

## KAMALINI WIJAYATILLAKE – CELEBRATING HER ACTIVIST SPIRIT

**A**s another friend pointed out at the funeral, we tend not to appreciate people while they are alive. Somehow, we begrudge our thoughts of appreciation and gratitude about our nearest family and dearest friends as well as admired and respected colleagues and acquaintances, during their lifetime. It seems to take the finality of death to force us into expressing our feelings of love, loss, and grief, and to verbally appreciate the person and take stock of her life, her loved ones, her characteristics, her likes and dislikes and insecurities, her achievements, and her hopes - for which there was simply not enough time. So let us write, what we could not speak, during her lifetime.

In a society that is riven by the violence of political hates, ethnic mistrust, gender disparities, we will remember Kamalini Wijayatillake as an exceptional woman who was deeply and sincerely committed towards social change and justice, especially for women. Unlike other activists who sometimes use the media as a political tool, Kamalini believed in working on a person-to-person level – which in fact, was her great strength. For this reason, many of you did not know her – because that was the way she wanted it. But many of you would have read her articles - for instance in the Ms. column. And for those of us who did know her, she was just ‘Kamalini’ – we doubt that anyone ever addressed her as Ms. or Mrs. Wijayatillake.

### Many Roles

**L**ike many women, Kamalini chose to wear many hats. To us, she was an intimate friend and colleague, a ‘sounding board’ and a sister feminist. She was a fellow student of the MA degree in Women’s Studies at Colombo, a colleague with whom many of us collaborated with on feminist research projects, a phone-in counselor for battered women, an ‘advisor’ on gender and women’s issues (who we had only to call to be given contacts and resources), and on many occasions, an initiator of feminist action against current events that discriminated against women - such as drafting protest statements, networking and critiquing legislation with regard to women.

As her friends, we know only some facets of her life and work. There are those who knew her from her times at Visakha Vidyalaya and the Sri Lanka Law College. Others who knew her through her links to various women’s groups and community-based

organizations, displaced people, and battered women especially vis a vis her work in the rural areas of Moneragala, Hambantota, Kandy, Balangoda, Kurunegalle, and Anamaduwa to mention a few. We have known her over a span of 10-20 years – essentially as a feminist researcher and an activist.

### Lawyer and Feminist Activist

**A**s a lawyer, Kamalini saw legal literacy as a powerful tool for women’s overall empowerment, and argued consistently and compellingly for grassroots legal awareness. In the early years, she was involved with the legal literacy program of the Sri Lanka Women Lawyers Association; she was one of the founding members of Women in Need (WIN) organization (a dire need of the time) and counseled survivors of domestic violence for many years; she then worked as a programme officer at Canadian International Development Aid (CIDA) for a while; she was a long-term independent consultant on legal / gender issues and a gender trainer to many local and outreach organizations such as the Kantha Shakthi, Vehilihini Development Centre in Moneragala, the Uva Welassa Women Farmers Organization, Centre for Family Services, Women’s Development Centre Kandy, Rural Development Foundation – Puttalam, Sri Lanka Canada Development Fund, etc. traveling the length and breadth of the country on weekends, interacting with women from many fields of life, creating consciousness about gender and women’s issues, conducting legal literacy programs, and working out schemes for the overall empowerment of women. She was also able to influence the gender policies / women’s programs of a large number of NGOs and women’s organizations on a more short-term basis. For instance, she was very much involved in the formulation of the Women’s Charter of Sri Lanka and she also drafted the Guidelines for a Code of Ethics on Sexual Harassment for the Sri Lanka Employers’ Federation / ILO. During the last three years, as a member of the National Committee on Women, she was able give her inputs to such initiatives as the National Women’s Bill.

### International

**K**amalini was able to network extensively with women in countries like Nepal, Thailand, India, Pakistan etc. through the Asia Pacific Women, Law and Development Women’s Forum (APWLD); and she was also at the forefront of the Sri Lanka NGO

Forum, and was part of the delegation to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (UNCEDAW) a number of times, to present the Sri Lanka Shadow Report at the sittings.

