

# A FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN SRI LANKA: THE POTENTIAL AND THE NECESSITY

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## Women in the Sri Lankan economy

From colonial times, women have made a highly visible contribution to the Sri Lankan economy; today they continue to play a crucial role, not only as workers on the tea plantations, but also as workers in export-oriented industrial production, especially the garment industry, and through remittances earned by their work in Middle Eastern countries. Yet the importance of their contribution is very far from being socially recognized or adequately remunerated. Where they have won equal pay for the same work as men, as in the plantations, it has only been as a result of prolonged struggle; more often, they are shunted into exclusively 'female' tasks, and continue to be paid abysmal wages for excessively long working hours under wretched working conditions.

This is only the more visible side of the problem. The less visible side is that women are also responsible for childcare and for running the household, a task which becomes more and more impossible with sweeping cuts in government welfare expenditure combined with a drastic fall in real wages. This problem, popularly referred to as 'the double burden of wage-work and domestic labour', is commonly seen as one which affects women alone, and therefore receives very low priority if it is recognized at all. I feel, on the contrary, that the experience of Sri Lanka demonstrates the extreme urgency of this problem, which affects not women but the development process as a whole.

## The gender division of labour

According to the gender division of labour, women and girls are allocated virtually all the caring work in society, although apart from child-bearing and breast-feeding, there is nothing women can do which men cannot also do. While the nurturing of life and alleviation of pain are allocated almost exclusively to women, their opposite—torture, or the deliberate infliction of pain, and killing, or the destruction of life—have become the predominant male occupations in Sri Lanka. That this is a social rather than a biological division of labour is demonstrated by those cases where men have taken up nurturing and women have gone into the business of torturing and killing. Like other occupations, a process of learning is involved in both, and learning involves the internalization of specific responses to specific stimuli so that they become second nature. For example, before you know a language, you see its script as a meaningless scrawl, you hear its speech as meaningless jumble of sounds, but once you have learned the language, everything spoken or written in it automatically has meaning for you; you can never again see or hear it in the same way as before. In the case of caring and killing, the stimulus is other

human beings; and since the responses of one are opposed to and incompatible with the responses of the other, learning one would tend to inhibit learning of the other. If your normal emotional response to a body is feeling of tenderness, you won't find it easy to know it in a fire or dash its head against a wall. So if we feel that behavior of the latter type is undesirable, it is worth considering the strategy of training girls and boys in the skills of caring and the values which go with it. If today we have a situation where so many people are capable of committing such appalling atrocities, that signifies, among other things, a failure of education which is largely a result of the gender division of labour.

That same division of labour holds back the development process in a second way. If women have to bear the sole responsibility for caring work in the home, their capacity to engage in other kinds of work is restricted; they may never get a chance to develop latent talents which could make an important contribution to society. It is anomalous that even those who reject the notion that birth into a particular *caste* predestines you to take up a certain occupation, often cling to the notion that birth into a particular sex determines our occupation in life. This idea deprives many women and girls of the opportunity to develop and use their abilities to the full, since occupations both inside the home are highly gender-determined.

## Attitudes to ethnic nationalism and the civil war

The gender division of labour affects perceptions of, as well as the ability to influence, the ethnic conflict and civil war in Sri Lanka. It is true that some Sinhalese women are supporters of Sinhalese nationalism, while some Tamil women have taken part in the armed struggle of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and other militant groups. However, the role of women in the nationalist struggles has been at best marginal and subordinate, whereas they have been at the forefront in the movement for human rights and peace. Their opposition to human rights violations has at times been totally spontaneous and unorganized. For example, in the anti-Tamil riots of July 1983, around 2500 Tamils were killed in state-sponsored violence; but it has been estimated that the death toll would have been more like 50,000, if not for the intervention of Sinhalese people who rescued and sheltered Tamil friends, neighbors, and sometimes complete strangers. This action took place spontaneously at the level of the community, and women played an important role in it. In my interviews with Tamil refugees I recorded a large number of such incidents, and have had a similar experience myself when my family was caught up in the riots of 1958, and the main organizer of our escape was a Sinhalese woman who was a friend and neighbor.

