentions the plantation workers and coastal communities, but IDPs and war widows are not mentioned there either. Since the policy document did not define who vulnerable groups are, there is an unacceptable ambiguity on the status of IDPs and war widows in the scheme of State responsibility towards vulnerable populations. As the ethnic identity of the majority of these two groups is Tamil, it is possible to argue that Tamils were marginalized in the policy document. By seeming to marginalizing one ethnic community (i.e. Tamil), the policy document inadvertently supports and represents the sentiments of the other ethnic group (i.e. Sinhala).

Words have a labelling effect on people according to the way they identify themselves, and also for others to recognize them. The words IDP may have been banned from policy vocabulary as a mechanism to erase the war from public memory. Analysing one of the speeches of Mahinda Rajapaksa in late 2009, where he talks about "removing the word minority from the vocabulary", Wickramasinghe (2009) contends that the mere removal of the word "minority" will not lead to the idea of a civic nation with citizens/patriots. Similarly, removing the words IDP and war widows from policy documents will not erase the "war" from public memory.

National Policy on Maternal and Child Health (2012)

This policy developed by the Ministry of Health, recognises the changing scenarios of women, children and adolescents and proposes a life cycle approach to addressing sexual and reproductive health needs of the population, especially all women, children and their families. Although there is no specific ethnic, religious or nationalist sentiment expressed in the policy, its mission is "to contribute to the attainment of highest possible levels of health of all women, children and families through provision of comprehensive, sustainable, equitable and quality Maternal and Child Health services in a supportive, culturally acceptable and family friendly settings" (p. 4). The policy however, does not discuss what it "culturally acceptable".

The policy is geared towards improving maternal and child health, as well as attending to all segments in the society without discriminating against any particular group. It also recongises the importance of including women with special needs such as institutionalized women, migrant women, displaced and marginalized women (p. 7). The document does not employ a critical framework that brings out the importance of women's socio-cultural and political positioning that impact on their ability to access health services or to inform health policy. However, it does discuss the need for research and investigation of the behavioural and socio-economic implications of the policies and reiterates the importance of evidence-based policy and programme development.

National Policy on HIV AIDS in the World of Work in Sri Lanka (2011)

This policy document developed by the Ministry of Labour and Labour Relations, addresses non-discrimination of people living with HIV (PLHIV) in health and education sectors and in reproductive and family life. It was compiled within a rights based approach and notes that "all programmes should be gender sensitive, as well as sensitive to race and sexual orientation" (p. 9). It addresses the need for strengthened national capacity to deliver quality reproductive health services and individuals' accessibility to quality services and information on SRHR. It does not imply any particular ethnic, religious or national sentiment.

This policy was formulated to ensure better working conditions for the workforce of the country and also for "employers and workers" organizations to refer to as a policy framework in formulating and implementing workplace policies in their individual institutions" (p. 4). Sexual discipline is pertinent for the State not only to regulate and control the population, but also to maintain a healthy workforce to support the capitalist/socialist economy. It envisages that once the discipline is set by the employers within the factory, the workers will soon become competent in self-surveillance.

Sri Lanka National Migration Health Policy (2012)

This policy developed by the Ministry of Health aims to "safeguard the health of all categories of migrants throughout the migration cycle to contribute to the development goals of the country" (p. 8). Since the migrant workforce of Sri Lanka is a crucial determinant in foreign income earnings of the country, it is imperative that their health is taken care of by the State. Internal migrants in this policy encompass labour migrants, students and internally displaced people (p. 10). By identifying IDPs as internal migrants, this policy has attempted to address all the marginalized groups in society, without expressing any specific ethnic, religious or nationalist sentiment.

The policy notes the importance of access to reproductive health information and services; however, it does not address sexual and reproductive rights (p. 10). The main focus of providing this information is discussed in relation to internal migrants or those within the Export Processing Zones, where the employee profile largely consists of unmarried women within the age group of 16 to 29 years (p. 21). The policy appears to be informed about some of the socio-cultural factors that affect women migrant workers' decisions, whether in employment overseas or within the country but focuses more sharply on addressing some of the factors that are directly employment related issues of migrants.

National Youth Policy (2014)

This policy was drafted by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Skills Development to encompass issues related to all youth segments in the country and with a vision to integrate youth into broader national plans on reconstruction, reconciliation and development. There is a substantial discussion on youth marginalization and exclusion (p. 12-13) with special reference to the last three decades. Social diversity has been meaningfully conceptualized in such a way that helps policy planners and other stakeholders to design well-rounded programmes for youth (p. 14-15). Furthermore, this policy was written in a positive note acknowledging the failures of the past and envisioning a future based on respect and dignity for self and others (p. 23). War, marginalization and exclusion are not considered as taboo terms in the policy; instead, the policy engages with these terms in order to inform policy and programme planners to reflect on the recent events of the country when designing future projects. A specific ethnic, religious or nationalist sentiment is not implied in the policy, nor is there any specific focus on the gender-based relations of power.

The policy can also be seen as progressive as it recognises SRH related issues faced by adolescents such as low level of knowledge on reproductive health including Sexually Transmitted Infections and HIV, adolescents having sex with commercial sex workers, difficulties in accessing information with regard to sexual and reproductive health, lack of support for youth with different sexual orientations or facing personal crises (p. 13), and increase in gender-based violence, sexual harassment, teenage pregnancies and sexual abuse (p. 16). It notes several policy recommendations to promote the health and wellbeing among young people through information and access to youth friendly services on sexual and reproductive health. Key among these policy interventions are the need to review and improve school health programs and expand and strengthen physical, mental including sexual reproductive health education at school level and continue these services as appropriate to higher education sector including universities and technical and vocational training institutes, establish psychosocial services, build capacity of health professionals to respond to youth health issues and

provide protection and support services for young people who have experienced sexual violence (p. 22). These issues and recommendations have been identified as those faced by the larger youth population rather than those from a specific ethnic group.

Human Resources for Health Strategic Plan 2009-2018 (2009)

This strategic plan was developed by the Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition and outlines the need for managing human resources in the health sector in Sri Lanka in order to provide a better service to the public. While the document itself does not express any specific ethnic, religious or nationalist sentiment, it is noteworthy that it discusses some cultural aspects unique to the provision of healthcare in Sri Lanka (p. 8). It notes that the demand for healthcare is influenced by culture and the role of the female in the family unit as important in improving healthcare (p. 8). The document also makes an important observation that "the government health sector has not explored possibilities of part time employment for female staff as a measure of improving efficiency whilst taking into consideration their role in society and family development as an overall factor in improving health of the country" (p. 23). This would be a progressive policy measure that understands the realities of women service providers in the health sector. It acknowledges the demand for better services to IDPs and Tamil speaking communities in the country especially in the post-war context. Further, IDPs have been identified and listed as a group of people in need of short-term policy directives, as their health needs are not adequately addressed at present. An implementation strategy, however, is not spelt out in detail but developed in the form of a broad strategic plan (p. 66).