### Researcher

**K**amalini was known to many, more closely, through her association with the Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR), where as a board member, she initiated and researched a large number of legal and other studies spanning from her extensive work in the field of violence against women (domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment) to women's inheritance rights; from legal aid for women, to women's family rights etc. Kamalini's other written work also focuses on concerns such as peace, critical gender issues; Govt-NGO initiatives for women's rights in Sri Lanka; incest; trafficking of women; women's movements; globalization; women workers in the Middle East, engendering the national budget, post conflict reconstruction etc., and form a considerable corpus of research within Sri Lankan women's studies, and situates Kamalini as a significant feminist writer of the past two decades.

### Books

**K**amalini also wrote a book on a topic close to her heart - *Unraveling Herstories – A Three Generational Study* on the life experiences of mothers, daughters and granddaughters during the 20<sup>th</sup> century; tracing such issues and events as menarche, virginity, marriage, dowry, divorce, childbirth etc., and such roles and responsibilities as heading the household, providing for and decision-making within the family etc. This book is a cultural analysis of women's situation and relations within the family, and constitutes an important feminist record of contemporary history in Sri Lanka.

Last month, a selected collection of Kamalini's research studies was posthumously published under the title *Conquering the Diviya*. It encapsulates her work as an activist/researcher. For instance, the book shows how Kamalini traces the status of women vis a vis the law – with regard to the family, customary laws, women's rights and gender equity. She analyzes incisively, the gaps and lapses within the law as well as the misinterpretations that discriminate against women in its practice – frequently with reference to her experiences in the field and in life. She recounts the legal reforms and progress made – and always provides possible options and recommendations in her work. The book records Kamalini's views and vision on contemporary economic developments affecting women and women workers, as well as her conceptualizations of feminism, gender and women rights in Sri Lanka – from a local perspective. In some instances, it serves as an insightful trajectory of women's activism, and grassroots mobilization on women's issues.

### Gender Trainer

**K**amalini was also one of the first gender trainers in the island, creating her own resource material to suit the Sri Lankan context. Her keen intellect and incisive arguments (enhanced by creative anecdotes) were always channeled via a calm demeanor through which she was able to convince people about the discrimination faced by women and the need for gender equity / equality.

Above all, Kamalini was a sensitive, kind and gentle person: her unassuming, low-key character; her down-to-earth nature; her subtle irony and unexpected sense of humour; her tenacity of mind; combined with her absolute integrity and strength of character with which she worked, played and lived made sure that she was loved by all, and most importantly, accepted by all who had the privilege to know her. She could empathize with all of us - not barring age, race, social class, geographical location etc. She was equally at home in the thorny jungles in Mahawalattenna talking with rural women, as she was serving 'Maisoor mixture' to her friends in her house in Colombo.

At the same time, Kamalini's love of life and friends, her spirit of discovery and adventure, and her appreciation of creativity whether it be in literature, art or craft, ensured that she was erudite not only academically, but also about the little things in life - such as family histories and local places of interest. She herself, was a creator – though perhaps not always acknowledged by her – of exquisite embroidery and her own clothes, of cover designs for books and floral arrangements, in her writing, etc.

We have merely charted and compressed to an article the things that struck us of a woman who was a dear friend. To others, she was much more. To her family members, she was a much-loved wife/partner, and a beloved and progressive mother. We know that Kamalini, herself, would be (characteristically) very annoyed with us for writing about and publicizing her. But, forgive us, we need to salute you: your courage especially during the last three years of your life – undaunted by the craven disease that finally killed you; your activist and intellectual achievements of a lifetime - not only for yourself - but for many women in this country; and your spirit that was always unpretentious yet sometimes mischievous. While our grief at losing you is profound; we celebrate your life and your work, and treasure in our minds, the image of you; and in our hearts, the memories we have of you.

Courtesy of MS.