



International Women's Day: Sri Lankan Women Demand Democracy, Economic Justice and Freedom

In 1908, fifteen thousand working women marched through New York City demanding decent working hours, better pay and voting rights. In 1910, at the Second International Conference of Working Women, Clara Zetkin proposed the idea of an International Women's day.

On this 8th of March 2023, we are moved by our fury at the state of Sri Lankan political institutions, the callousness of decision-makers and the lack of representation of women in economic decisions to echo the calls of the women workers on that 1908 women's march for labour rights and voting rights. We demand:

Our democratic right to vote!

Universal social security schemes to secure education, health and nutrition!

Food security by investment in domestic food production and distribution!

Wealth taxes!

Subsidized electricity for households!

These are the demands of the suffering masses of women in Sri Lanka. The plea by the Feminist Collective for Economic Justice (FCEJ) a year ago, comprising several proposals to address the severe pain that the deep economic crisis has inflicted on the poor, women, children, and marginalised communities, has gone unheeded.

In the months since, no plans have emerged to address the issue of food insecurity, malnutrition or the great number of households plunging into poverty. Instead, the Government, along with its economic advisors, is single-mindedly focused on delivering on promises to the IMF, removing subsidies, driving up household debt and paying lip service to social safety nets. Even the illogical schemes proposed without any consultation to allegedly better target beneficiaries have not seen the light of day.

Along with the Government's indifference to the people's suffering, the postponement of the scheduled Local Government elections has denied the people their yearning to express their views via democratic means. Even the people's basic right to protest is under daily attack. We cannot envision a just economy without the democratisation of government and society.



Gender Watch

The FCEJ has been documenting the mounting pressures on women in Sri Lanka for several months. After the Gender Watch report of September 2022, the situation has only continued to worsen. In January 2023, the BBC reported that 8 million Sri Lankans, comprising more than a third of the population, are estimated to be food insecure, while 42% of children under 5 years are reported to be suffering from malnutrition. For the next few years, poverty is projected to remain above 25%. In these circumstances, there are multiple narratives emerging of desperation among families, as monthly earnings no longer allow them to meet basic needs.

Last year, the Government's proposed budget for 2023 failed to make provision or plan for meaningful economic relief or food security for a people facing the worst economic crisis Sri Lanka has experienced. Instead of recognizing and responding to the plight of the people, President Ranil Wickremasinghe only emphasized 'rapid economic growth' and 'economic modernization' as the way forward. Social protections for people were not on the agenda, yet an increase in the defence budget was deemed a priority. For a detailed gender analysis of the proposed budget see FCEJ's Statement of November 2022.

Sri Lanka continued to fail to acknowledge women's unpaid labour in the proposed National Budget. There was no social security response to the increase in unpaid care work burden on women. It has been repeatedly highlighted that women typically spend disproportionately more time on unpaid care work than men, as a result of gendered social norms, a situation which has been exacerbated by both the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the ongoing crisis. Additionally, there is no state policy in Sri Lanka that acknowledges or recognizes this invaluable role played primarily by women or provides any support or assistance for the care of the elderly or disabled.

Increased burdens as a result of weak family laws, including fair maintenance of wives and children by their spouses, sexual and reproductive health, domestic violence and period poverty are also a result of financial pressures on families. These severely neglected areas compound the distress felt due to restrictions to accessing education and work, and make productive contributions.

Social Welfare

In October 2022, 3.9 million families (57.5% of Sri Lanka's households) sought some form of financial assistance. One million families had applied to become beneficiaries under the Samurdhi scheme. Even though the State Minister of Finance has publicly stated that it is the State's responsibility to support people in the current environment (Daily Mirror, October 2022), close to six months later no measures have been implemented.



In early January 2023, the Government delayed crediting payments for pensioners. In addition, Samurdhi payments have been delayed and the Government appears on course to introduce more exclusion factors to prevent people from being eligible for welfare benefits. The Welfare Benefits Board announced that on 15th December 2022, that the Government would calculate poverty levels under the criteria of education, health, economic level, assets, housing status and family demography, along with 22 related indicators, and display the list of poverty scores and those eligible for welfare benefits at the Divisional Secretariat level. The focus on targeting of beneficiaries for welfare as opposed to universal schemes has meant that much time and effort is expended, often in flawed and corrupt ways, on welfare scheme that fails bring people and households to a decent basic standard of living.

It is outrageous that while occasional promises are made, no meaningful state assistance has been received by those who need it the most. The people's desperation only grows with no relief in sight.