National Policy Framework for Social Integration

The Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration was founded in late 2009 (after the military victory by the government) with the aim of renewing and strengthening "the Sri Lankan government's commitment to achieve social cohesion" (p. iii). The National Policy Framework for Social Integration: Access for Everyone, was developed as

a "roadmap for the process of social integration". In other words, while the Policy Framework does not provide any recommendations to follow, it does address the "elements of the social integration process, target categories and cross-cutting themes which are intrinsically linked and are integral to achieving social cohesion in Sri Lanka" (p. 6). Having such an institutional framework in place is essential to work towards any reconciliatory effort. It has addressed all the vulnerable groups in Sri Lanka and has developed a rights-based approach with "clearly-defined rights of individuals and duties of the State to enhance social justice and inclusion" (p. 2). A separate section highlights a focus on gender equality addressing the need to provide equal opportunities to women and to men and, to take necessary steps to ensure economic facilities are made available to war widows, female headed households etc. (p. 117).

Family Background Report (2013)

This circular (no: MFE/RAD/1/3) consists of a cover letter and the Family Background Report (FBR) form in Sinhala and English language. It was issued by the Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare and is titled "Receiving a Family Background Report from domestic sector female migrant workers" (roughly translated) to all Secretaries of the Provincial Councils. It instructs on prohibiting women with children under the age of five from migrating for domestic employment. It also requests a certificate guaranteeing the protection of children for all women with children (no specific age limit of the child is given) by nominating a suitable guardian. It establishes an upper age limit of 55 years and a different minimum age (ranging from 21 to 25 years) based on the region of employment. It must be noted that these requirements are not for all women, but only for those who fall under the 'unskilled worker' category.

While the main rationale of this circular if for the protection of children of domestic workers, it places the complete responsibility of guardianship of children on the woman's shoulders (migrant men are exempted from this) where she has to bear the familial responsibility and child care of children under 5 years of age. Therefore, although this circular does not overtly discriminate based on religion or

ethnicity, it discriminates based on socio-economic class as it targets the poorer women who seek employment as migrant domestic workers. It also assumes the definition of family through a heteronormative lens, thus discriminating against the changing dynamics of the family (those with different sexual orientations/extended families).

There is no overt identification of ethno-religious and nationalistic sentiments in policies, the welfare approach and mind-set remains central, with less focus on measures to directly address issues of social and economic marginalisation and discrimination. A rights-based analysis and approach is implicit in some of the policies and not so in others. Some groups continue to be left out of broader level policies and within targeted policies that attempt to tackle discrimination; the lack of an intersectional lens further reinforces this.

> "A rights-based analysis and approach is implicit in some of the policies and not so in others. Some groups continue to be left out of broader level policies and within targeted policies that attempt to tackle discrimination; the lack of an intersectional lens further reinforces this."

The analysis was done on policy documents rather than including a focus on implementation, which was beyond the scope of this work. Nevertheless, it warrants a comment on the need to factor in such an analysis into identifying target groups and the need to allocate resources in a meaningful manner to ensure adequate implementation and monitoring of policies.

Ethnic, Religious and Nationalist Sentiments in Selected Sinhala Newspapers and its Influence on the Sexual and Reproductive Rights of Women and Girls

"Compounded by the protracted ethno-political conflict, exacerbated by ineffective media reforms and coupled with the imperatives of market economics, the mainstream media in Sri Lanka continues to be burdened with a number of problems. Many newspapers, for instance, perceive ethnicity as immutable and innate, and, on account of a conscious decision or distinct lack of willingness, do not demystify stereotypes and buttress institutions and practices that can ameliorate ethno-political conflict. In short, the media in Sri Lanka exacerbates existing communal and ethnic tensions by continuously playing on the nationalist and religious emotions of the people."

(Hattotuwa 2003, 2)

The review of Sinhala newspapers brought out two main trends in the articles that were selected for the review. As such, this section has been written under those themes which were (1) on Family Planning, Contraception and the Size of the Family, and (2) on Abortion. The newspaper quotes presented have been translated from Sinhala to English. Brief information has been presented where relevant and in Section 2 above, in order to understand the contextual background of this section.

On Family Planning, Contraception and the Size of the Family

The Sinhala language newspapers reviewed for this study brought out a recurrent theme of women's role in society within ethnic and religious identities in the country. This section juxtaposes the newspaper reports and the messaging of these reports against the current goal of the National Family Planning Programme, which is to enable all couples to have a desired number of children with optimal spacing whilst preventing unintended pregnancies. The programme facilitates families to make informed decisions and offers contraceptives through a cafeteria approach (FHB 2012).

In the post-war period under review, the issue of ethnic based extrapolations of information on population growth became a focus of some ethno-religious nationalist groups including the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) as well as for some sections of the minority Muslim community. The "messaging" evident from these reports appear to be

arguments in support of ethno-religious supremacy as well as ethno-religious justifications against women's access to and use of contraceptives. Unsubstantiated rhetoric that the Sinhala population is diminishing was regularly used by the BBS as part of a campaign to discourage Sinhala women's access to and use of contraception and family planning.

"Sri Lanka is an unfortunate country, because the worst minorities in the world are found in Sri Lanka . . The Muslim population is growing rapidly. According to the Islam religion birth control is prohibited . . . Sinhalese are a race who like to produce one or two children and like a simple and entertaining life."
Feature article written by a special correspondent,
Divaina, November 4, 2012

The above is a quotation from a feature article in the Sinhala mainstream Divaina newspaper that needs to be critically examined in terms of the importance that is given to promoting such ideology by the newspaper. This is particularly significant given that there were no feature articles in this newspaper during this period that included discussion of other perspectives, particularly in relation to women's right to decide on their reproductive roles. This quote further exhibits racist sentiments towards minorities, especially Muslims in Sri Lanka, as well as comments on the majority Sinhala race as being "too lazy" to raise children. This is a recurrent sentiment that comes up in many of the Facebook pages discussed in the next section.

The following two statements were made by Buddhist monks and echo the ideology of the BBS in relation to the role of women—primarily that of procreation, to ensure a continuation of majority status, and to preserve the "purity" of the Sinhala race. The BBS organisation fosters ideas that deny any recognition of a woman's right to her own body, but rather advocates for (Sinhala) women to produce more children to build the (Sinhala) nation. They see the role of a woman as a mother who should be a fertile woman within the institution of marriage, and do not discuss women's right to education, employment or their status in the family. Notably these quotes are by Buddhist monks and carry deeply racist and   sexist sentiments.

> "Today our race is facing a big danger. Among the Sinhalese there are only about one million within the childbearing age. Most of them do not understand this grave challenge that we are facing."
>
> Dr. Medagoda Abhayatissthero,
> Divaina, February 18, 2013

"Today they [women] only think about their figure. Sticking to those views will lead to the reduction of the nation. If the Family Health Worker comes to educate about family planning, chase her away. Today we are not demising naturally. If mothers prefer, they could produce children and hand them over to the Buddhist Dispensation."

Witarandeniye Nanda Thero, National Organizer of Bodhu Bala Sena,
Quoted by Ilangakoon Manike Gunawathie,
Lankadeepa, March 12, 2013

Women and women's bodies are spoken about in terms of a "production line" for monks to take over the children for the Buddha Sasana/Buddhist Dispensation. This comment can be seen as part of BBS's attempt to form a skewed approach to a Buddhist 'welfare' state within the state apparatus itself. There is implicit denigration of the relationship between a woman and her child, about a woman's role as a mother and about women and men's roles as parents. It presents Sinhala women as unintelligent, as they do not understand the "cause"; nor do they appear to be interested in it. It also ridicules the previously celebrated family planning system in Sri Lanka.