At a more organized level, in 1985 the mothers' Front in Jaffna drafted and sent to the President a letter cataloguing the effects of the Emergency Regulation and excesses of the security forces, and demanding an end to them. Their letter dealt not only with human rights violations, but with the total disruption of production, transport, education and indeed the entire economic and social life of the region. In 1986, the Mothers' Front in the Eastern Province came out with rice pounders to prevent the LTTE from massacring a rival Tamil militant group and in 1991, the Mother's Front in the South defied a government ban and organized a huge mass meeting to call the government to account for the tens of thousands of disappearances which took place during counter-insurgency operations against the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a Sinhalese militant group. 'Women for Peace' brought together women from all communities to oppose the war, using such methods as publishing side by side the story of a Tamil mother from the North and a Sinhalese mother from the South, both of whom had lost their sons, in order to emphasize the commonalities in their experience of the war.

A Sinhalese woman refugee whom I interviewed summed up the sentiments of many refugee women from all communities when she said:

Look at all these here. They are asking for a plot of land and assistance to build a house. But supposing they get what they want, will that solve the problem? No. Because they will always feel, it was because of those Tamils that we were driven out of our homes. And they too will feel hatred and hostility. Hatred will lead to violence, and violence will lead to more violence, and so it will go on until the whole country is destroyed. So is that the solution? No, it's not. The only solution is to have friendship between communities as we used to have earlier.

Think of all the houses which have been destroyed; how will they ever be rebuilt again? And what about the fields which have been bombed, the crops which have been destroyed? Now who is going to feed all those people? What about those who have lost their arms or legs? Who is going to give them back their limbs? And what about those who have been killed? Who is going to bring them back to life? Tell me, who is going to bring them back to life?<sup>2</sup>

A multi-ethnic workshop on 'Women Against Racism and Militarisation' held in Katuwapitiya, western Sri Lanka) in 1986 concluded with a programme for 'Peace from a Women's Perspective' which included: the right to life, homes, means of livelihood and practice of their own culture for people of all communities; an end to human rights violations and repeal of repressive and discriminatory legislation; development to promote agricultural and industrial growth; good and equal opportunities for education, health care and employment for the urban and rural poor; and devolution to ensure the rights of economic, political, social and cultural self-determination for *all* the people of Sri Lanka and not merely their rulers.

All these women reject the violence, destruction and suffering which ethnic nationalism has entailed in Sri Lanka; it is interesting

to note that their reasons are not simply humanitarian, but also economic, showing an understanding of the incredible wastage of all the labour which has been invested in building houses, industries and infrastructure, tilling fields, and rearing and educating children and young people. But the *same* gender division of labour, which gives them a heightened perception of the negative consequences of the war, *also* gives them less power to halt it: their voices have, by and large, been ignored by those in power.

### Violence against women

**A** related problem is the prevalence of authoritarian gender relations in the home and the acceptance of a certain degree of domestic violence against women. In 1983 the feminist journal *Voice of Women* reported:

Many years ago Professor T.L. Green who worked on education in Sri Lanka remarked that Sri Lankans were a nation of wife beaters. Coming from a foreigner, this remark produced the usual righteous indignation and led to pronouncements that Sri Lankans were a gentle people with Buddhist and Hindu traditions which precluded all violence, even to the extent of not harming a fly. As usual, there was a difference between the idealized image and the reality, and today the stark reality of increasing violence against women cannot be ignored.

The subjection of women to this kind of treatment severely restricts the contribution they can make to economic development. Even in cases where actual violence is seldom used, the threat of violence may curb women's initiative to a point where a large part of their potential remains unrealized. Moreover, a society which allows one section of its population to be routinely subjected to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment is one which will not pose a great deal of resistance if the violation of human rights is extended to others. Thus the physical abuse of women, apart from being a problem in its own right, can increase the likelihood of more general abuses with all their negative consequences.

Combating the gender division of labour, as well as the authoritarian relations between men and women in the home, would be the task of a women's liberation movement. Of all the South Asian countries, Sri Lanka has perhaps the least developed women's liberation movement, possibly because traditionally women have been less oppressed in Sri Lanka than in the other countries; building it up is an urgent necessity if the human rights violations which have become routine are to be halted, the civil war ended, and the development process resumed.

### A feminist socialism and a socialist feminism

**H**owever, if all these objectives are to be achieved, we need to specify more closely what *kind* of feminist movement is required. Clearly, its objective cannot be to induct more men into wretched conditions of work in plantations, free trade zones, Gulf countries or poverty-stricken homes, and more women into the military and paramilitary forces: equality between men and women

under existing conditions is not the answer. While the occupations available to women in Sri Lanka are less dehumanizing and more socially useful than those which large numbers of men and boys enter because they feel they have no alternative, even the work which women do does not offer much scope for them to contribute and develop their abilities, and the conditions under which it is carried out are often quite inhuman.