Women Workers

The response to Sri Lanka's debt crisis ignores the voices and needs of working class women who are being made to pay for the odious debt generated by the corruption and recklessness of Sri Lanka's political elite. It is clear that the brunt of the economic crisis has been borne by women, and that the brunt of the recovery proposals will also continue to be borne by women workers.

Women working in the garments industry have faced a massive reduction in their take-home income due to the loss in labour hours, as most of the small-scale garment businesses where they work are in dire financial trouble. The take-home salary of workers that was previously in the range of Rs.40,000 - 60,000 has now drastically dropped to about Rs. 25,000 - 30,000 which is just their basic salary (The Sunday Times, January 2023).

Women workers in the plantation areas are being pushed into informal labour arrangements as a consequence of the suspension of the collective agreements that regulated pay and working conditions. Workers are losing their rights to minimum monthly wages and to statutory employment provident and trust fund contributions by employers, whilst also receiving even fewer protections for occupational health issues. Trade union busting is also on the rise.

Increased migration by women for work, both within the country and overseas. A recent report indicated that at least 32 Sri Lankans left the country every hour, and there will be a loss of future resources with parents looking to educate children abroad, pointing to signs of a country in rapid decline (Daily Mirror, September 2022).

Subsidies and Taxes

The two-step electricity tariff hike implemented from January 2023 is justified as necessary to cover current losses of the CEB (Daily Mirror, November 2022). Low-end consumers will be imposed with a disproportionately steep tariff hike. A recent expose of corruption in the industry (The Sunday Times, February 2023) begs the question of whether the poorest consumer is paying to cover theft by government cronies. While Sri Lanka achieved high electrification (99% of households), the tariff hikes raise concerns of whether households and small home-based economic activities will be plunged into darkness.

Higher income tax regulations have come into force from January 2023. Any individual with gross monthly earnings of Rs. 100,000 or above will be liable for income tax, and tax-free allowances have been reduced to widen the tax base. 90% of income earners in Sri Lanka earn less than Rs. 79,000 per month. The new income tax targets those who are in the top 8 - 10% of income earners in the country (Census and Statistics Dept, 2019). As to whether the revenue gained from the income tax increase will be channelled towards enhancing public services that benefit the poor must be closely followed. In the context of declining incomes, the Government continues to ignore the demands for the imposition of a wealth tax aimed at ensuring redistributive justice.

Of Mismanagement and Passing the Burden

The misuse of public funds and assets continues largely unchecked. News reports claim that 36 billion USD of Sri Lanka's export money, more than one-third of its economy, is held in offshore bank accounts (Daily Mirror Online, February 2023). Reports of mismanagement of public resources continue to surface. For example, the wrong type of crude oil was imported by the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, containing high rates of sulfur, which cannot be used by power plants to generate electricity (Economy Next, September 2022); and the Committee on Public Enterprises (COPE) revealed that the drug shortage was caused by the mismanagement of already available funds meant for the importation of drugs (Daily Mirror, October 2022). While those responsible for the mismanagement of public resources are not held accountable, the Government has imposed severe austerity measures which adversely affect the public provision of services crucial for Sri Lankans. Where is the justice in this?

Misogyny

We are appalled by the recent events of extreme violence against women that have come to light, while also acknowledging that misogyny is a common phenomenon faced by women in Sri Lanka. Farzana Haniffa recently wrote that "the low rates of women's political participation/representation in the legislature and local government since independence, the high incidence of gender-based violence and the economy's exploitation of vulnerable women's labour" are indicators of the pervasiveness of this misogyny in our institutions (The Island, February 2023).



We condemn the continuing displays of misogyny in the political arena including an incident where Trade Union leader and member of the National People's Power insulted nurses by using explicitly sexist remarks at a public gathering of nurses. Similarly, a female member of Parliament faced abusive and obscene language in Parliament, directed at her by a government MP and cabinet minister.

In December 2022, the President who is also the Minister for Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment, stated that he will present a Bill on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women focusing on establishing a National Commission on Women and an Ombudsman for women's rights. A Cabinet decision approving the Women's Empowerment Policy was made on 27th February 2023. We note with irony that while policies are passed, the political culture in Sri Lanka remains steeped in sexism and unchecked misogyny. As Sri Lankan policymakers are rushing to implement the recommendations of the IMF, the calls for gender equality made by women which have been ignored for decades, are now being dangled like carrots in the form of bills and policies.

This 112th International Women's Day, given the many increasing pressures on the lives of women and vulnerable communities and the exclusion of women by structural failures and misogyny reflected in spectrum of 'solutions' proposed towards this economic crisis, we demand that change start now and that everyone join this call for change. It is time. A demand for democracy, economic justice and freedom is never too impractical, never too much or is never made at a wrong time.