> **"There is implicit denigration of the relationship between a woman and her child, about a woman's role as a mother and about women and men's roles as parents"**

As seen from the following quotes, the lead Buddhist monk of the BBS also made frequent statements condemning (Sinhala) institutions and programmes that supported women's access to and use of family planning:

"There were organizations that were operative through foreign forces that were instrumental to curb the growth of our Sinhala population through birth control surgeries. We have been able to stop LRT surgeries by taking strong steps against those organizations."

Galabodaaththe Gnanasara Thero,
Lankadeepa, March 18, 2013

"As there is no proper public policy on population growth and control, secret non-governmental organizations that depend on foreign funding sources have carried out LRT surgeries during the past to control the Sinhalese population growth. The intervention of religious and non-governmental organizations in population growth should be prohibited. If it is impossible to develop a common public policy on the control of population growth applicable to all communities, the government organisations should also exit from that process."

Galaboda Gnasara Thero at the historic BBS convention in Maharagama,
Divaina, February 19, 2013

These statements were used to highlight the "success" of the BBS pressure on government to terminate LRT surgeries. This proposal was one of the 10 action points adopted by the BBS and presented to the then Government. These articles include more uncorroborated statements about one million Sinhalese women having undergone LRT surgeries and one million fertile women. Hence, the BBS argues that it is the responsibility of young women to give birth to a larger number of children. These statements, in addition to indicating the socio-political pressure exerted by the BBS to ban conducting of LRT, also shows the fear

mongering of "evil foreign forces" represented by NGOs which was part of the state propaganda at the time. It also challenges the state to exit from formulating a population policy, which has achieved favourable national health indicators in the past.

Patriarchal ideology relating to instituting controls over women's reproductive roles is also reflected by another male leader, this time from the Muslim community:

> "The population in the country should increase. To develop a country people are essential. It is wrong to say one or two children are sufficient for a family. It is also prohibited in our religion to forcefully stop of child births. It is a homicide as well."
>
> A.J.M. Musammil, Mayor of Colombo,
> Lankadeepa, February 28, 2013

These statements clearly show that whether it is by ethno-religious nationalist groups or by a person holding office, patriarchy is the underlying force that gives voice to men's self-declared right to control women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.

These media reportage illustrate the nexus between mainstream Sinhala language print media that uncritically associates men as representatives of ethno-religious groups to speak on women's sexual and reproductive roles. The newspapers reviewed for this study did not publish reports or feature articles that brought in women's perspectives (within or outside ethno-religious identities) on women's sexual and reproductive health or rights. Unfortunately, it comes as no surprise, given the socio-cultural and patriarchal context, that there was no space given for a rights-based discussion of women's place and role in society.

❝These media reportage illustrate the nexus between mainstream Sinhala language print media that uncritically associates men as representatives of ethno-religious groups to speak on women's sexual and reproductive roles. ❞

On Abortion Laws

Abortion is criminalised in Sri Lanka under Section 303 of the Penal Code of Sri Lanka (1833) except if the pregnancy puts the woman's life at risk. Amendments proposed in 1995 to decriminalise abortion on the grounds of rape, incest or where foetal abnormalities were not passed due to religious and cultural pressures (Wickramagamage 2004). While exact and reliable statistics are not available, the Ministry of Health notes that a majority of abortions that do get performed are unsafe as they are performed as illegal procedures and under septic conditions. This is supported by data that shows that nearly 12% of maternal deaths in Sri Lanka are due to septic abortions—the second commonest cause of direct maternal deaths (FHB, 2014).

In addition to the law in Sri Lanka, the act of abortion is condemned by some Buddhists, Muslims and Christians alike. These religious groups have generated ideas and traditions that prevent the right of women to maintain their reproductive rights. The controversial positions on decriminalising abortion are also reflected within the debates among legal experts. The Attorney General in 2011 was reported to have stated:

> "According to the existing law in our country we cannot carry out an abortion even though a woman is pregnant after a rape. According to our law, even a girl under 16 years who becomes pregnant as result of a rape, has to bear the pregnancy."
>
> Attorney General Eva Wanasundara,
> Divaina, March 9, 2011

These statements are in stark contrast to the observations made an year before by Savitri Goonesekere, the former representative of Sri Lanka at the CEDAW Committee, who noted:

> "Abortion is legal in an extremely limited situation (only to save the life of the mother) so there is a high incidence of illegal abortion in Sri Lanka. This is an area in which the laws are actually contributing to ill health and even death. The very limited access to legal abortion means that many young women and adolescents turn to backstreet abortionists. . . . We need to look at abortion in terms of the public health implications of unsafe abortions on the

mother, not in terms of pro-life issues. Women should have the right to health, and viewing this issue from a human rights perspective can help."

Professor Savitri Goonesekere,
February 20, 2010 (WHO, 2010)

The notion of attempts by "outside forces" to interfere in changing the ethno-religious composition of Sri Lanka's population is another theme that is evident in the media discourse on SRHR. A newspaper article alleges that drugs to induce abortion were being brought into the country from Pakistan (Muslim country) with the intention of inducing Sinhala women to limit their procreative roles. The focus of the article appears intended to further contribute to the ethno-religious nationalist sentiment that was being articulated with fervour in the country during this period.

"Three Pakistanis who have brought abortion vaccine and sleeping tablets apprehended at the airport. . . . value of the consignment is 2.2 million."

Lankadeepa, February 20, 2013

An article titled "Neethiye Thotilla (The Cradle of the Law)" published in view of the International Women's day in the Divaina on March 10, 2012, notes some key ideas expressed on abortion by the Attorney General at the time. His approach was in contrast to his predecessor; he acknowledged that it was a reproductive right of a woman and that there was an attitudinal change needed in society. The article further noted the shortcomings in the abortion law that excludes women and underage girls who conceive through being subject to violence, rape and incest. It was also suggested that the abortion law should be amended through the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Affairs.

❝ The article further noted the shortcomings in the abortion law that excludes women and underage girls who conceive through being subject to violence, rape and incest. ❞

As has been noted, there remains diverse views on the issue even among those at the highest level in administering the law. However, decriminalising abortion is also an issue that is appears to be gathering more support particularly within the health sector.

As the analysis of Facebook posts show (below) the implicit allegations in newspaper reports on this issue during the period under review also gave rise to extreme views being expressed among Sinhala language users of social media.

