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பெண்கள் மற்றும் ஊடகக் கூட்டமைப்பு  
Women and Media Collective

## **Statement on the proposed Kotelawala National Defence University Bill and the proposed Amendments to the Universities Act**

Women and Media Collective  
August 2021

The Women and Media Collective as a civil society organization that continues to engage in advocating for equal opportunities and democratic rights, believe that it is our duty to voice our opinion on the Proposed Kotelawala National Defence University (KNDU) Bill and the proposed amendments to the Universities Act no. 16 of 1978.

### **Militarisation of Education**

The KNDU Bill proposes to establish a higher education system that is run by military personnel. In fact, five of the nine board members including the vice chancellor will be from active military service positions. It cannot be denied that this university system will only be controlled by certain type of thinking. The government has been open about wanting to produce citizens who are disciplined to fill civic administrative roles and, in this context, essentially those who will follow orders.

Militarisation of civic functions has accelerated, with the appointment of 28 military and intelligence personnel to important administrative posts in Sri Lanka. The COVID-19 response is also heavily militarised with the Commander of the Army heading the 'National Operation Centre for the Prevention on the COVID-19 Outbreak'

We are therefore alarmed at the eagerness of the government to bring more aspect of civil administration under the military.

The current KDU Act includes provisions to quell students' right to free expression and dissent. While this may be part of a military training it is inappropriate for civil higher education where the fostering of free thought is most crucial.

### **The disciplined citizen**

As an explanation for the need for the KNDU provisions, the Secretary to the Ministry of Defence had stated that the (KDU) University, "which is currently producing a disciplined generation of students suitable for the job market, is highly regarded and in high demand in the society including parents and students

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with the completion of courses within a specified period being one main reason for this”.

We are concerned firstly by the reference to discipline, which means that a militarized discipline is expected of the citizens the institution intends to produce. Military discipline is a separate standard required from that of citizens and youth. The rich and free-thinking minds of students should not be repressed to fit a mould of the acquiescent citizen.

The report by the C.W.W. Kannangara Committee in 1943 articulates a visionary stance on education. The report states the education system must help the individual to “achieve the highest degree of physical, mental and moral development of which he is capable, irrespective of his wealth or social status and secondly, the individual *as a result of his education should be able to use his abilities for the good of the nation in the fullest possible measure and should be able to pass his judgement on affairs of state and exercise intelligently the franchise that the State has conferred upon him*”. Therefore, education in its truest form must foster intelligent and independent citizens and not those merely geared to take orders.

The second part of the Minister’s statement is also troubling because it seems that the government sees the militarised system of education as a way to overcome the inefficiencies in State universities. The KNDU however will be a paid university which already makes it a discriminatory education system. It addresses none of the problems identified in the current university system under the University Grants Commission (UGC). It seems that instead of working to make the current university system more efficient the government is attempting to introduce a quick-fix.

### **Amendment to the Universities Act**

In the face of opposition to the KNDU Bill the government hurriedly gazetted amendments to the Universities Act in July 2021. This new amendment allows the UGC to establish a ‘University for a specific purpose’. In the context and timing in which this amendment has been brought in we are forced to conclude that this is a vain attempt to bring the KNDU under the UGC.

It is interesting to note whether the special function or ‘specific purpose’ of KDU as an academy for cadets is lost through the provisions of this new bill to open the academy to civilian students. Either KNDU will cease to be a higher education institution with the specific purpose to train young cadets or the government through this amendment admits that the purpose of KNDU is for militarised education. It is questionable whether the UGC has the mandate and competence to oversee military education.

We therefore question the rationale of these decisions and the vision this government has for the future of higher education in Sri Lanka. We strongly believe that any change in this regard must be a consultative process with educationists and experts in the field.