Of course, the problem of making the maximum use of the available human resources is not one which capitalism can ever completely solve. Even where occupation is not determined by caste, a potentially brilliant scientist or architect may end up as subsistence farmer or unskilled laborer simply as a result of economic compulsion. Nor does the achievement of higher wage levels change the fact that the authority relation between employer and employee crushes the initiative and stifles the creativity of workers. This is the basis of Marx's belief that beyond a certain point, further economic development requires the abolition of capitalist social relations with their restrictive division of labour. One would expect, therefore, that socialists would see the struggle for women's liberation as an indispensable part of their own struggle. Yet this is far from being the case in Sri Lanka.

Perhaps the main reason is that what is referred to as 'socialism' is usually either (1) Social Democracy, as in the case of the Labour Party in Britain, or (2) Stalinism, as in the case of the regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe which have recently come to an end. What is shared in common between these currents is the strategy of gaining and retaining state power, an essentially authoritarian institution. The power of the state, whether it is expressed as naked coercion or through more subtle forms of control, rests on authoritarian relations within such social institutions as the work place, the family, institutionalized religion, and so forth. Any movement which threatens any of these power relations is also a threat to state power, and is therefore not welcome to these currents, whether they are actually holding state power or only hope to do so. They may support women's rights to a certain extent, but the point where feminism threatens existing power relations is the point at which they become hostile.

The case with radical or Leninist socialists is more complicated. They too aim to capture state power, but, they say, only as a prelude to handing it over to the proletariat. Historically, however, there is no instance where this has ever occurred, and it is worth asking why. I think it is because the state machinery has a dynamic of its own, and once you are part of it you are compelled to go along with it whether you like it or not. Smashing the state apparatus while you are resting on it is about as difficult as chopping down a tree while you are perched on top of it. You cannot encourage the self-determination of working people while you are in authority over them; it is only from below and outside the structure that you can begin to dismantle it.

Latter-day Leninists don't bother much about the question of how power is actually going to be taken over by working people because they assume that this, like the problem of women's liberation, will automatically be solved 'after the revolution', i.e. after the capture

of state power by the vanguard party. They concentrate instead on the capture itself; and in order to take over an authoritarian institution (the state), you need an authoritarian organization (the party). Given such a strategy, a struggle over gender relations is seen as an inconvenient diversion or worse. The usual charge levelled against feminists is that they are weakening working class unity or splitting the working class. One might argue, however, that a class in which one section dominates another is *already* split; unity is possible only between equals, and in attempting to bring about equality—whether between different ethnic groups or different gender groups—one is promoting, not weakening, class unity. So this cannot be the real reason for opposing feminism. I feel the real reason is that a radical questioning of authoritarian structures and relationship is seen as a threat within an organizational structure which is itself essentially authoritarian..

These three 'socialist' currents—all of which are present in Sri Lanka—concentrate on the task of achieving state power, even though in the case of Leninist socialists this is supposed to be only an intermediate step. The essence of the strategy of aiming for state power is that in order to defeat the enemy, you must become like the enemy; whereas I think history has shown us that if you become like the enemy, then you *are* the enemy. A radically different approach is required: one which confronts authoritarian relationships *wherever* they are encountered, which helps ordinary working people to acquire the self-confidence to take control over their own lives and build structures of collective self-management and self-government which will begin, from below, to transform society. Within *this* type of socialist or communist movement, feminism would be an essential component, challenging authoritarian gender relations as well as a stultifying and dehumanizing gender division of labour. Conversely, it is only a feminism which identifies with the objectives of a movement of this type which can actively propose *all* the varieties of oppression suffered by *all* strata of women.

### Realizing the feminist vision of a more humane society

**W**hat is being argued here is that the building of a socialist feminist movement in Sri Lanka is not solely in the interests of women, but, on the country, is a condition for the development process itself. By combating authoritarian relations in the home, violence against women, and a gender division of labour which fails to socialize boys and men into caring and nurturing roles, it would on the one hand counteract tendencies towards large-scale indiscriminate violence and human rights abuses, and on the other hand enable a more rational use of human resources through the optimum development of people's talents and abilities.