Ethnic, Religious and Nationalist Sentiments on Facebook and its Influence on the Sexual and Reproductive Rights of Women and Girls

> "Social media has been instrumental in maintaining the democratic space necessary to counter religious hatred and violence. Social media is certainly a double-edged sword. One the one hand, we must recognise that hate speech is often transmitted over social media. Yet it is perhaps the only unrestricted channel through which state-sponsored religious attacks can be documented and reported on—to inform the public of ongoing attacks and prompt resistance. Moreover, social media platforms are crucial to "counter-messaging", which might help defuse the build-up of hate speech in the public domain."
>
> (Gunatilleke 2015, 52)

This section has been written under three sub topics that highlight the interest and intensity of the debates on women's SRHR during this period. As arguably the most popular form of social media communication, Facebook has quickly manifested itself as the platform for "sharing" of ideas and opinions for a specific, mostly younger, group of media consumers. This review identifies the following sub topics for this purpose: (1) Reproductive rights and economic facets in ethno-religious discourse; (2) government policy on migrant women; and 3) the "Buddhists Questioning Bodu Bala Sena" candlelight vigil and the resultant fallout. The significance of Facebook communications is the ability to post both text and visuals: as can be seen in the discussion below. Where quotes have been presented, they have been extracted and translated from Sinhala from the comments sections of various Facebook user accounts (unless otherwise specified). The outpouring of ethno-religious nationalist sentiments used both these elements to push through a dialogue of extreme religious politics. A brief background to these topics has been discussed in the Section 2 of this report.

Reproductive Rights and Economic Facets in Ethno-Religious Discourse

Over the period of 2012 to 2014, multiple posts appeared online, alleging that Muslims were reproducing in earnest while simultaneously conspiring to restrict the fertility of Sinhalese women. The latter took the form of rumours that alleged Muslim shops were selling women's garments tainted with chemicals that caused infertility and also that toffees—especially designed to attack Sinhalese DNA—were distributed at these places of business. These rumours inspired different responses among the Facebook pages that were tracked.

In April 2012 the Facebook page "Sinhala Buddhist", which had 327,605 followers, posted an image on their Facebook page showing the arms of a misshapen foetus, claiming that popular Muslim owned business establishment "No Limit" was handing out toffees containing malic acid to Sinhalese patrons with the intention of rendering Sinhalese women infertile and to trigger miscarriages. The post had 4,074 shares. While this substance is used in small quantities as a food additive[5], allegations such as those in the Facebook exchanges attempted to present it as a weapon used by one ethnic population to put another in danger.

As can be the case with such attacks, rumour was rarely substantiated and frequently added to. A comment on the "Sinhala Buddhist" page in response to the post of the misshapen foetus clutching a coin, is a good example of this. In it the user asked: "Do you know that the malic acid in these toffees is especially designed to attack Sinhalese DNA? Malic acid only gets activated when it comes into contact with Sinhalese blood. The Mahavamsa says the Sinhalese are descended from lions and Malic acid was used to get rid of lions earlier."

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5 Malic acid, when added to food products, is denoted by E number E296. It is used with or in place of the less sour citric acid in sour sweets. These sweets are sometimes labeled with a warning stating that excessive consumption can cause irritation of the mouth. It is approved for use as a food additive in the EU, USA and Australia and New Zealand. http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2012/4/75774_space.html

Figure 3: Controversies around Contraception (Increasing Muslim Population)
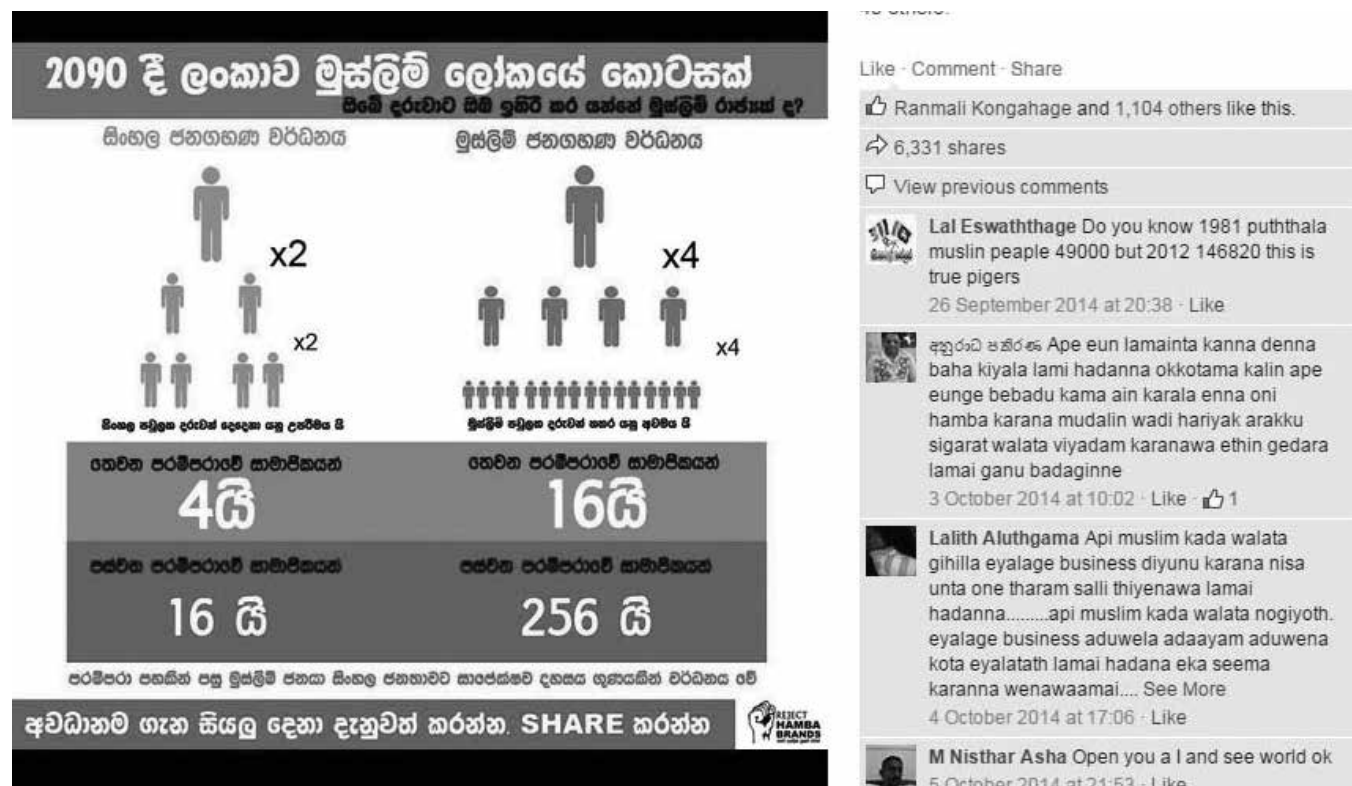
Source: "Sinhala Buddhist" Facebook page, October 2012, accessed March 2015

These posts, though based on dubious logic, succeeded in triggering anxiety in women, with at least one instance of a female user asking, "I ate a toffee, what is going to happen to me now?" The online discourse however also showed users who attempted to counter this racist narrative. Such as in the case of a user who pointed out: "Nobody force-feeds these toffees to you. They are offered and you can take them if you want. Has anyone who is shouting here lodged a police complaint because if you did, you would know what is true and what is not."

The above post (Figure 3) on the "Sinhala Buddhist" page in October 2012 was shared 6,331 times and liked 1,104 times claimed that Sri Lanka would be part of the Muslim world by 2090 and that the Muslim population would exceed the Sinhalese population by 16 times in 10 generations. Attacks on perceived Muslim reproductive practices—such as polygamy—were also included in online exchanges.

Such attacks did not recognise differences in reproductive practices adopted within the Muslim community itself or that the practices referred to were not necessarily the norm—as was argued by Muslims themselves who chose to have their voice heard around these issues. The aim of these exchanges clearly depended on creating and/or building on one ethnic population's perceived insecurities in maintaining its dominance in the country's population in the face of the population of another ethnic group. Muslim women were derided for having children, comparing them to machines. The practice of polygamy drew particular ire. One user remarked: "The Muslim law should be removed from the Sri Lanka legal system. If you are allowed to marry seven women then you should also bring the punishments from that legal system, or you should have a family planning law like China and send those who have too many children to jail."

Figure 4: Controversies around Contraception (Increasing Sinhala Population)

Source: "Mahamegha" Facebook page, June 2013, accessed March 2015

Thus users argued for the need to limit the number of children Muslims had through legal channels or for the law to be changed so that Sinhalese men might also marry four women. Procreating was depicted as one's duty to the Sinhalese race.

A post (Figure 4) on "Mahamegha", which had 88,475 followers in June 2013, consisted of a banner which read: "A large family is best—let's create more pure Sinhala children to serve in the way of the Dhamma." This post was shared 274 times and liked 88 times. What is important to note here is that it is a spin-off (and ridiculing) of the 1960s "Punchi Pavula Raththaran"[6] slogan of the country's population policy.

Another user made an original argument stating his conviction that the real problem lay with Sinhalese people who he alleged were "afraid to commit, to get married and have more than one child," whereas Muslims suffered no such hesitation. He called on all his Sinhalese brothers and sisters to "do your thing and begin production."

6 Translates to Small Family is the Best (Golden). This slogan was used in the 1980s to promote having a small family for the development of the country.

Push back in these conversations came in part from Muslim users who argued that, "Islam only forbids abortions." This user went on to say that in his experience: "I haven't heard of a ban on condoms or birth control pills. The Muslim population in the world has grown not because we reproduce like cattle but because more people are embracing Islam. Muslims are not people who fell from the sky. Depending on the climate, country and food patterns there is natural birth control. My personal opinion is that birth control is a personal right."

A recurring theme in ethno-religious nationalist discourse, as was seen in the discussion of print media, is a mistrust of international NGOs who are seen as agents, intent on acting against Sri Lanka's best interests. The BBS campaign appeared to have successfully moved this debate from rhetoric to action by the government, when the Ministry of Health reportedly sent out a circular in 2013 banning all irreversible sterilisation procedures. While there was little discussion on this move, it illustrates the control that can be exerted on women's access to reproductive services. From the standpoint of the discourse of the BBS, women's choices were subservient to the pressing need to protect

a Sinhalese-Buddhist national identity. For example, the International NGO Marie Stopes, which had been providing reproductive services in Sri Lanka, were among other NGOs in this sector to be banned by the government from making the LRT procedure available to locals (Christopher 2014). One Facebook user voiced an often repeated accusation while transferring the onus back onto Sinhalese women who chose to undergo this procedure by saying: "Our enemies are the Sinhalese themselves. When you go to give birth, NGOs tell all the lies in the world and seize her just to make money. After you have had your third child they force you to have this LRT operation."

There was also the matter of a report published in September 2013 under the pseudonym "The Social Architects" and published on the citizen journalism website, Groundviews. As shown in Figure 5, its authors alleged that women in three villages in Kilinochchi in Sri Lanka's Northern Province had been coerced into accepting birth control (The Social Architects, 2013).

The report generated controversy within Sri Lanka and even beyond when the former Health Minister of India, Dr. Anbumani Ramadoss described the incident as "genocide" and urged the UN to investigate at the 68th Annual General Meeting in New York (Lankasri News 2013). Some aspects of the report were later challenged and the Regional District Health Services of Kilinochchi went on record to say the incident has been blown out of proportion (Tegal 2013). A follow up to the report on Groundviews (once again by The Social Architects), concluded among other things that government health workers had coerced women into taking the implants, that women were not provided adequate counselling nor did they give full and informed consent (The Social Architects 2013). An article published on the citizen journalism website Groundviews on September 13, 2013 which received 15 likes and 42 shares, alleged that: "Many other observations can be made from this, although without certainty, beginning with women's autonomy and their reproductive choices being a matter that was not in their sole control and required a husband's oversight and approval. It could be construed that the women agreed to receive the contraception after this threat was made because they did not want their husbands to be

inconvenienced in any way or that they saw it as a sign of disrespect to his status as the head of the family."

Figure 5: Controversies around Contraception (Coercive Population Control)

Source: "Groundviews" Facebook page, August 2013, accessed March 2015

The story's next chapter came when a journalist with the "The Sunday Leader" put up a post on Facebook on September 24, 2013, sharing details of her investigation into the allegations made in the Groundviews piece. She said in her post "It turns out it isn't as bad as it was made out to be," and opined that the issue may have actually been a result of a dispute over ownership or access to land for women and their families displaced by the war. This became part of the discussion around the subject of forced sterilization.

Groundviews itself produced a follow-up report which was shared on October 11, 2013. The site, which has 27,026 fans shared the post which was liked 15 times and shared

25 times. In it the authors of the original article claimed to have returned to the affected villages and interviewed the women in question. Groundviews stated: "This report confirms that public health workers used coercive tactics to convince women to accept Jadelle [contraceptive implant]. This egregious disregard for medical ethics and protocol constitutes serious violations of a woman's rights to informed consent, reproductive autonomy, and health."

Given the extensive outreach of the government's health service, it should be construed also that the alleged coercion was not practice but may have been a result of acts of individual health workers. Clearly, this reportage illustrates the tensions relating to the issue of access to amd pressure to accept SRH services.

Government Policy on Migrant Women
Sri Lanka opened up its doors to facilitate employment migration in the late 1970s and witnessed the phenomenon of hundreds of thousands of its citizens using this avenue to earn incomes that were not available in the country. For almost three decades, women comprised 50-60% of this flow of labour. A major factor in the resultant debates and discussions was the perceived negative impact of women's absence from the household. The roles and responsibilities of men as fathers and as spouses were and remains largely absent in public debates on this issue.

The number of Sri Lankan women migrating for work dipped sharply in the wake of the circular (no: MFE/RAD/1/3 discussed above), dated June 2013 and subsequently updated on December 2013 of the Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare's (MFEPW) and the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment's (SLBFE) (UNFPA 2015 b). Some news sites attributed the decline to safety concerns after the execution in Saudi Arabia of Sri Lankan housemaid Rizana Nafeek in January 2013, and the need to protect unskilled migrant women from abuse by their foreign employers (The Daily Mirror 2014). BBS representatives had made the same argument in 2014, but with the interests of the Sinhala-Buddhist population in mind they claimed the decrease in Sinhala-Buddhist numbers could be traced in part to the number of (Sinhala) women migrating to work (Wickrematunge, 2013). One

of the other stated aims of the government directive was to "minimize the psycho-social cost on children of female migration, through the Family Background Report (FBR). In addition, women also had to secure a no-objection certificate from their husbands (Kodikara 2014: UNFPA 2015 b). As a post on Women and Media Collective's Facebook page which has 1,865 fans noted: "The Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare recently issued a circular which requires prospective women migrants to provide information on their family background and evidence of adequate childcare arrangements as a condition for leaving for employment overseas. Women and Media Collective (WMC) recognizes this to be an infringement of a woman's right to paid work as well as a direct measure to remove from men their accountability towards the welfare of the family and the care of children."