This is the exact opposite of the argument that industrialization entails some degree of human rights abuses, and a high standard of human rights cannot be expected until a country has achieved a high level of economic development.<sup>3</sup> It is true that Western capitalist nations scant for human rights while they were industrializing, however, the reason why they could afford such a massive wastage of human resources was that they had access to the resources of the greater part of the world through their colonies. The Eastern bloc

countries too, while more restricted in their access to resources, industrialized under relatively favorable conditions and could therefore, in a sense, afford to squander their human resources through widespread human rights violations, but for small Third World countries like Sri Lanka, industrializing at the expense of colonies is of course not an option; nor are there unlimited internal resources. The most valuable internal resource is the human potential of its people, and the best strategy for development, therefore, is to create conditions where maximum scope is provided for people to discover, develop and use their own capacities. To the extent that a socialist feminist movement is a crucial element in creating such conditions, it is a precondition for balanced and sustainable development.

The various opinions and action of women cited earlier in this paper suggest that the potential for the development of such a movement in Sri Lanka is considerable. On the one hand, the gender perspective of women gives them a more clear-sighted view of the purely destructive character of ethnic nationalism; on the other, the crucial importance of their labour to the economy puts them in a relatively strong bargaining position. Moreover, in Sri Lanka as in other parts of the world, women are inculcated with an ethos of altruism and self-sacrifice which makes them particularly tenacious when fighting for a cause which they feel falls within their sphere, such as the welfare and survival of their children.

What is lacking, however, is any strategy for sustained intervention in a male-dominated public sphere where all the crucial economic and political decisions are made. The move from an awareness of the disastrous impact of decisions made by male leaders to an actual struggle for an alternative programme has yet to be made. Making it would involve overcoming the age-old diffidence of the vast majority of urban and rural poor women, as well as their lack of experience in creating stable democratic organizations through which alternatives can be worked out and fought for. These are serious obstacles, but they are not insurmountable, given the advantages which Sri Lankan women already enjoy. The whole future of Sri Lanka depends to a very great extent on their success in overcoming these obstacles and building a movement to realise their vision of a more humane society.

## Notes and References

1. Interviews with Tamil refugees in Britain were carried out in 1989; interviews in Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim refugee camps in Sri Lanka were carried out in 1990.
2. Quoted in Rohini Hensman, *Journey Without a Destination: Is There a Solution to the Problem of Sri Lankan Refugees?* (London, The Refugee Council, 1983). Although not all the women, especially in Sinhalese camps, were as clear-sighted as the women quoted here, and by no means all the men supported ethnic nationalist positions, women were, in general, more critical of ethnic nationalism. For example, one Tamil nationalist position, women were in general, more critical of ethnic nationalism. For example,

one Tamil woman voiced a common sentiment when she said, 'I don't want any Eelam! I think people of different communities can live together, what we need is peace, not Eelam'. At another group interview with Tamil refugees, the following remarks were made by the women:

when the armed groups are fighting, ordinary people are suffering. It's wrong to hurt innocent people. Both sides are wrong.

Yes, that's true. Killing innocent people only makes things worse. They should stop fighting and talk, solve the problems by discussion.

I would like all three communities to live together in peace. Yes, that's right. (general agreement)

Muslim women refugees too, by contrast with male leaders of their community who were demanding more arms, expressed a strong desire for peace and ethnic armory.

3. An example of this type of argument is an article by B. Fonseka in *The Sunday Times* (Sri Lanka), 1 September 1991, p 5, where he says.

Human rights have become an industry in the developed world, with organizations such as Amnesty international and Asia Watch working full time to publicize human rights abuses in the world. but an important point to consider is whether these same Western countries first solved rights problems in their own nations before they went on to achieve economic well-being.

These nations seem to forget that they themselves achieved their high economic standards at an extremely high cost in human rights. Slavery, which was abolished in the USA relatively recently, is a prime example of the price paid by human beings so that the country could achieve its present economic situation. The industrial revolution had such an adverse impact on workers that the first trade union movements were a direct result of it, and it is trade unions that have been in the forefront of the human rights campaign.

Western countries having achieved economic well-being, now tell devolving nations to take care of human rights first, before moving towards economic advancement, which is exactly the reverse of what they themselves did. I am not trying to downgrade the importance of human rights, but human rights have their place and must come about in a certain logical fashion. A consciousness and recognition of human rights will come when society achieves a high level, which is what happened in the West.

The United States and Australia, which are in the forefront of the human rights movement, have forgotten about the centuries of oppression that the aborigines and native Americans or Indians went through. What the West must understand is that high standards of human rights may not be possible in developing nations. ■

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