Figure 6: Facebook Screenshot on Migration Issues

Source: "Sinhala Buddhist" Facebook page, January 2013, accessed March 2015

While one might assume that the issue of migrant women would have been the focus of much commentary on Facebook, there was surprisingly few posts found on the issue. It was found that the WMC Facebook page was one of very few accounts to actively engage with and post on the migrant issue over an extended period. The execution of Sri Lankan maid Rizana Nafeek in Saudi Arabia did trigger some conversation. For instance a post on "Sinhala Buddhist" was shared 3,216 times and liked by over 1,450 people. The post in Figure 6 announced: "Rizana Nafeek is decapitated under Sharia law. May the brutal Sharia law never come to my country. May you be born among the enlightened people in your next life."

Rizana's case drew attention to the risk faced by women migrating for work to Saudi Arabia. Moreover, in some comments her death was seen as a failure of the men in this country to protect her, and as a simultaneous condemnation of the character of the stereotyped Muslim man who killed her. This idea was reflected in subsequent policies adopted by the government requiring women migrating for domestic labour to present a no objection certificate from their husband (discussed above).

Between 2011 and 2013 alone there were several posts that flagged issues around the migration of women for work. These included research that revealed that almost one in three Sri Lankan women domestic migrant workers are subjected to physical abuse such as beating or burning and those workers were denied access to legal proceedings and to international arbitration. That particular post concluded, "They have been objects of exploitation, persecution and rape as receiving countries have no codes."

Despite the evident seriousness of these issues and its effect on key contributors to Sri Lanka's economy, these posts received markedly few likes, shares and comments. From the posts located in Sinhala, discourse appeared to be limited primarily to Rizana's fate. However, the issue is important because the posts that critique women's migration, whether it is about abusive employment relationships or otherwise, espouse ethno-religious nationalist ideology which overrides recognition of women's right to employment and male responsibility in childcare;

the onus is on the woman to fulfil her gendered roles towards society and her reproductive duties towards her ethnic and religious community to give birth to "more" children and, on the state to exert implicit controls over women to ensure adherence to these norms.

The "Buddhists Questioning Bodu Bala Sena" (BQBBS) Candlelight Vigil and the Resultant Fallout[7]

When taking a closer look at the positive or negative impacts and outcomes of the discourse on ethno-religious nationalism in the public (and private spheres) there was one event which can be recorded as an expression of protest and rejection of this ideology. As the account of the incident below shows, this was a specific urban phenomenon, which had its own momentum linked to an identity with the English-speaking middle or upper classes. This appears to be a key factor in the nature of the posts that were seen immediately following this one public demonstration rejecting hate speech.

It is worth pausing at this moment to consider that while the Muslim community had predominantly been the targets of these hate groups up until this point, the vigil marked a moment where anyone who stood in opposition was considered equally an enemy even if they were Sinhala-Buddhist. This anger extended even to people not present at the vigil who had simply expressed support on the Facebook page in the days leading up to it.

A candle-light vigil to promote inter-religious harmony and to take a stance against perceived racism was held in the evening of April 2, 2013 (Global Voices 2013). Participants were extensively photographed, presumably by members of the BBS or their allies and in the days that followed the women in particular who had participated in the vigil were attacked on social media. Personal photos and details

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7 A decision was made by the authors of this report for reasons of privacy, not to include original posts that contained images of the girls and women whose photos were stolen. In this case, only selected comments on the posts were included. This section was almost entirely developed on personal archives because by the time of writing this segment of this report (in 2015), the original posts had been taken down. This is why the analysis does not accompany excerpts with data from the original posts. The content below was meticulously archived by individuals who were affected personally by the fallout from the BQBBS candlelight vigil.

were stolen from their Facebook accounts and used to launch a smear campaign. Captions under the pictures contained abuse and threats with strong sexual overtones that called into question the moral standing of the women participants—dismissing them as "nightclub Buddhists" who could not presume to speak to Buddhist ideals or philosophy (The Sunday Leader 2013).

In this exercise of identifying Facebook communications on Sinhala Buddhist nationalist issues, the narrative found in this particular incident stood out for the viciousness of the attacks, the extent of privacy violations and the considered targeting of individual women. In the aftermath of the smear campaign being launched across the Facebook pages of multiple hate groups, women who were its targets experienced a very real sense of fear for their personal safety. In the case of one of the individuals who shared her archive for this study, the fallout also took the form of criticism from her relatives as well as her employer. She has subsequently left Facebook and says she is unlikely to get back on the platform. Her case is an example of how online intimidation can have far-reaching, long-term consequences, and can effectively silence dissent.

From the photographs taken at the event and the Facebook pages of the women, those wearing sleeveless clothes or anything that was transparent were targeted. In at least two instances, women who were not even at the vigil were targeted using images off their accounts that showed them in revealing clothes but within their own home or among their friends. Some of the captions that went with these images were: "Nightclub prostitutes who came to teach Buddhists their religion." Others noted "They light candles against the Bodu Bala Sena but in real life they sell their bodies to foreigners. Not stopping at selling their bodies they are now out to sell the nation show the world the truth about the candle cult." Sexually explicit threats including rape were also posted: "Vulgar bitches their mother slept with dogs publish their names and where   they are."

On a Facebook page titled "Surya Vangshaye Sinhalaya" (Sinhalese of the Era of the Sun) one commenter conceded: "It's like this, we can't force anyone about their personal life. How they eat, drink, dress, etc. are their basic

requirements . . . but these people have enjoyed by getting sexually violated by white people and posh Colombo boys, and taken drugs, alcohol with them. They have been gang raped . . . we should disrobe you publicly in road junctions for living in this land and conspiring against the same. Victory!"

Push back appeared not just on sites like BQBBS but also within these long comment threads. However, in both the attacks that target women as well as in the pushback that tries to counter these attacks, women are easy targets. Take for instance, one user who accused others on the comment thread of misusing the photographs of "innocent girls" for their narrow goals. Another user responded: "You pig, do your mother and sister go on the road wearing bikinis?" To which the comeback was: "These guys are sexually frustrated because after they suckled milk from their mothers they have not been close to a woman. I don't even know if their mothers gave them milk. At least then they might have had some respect."

A backlash against this counter narrative touched on notions of the perceived purity of young women from rural areas, even as it recalled the economic tensions between Sinhalese and Muslims, referenced earlier in this report. "What these guys are trying to do by defending them, is trying to dress our village girls also in bikinis and to ruin them. And to send them to No Limit to buy bikinis."

As the comment thread grew, the conversation digressed into a long back and forth on appropriate clothing for women. As one picture depicted a girl in a bikini, that garment drew particular ire. Some commenters stated that they thought that a bikini was acceptable to swim in but not as fashionable wear that women would be photographed in. "They take photos to show boys." Here is a clear example of men dictating not only what women can wear, but when and where they should wear it. There was also an attempt interpret a woman's choice of clothing as reflective of her character. For instance, women who wear bikinis were described variously as low class, trying hard to be a white woman and not wanting to be with Sinhala boys: "Like they're trying to belong to outsiders, these low sluts are also trying to steal the girls we have".

Using English was seen as lacking patriotism and of not belonging to the Sinhalese nation. In one picture, a girl was shown with her leg in a cast. A comment underneath read: "What is written on your cast is written in English you don't belong to the Sinhalese country". There were also comments identifying participants as lesbian, using it as a derogatory term intended to speak to the women's low character. "This whole group are nightclubbing, drunken and lesbians. We know the character of the whole lot".

One of the explanations put forward on a hate site to justify the smear campaign was to say that they were doing a service to the Sinhala-Buddhist nation because they were exposing women of other faiths who they believed were promoting an alternative agenda and undermining their cause. A lot of the hate speech around this incident appeared in Sinhala, while the pushback was strong in English, though notably, the English posts were never circulated or shared as widely as the posts appearing in Sinhala. There were instances of individuals posting on sites attempting to raise awareness about what was going on and to agitate for hate sites to be blocked and banned. On the site "Buddhists Questioning Bodu Bala Sena" which has 9,177 fans, on April 15, 2013 a post was made directly addressing Dilanthe Withanage of the BBS.

The post which received 163 likes and 53 shares called on the BBS to stop the hate campaign against those who attended the vigil. A comment under the post called out the BBS for their criminal activity in publishing people's private photographs and questioned their practice and interpretation of Buddhism. "Most of the photos stolen are of women . . . For example, there was one of a very young girl who had a broken leg in a plaster-cast, and she was wearing shorts in the privacy of a bedroom in a household, while recovering! Is there something wrong with wearing what you want, at home especially? It is a private photo, taken to be shared with only close friends and family. Once they are stolen posted on other pages, BBS supporters have made terribly sexual comments (about raping these girls). Is that a mark of Buddhism??? This is so wrong, so intolerable. Lord Buddha had the utmost respect for womankind. Is there anyone to stand up for the women who supported this?" (BQBBS, April 25, 2013)

The extensive archives maintained by individuals of posts around the BQBBS vigil served to underscore what was now missing—with not just posts but entire pages being removed in response to a changing political context. Facebook's innate mutability—the freedom it allows its users to edit or delete their posts is a serious hindrance to the pursuit of accountability. While mechanisms exist to report and take down pages that violate the site's rules it can feel like an exercise in futility as administrators can, and often do, simply set up a new page with ease.

Comparing posts archived as part of this research in English and Sinhala, it was found that the latter tended to have much more engagement in terms of shares, likes and comments. In English, commentary often took the form of a link with an excerpt or a brief response. On official pages such as those of Groundviews and Republic Square, public commentary was sparse and many shares indicated that people chose to continue the conversations in the relative privacy of their own timelines. The use of colloquial terms, including derogatory slang, appeared to be used with far more frequency on Sinhalese Facebook pages than on English ones. This also proved a challenge while collecting data in English. The Sinhala posts saw a rich and creative use of graphics, which seemed to take on a life of their own and would often be picked up by multiple sites simultaneously.

These conversations show deeply ingrained perceptions regarding class and an association of the urban with loose morals and lack of "belonging", in comparison with an overly romanticised image of the non-English speaking rural women. Both these strands of argument are couched in terms of expectations that women conform to their expected gendered roles where there is no space for non-conformity. This examination of Facebook exchanges in a time when parts of the establishment was attempting to push for 'reconciliation' among ethnic communities, illustrate the ways in which women's bodies women's sexuality, and women's gendered roles become "accepted" platforms on which ethno-religious nationalism is articulated.

"The discourse of ethno-religious nationalism in Sri Lanka, by its very nature, is unable to move towards recognising and endorsing women's sexuality and women's sexual rights through policy interventions, in mainstream national Sinhala newspapers and in social media."

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper focused on a public discourse on women after the ending of the civil war in 2009 which saw substantive government investment in infrastructure development in the conflict-affected regions and conversations on reconciliation. The complex socio-political environment where the Sinhala dominated government defeated a Tamil-led armed struggle also witnessed an upsurge in ethno-religious nationalist sentiment, a rise in hate speech and violence directed at religious and ethnic minorities, the emergence of ethno-religious nationalist groups, and the framing of women as bearers of culture and national identity and as biological reproducers of the nation. The discourse around these changes was examined in relation to selected policies, news reports in Sinhala mainstream print media and posts on social media.

The **review of selected policies** as an indicator of whether and to what extent a small ethno-religious nationalist group was able to influence key sectors of the economy, health, and welfare of women showed overall that policy makers in fact did not use ethno-religious language in drafting policies on development, health, migration, adolescent health or social cohesion. However, the concept of "woman" was uniformly unproblematized as mothers, migrants, widows, female heads of households or victims of sexual violence. Similarly, policy overwhelmingly conceptualises the "family" within the heterosexual norm, embracing "female headed" households where the male partner is not present. Recognition of sexual rights, sexual orientation and women's agency in deciding on their sexuality and life remains minimal even in the sub-text of policy. There is no specific indication in any of the policy documents that were analysed implying any direct influence over reproductive rights of women and girls due to the expressed ethnic, religious and nationalist sentiments.

An examination of selected mainstream **Sinhala print media** focusing on reportage on ethno-religious nationalism revealed subtle distinction of a majority nation and a minority nation in opposition to each other. Articles mostly contained news items and reports of incidents as they occurred, quoting statements made by religious or other persons of authority. Articles noting ethnic and religious tensions between Buddhist and Muslim fundamentalists were mostly discussed in newspapers in 2012, 2013 and 2014, a period of heightened hate speech in the public arena. Women's sexuality and reproductive functions became the centre of speeches reported on. Access to contraception and family planning are shown as mechanisations of foreign interests bent on controlling Sinhala women's ability to have children and thereby reduce the Sinhala population. Sinhala women are berated for conforming to such foreign interventions and for placing an entire "nation" in peril.

As the print media in Sri Lanka has a wide readership and reaches the masses, it compels them to think and act upon the news items and the ethno-religious and nationalist ideologies. This is more so when the quotes and statements are spoken by religious leaders, politicians and other persons of authority. The fact that no counter narrative was found in the newspapers reviewed is significant as it points to a lack of commitment of these media companies to provide professional space for a dynamic engagement with issues of ethno-religiosity on the one hand, and critical treatment of women's rights on the other.

The online "conversations" followed for this study through the **review of Facebook** posts brought to the surface a level of mysoginism that was not visible in other mainstream media outputs reviewed. The very nature of interaction in social media necessarily allows for the "freedom of expression" of a multitude of actors and accommodation of many different voices and opinions. That the online space can be a hostile one, hence, comes as no surprise. The posts examined showed that women (in it) experience

routine objectification, very direct, sexually explicit threats, intolerance for their dissent and ridiculing of their choices. Women who chose to speak up faced a disproportionately violent backlash that targeted them not on the contents of their argument but seemingly for their temerity in having an opinion or making a choice seen as not in keeping with notions of a "good" woman. Women who were targeted online experienced consequences offline whether it was at home or at work. Yet the online space remains a difficult one for women to seek meaningful redress and demand accountability. This is despite the fact that perpetrators of hate speech are often clearly identifiable, thanks to their associated personal accounts that typically display details such as their full name, city of residence and even where they attended school or currently work.

In the online discourse examined in this study, there appeared to be a clear hierarchy of liberties between men and women most commonly framed within an imaginary idyllic past where women conformed to their roles as wives and mothers, loyal and dedicated to their ethno-religious community as opposed to women from another such community. Sinhala women are to be venerated as mothers who by rearing many children, commit to the continuation of the Sinhala-Buddhist nation in the face of perceived threats of the Muslim community. However, where Sinhala Buddhist women's behaviour deviates from narrowly defined religious and moral norms, they are denigrated with equal fervour. Hate speech against women was most visible in the posts on Facebook with the focus moving from derogatory comments about the Muslim community and Muslim women to virulent attacks on women who were from or deemed to be from the Sinhala Buddhist community.

Across the research it became evident that women were routinely excluded from discussions that pertained directly to their own bodily autonomy and sexual freedom. However, the platform did allow women to carve out spaces for self-expression and dissent in the instances of pushback recorded. The fact that perpetrators of hate speech and violence online are able to do so with impunity in Sri Lanka is in part a reflection of its political context.

There is no specific indication of a direct influence of the discourse of ethno-religious nationalism on the reproductive health policies of women and girls. The findings of this research do show, however, that the discourse of ethno-religious nationalism in Sri Lanka, by its very nature, is unable to move towards recognising and endorsing women's sexuality and women's sexual rights through policy interventions, in mainstream national Sinhala newspapers and in social media.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the main objectives and research questions of this study was to identify the main avenues for positive change and advocacy. Therefore, this section presents recommendations targeted at specific stakeholder groups identified during the course of this study.

Recommendations for the Government

• Political parties, and state and government officials should have zero tolerance towards rhetoric, demands and actions of ethno-religious nationalist groups such as the BBS. Their position in the wider social spaces and influence on communities should be closely monitored and addressed through legal means.

• Civil society, women's rights organizations and health experts be routinely consulted by policy makers in the drafting of policies, especially those that have direct implications on the health, wellbeing and rights of women and girls, including their SRHR.

• Government and relevant ministries ensure transparency in making public policies that have implications on the health and wellbeing of women and the family instead of passing them without transparency.

• Policies and programmes implemented by government bodies be formulated from a secular, rights-based and gender-sensitive perspective.

• Legislative reform to decriminalise abortion, criminalise marital rape, recognise sexual orientation and gender identity be instituted.

• Strengthen institutions such as the Computer Emergency Readiness Team (CERT)—Sri Lanka's self-described National Centre for Cyber Security, to address hate speech, and those inciting violence towards women, ethnic and religious minorities and other groups.

Media-related Recommendations

• Sensitisation on gender concerns and issues pertaining to women's rights, especially when reporting on sexual and reproductive health and rights of women.

• Counter messaging in terms of online advocacy on Facebook and writing factual articles in response to print media articles.

• Investigate accountability when organizations or persons in positions of authority make extremist statements offending other/minority races or religions or gender.

Recommendations for Civil Society

• Campaign and advocate for public awareness and dialogue on co-existence, tolerance and ethnic and religious harmony through initiating forums and engage various stakeholders (religious leaders, politicians, business community, health sector personnel and women's rights activists) for debate and discussion.

• Promote a rights-based perspective when discussing or engaging in activism on women's sexual and reproductive health.

• Build alliances and work through religious leaders sympathetic or sensitive to social cohesion, gender equality and women's rights.

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7.   APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Glossary and Working Definitions[8]

Reproductive Health: According to the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) it is "a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes."

Reproductive Rights: The basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so; the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health, to make decisions concerning reproduction, free of discrimination, coercion and violence. Reproductive rights are not synonymous with sexual rights.

Sexual Health: Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.

Sexual Rights: Sexual rights embrace human rights that are already recognized in national laws, international human rights documents and other consensus statements. They include the right of all persons, to be free of coercion, discrimination and violence, to achieve the highest attainable standard of sexual health, including the ability to:
- access sexual and reproductive health care services;
- seek, receive and impart information related to sexuality;
- access sexuality education;
- receive respect for bodily integrity;
- choose their partner;
- decide to be sexually active or not;
- consensual sexual relations;

- consensual marriage;
- decide whether or not, and when, to have children;
- pursue a satisfying, safe and pleasurable sexual life.

Appendix 2: Breakdown of Newspapers Reviewed for the Sinhala Newspaper Review

Period	easons for selecting the sample	No. of newspapers
June 2009*	Beginning of the post-war era	7
March 2010*	International women's day	7
May 2010*	May Day	7
March 2011	International Women's Day	10
May 2011*	May Day	7
March 2012	International Women's Day	10
May 2012*	May day	7
March 2013	International Women's Day	10
May 2013*	May Day	7
March 2014	International Women's Day	10
May 2014*	May Day	7
Special dates March 2013 February 2013 June 2014 December/July 2012	During this period violence between Bodhu Bala Sena and Muslim groups erupted.	60

* First week of the month.

Divaina Newspaper: selected as it has a large readership, has been in circulation for over three decades and is bought by government institutions, private institutions, and public libraries. It is estimated that the daily newspaper currently has a circulation of 156,000 and its Sunday edition, 340,000. (http://www.divaina.com/images/circulation.htm)

Lankadeepa Newspaper : This newspaper is known for its wide reach and readership and sensational news articles. The daily newspaper has a circulation of around 200,000 and the Sunday edition, over 350,000. (http://www. newsepapers.com/sri-lanka/lankadeepa/)

8 UNFPA (2015). Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Terminology Guide. Youth Technical Advisory Committee of The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka, Y - PEER Sri Lanka, United Nations Population Fund, Sri Lanka.

ARROW is a regional and non-profit women's NGO based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and has consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Since it was established in 1993, it has been working to advance women's health, affirmative sexuality and rights, and to empower women through information and knowledge, evidence generation, advocacy, capacity building, partnership building and organisational development.

Women and Media Collective (WMC) was formed in 1984 by a group of Sri Lankan feminists interested in exploring ideological and practical issues of concern to women in Sri Lanka. WMC has been actively engaged in bringing about change based on feminist principles for creating a just society that does not discriminate based on gender. WMC has contributed to social and political change, the inclusion of women and gender concerns in the peace process, increased state recognition of women's rights, the enactment of new legislation or legislative and policy reform promoting and protecting women's rights, and recognition of the need to increase women's representation in politics. WMC has contributed to the formulation of the National Women's Charter, the National Action Plans for Women and the Migrant Rights Policy, and co-ordinated the civil society organisations campaign which resulted in the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act of 2005. WMC has engaged in policy discussions related to women's land rights, single women and female heads of households, peace-making and peace-building, and media reforms among others. WMC has also helped initiate women's networks and continue to work with a range of organisations from grassroots level local women's organisations to national level institutions, which have a direct voice in policy formulation and implementation.

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Women and Media Collective
Established 1984

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