

## Women & The Election

# ISSUES OF CRITICAL IMPORTANCE TO WOMEN RECOMMENDED TO BE INCLUDED IN THE MANIFESTOS OF POLITICAL PARTIES

**W**hile women in Sri Lanka have made significant progress during the last few decades there are still severe constraints, economic hardships created by spiralling cost of living and reduction in social sector expenditure and occurrences of violence against women. That impedes their advancement and affects adversely their quality of life. Women's organisations in Sri Lanka therefore strongly urge that adequate attention be given in the manifestos and agendas of political parties to the following policies and programmes which we urge are of crucial and immediate concern to women and to the society.

### I. WOMEN'S CHARTER

- 1) The Women's Charter which was approved by the Cabinet in March 1993 has no legal base. We propose that it be given legal validity through an Act of Parliament.
- 2) We also propose that the National Committee on Women be established as a National Commission on Women by an Act of Parliament to operationalise the above Act.

### II. NATIONAL MACHINERY FOR WOMEN

As the state Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Women's Bureau function at present under the Cabinet Ministry of Health and Women's affairs, women's issues outside the social sector tend to be marginalized. We urge that these two bodies be placed under the Ministry of Policy Planning and Implementation in order to increase their national visibility and to integrate women's concerns more affectively in the national planning process.

### III. LEGAL REFORMS

Legal reforms are necessary to make the gender equality proclaimed in the constitution a reality and to reduce the vulnerability of women to all forms of social and domestic violence. We urge:

- 1) The reform of the Citizenship Act and regulations for birth registration to eliminate gender inequality in the access of citizenship, parental status and legal/non-legal status of the child,

- 2) The reform of divorce laws,
- 3) Raising the minimum age of marriage from 12 to 16 years,
- 4) The amendment of the Land Development Ordinance of 1935 and its amendments to ensure equal inheritance rights in settlement areas.
- 5) The reform of legislation on sexual offenses such as rape, and on trafficking in and prostitution of women and children. For example in the case of custodial rape the onus of proof be shifted to the accused.
- 6) The introduction of legislation to deal with violations in relation to
  - (a) Domestic Violence
  - (b) Incest, and
  - (c) Sexual harassment.
- 7) The introduction of changes in personal laws to ensure uniformity in legal rights within universally accepted norms.

### IV. ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

Increasing numbers of women have entered the labour force and are making a crucial contribution to economic development and to family advancement. Their conditions of employment however need to be improved and measures introduced to protect them from exploitation as low cost labour.

We urge the following measures:

- 1) Ensure equal opportunity in employment for women,
- 2) Enforce legislation to ensure that the minimum age of employment is 15 years in the formal and informal sectors.
- 3) Ensure the enforcement of labour laws in the industrial sector, in the Export Processing Zones and in sub-contracting industries and in the agricultural sector including plantations, to improve the working and living conditions, health and welfare of all workers, guarantee the Trade Union rights of women.

- 4) In the case of overseas domestic workers, establish bilateral agreements between the state and labour receiving countries to ensure the enforcement of standardised contracts with minimum standards for recruitment, working conditions and repatriation.
- 5) Extend protection through legislation to workers in the rural and urban informal sector and domestic service and ensure equal remuneration for women and men.
- 6) Ensure joint ownership in the allocation of land/housing in State sponsored settlement and housing schemes.
- 7) Ensure that industries hazardous to health and environment are not permitted to be established in Sri Lanka and to encourage only environment friendly economic activities.

## V. EDUCATION

While the introduction of positive educational policies since the 1940's has ensured the equal access of girls and boys to general education, lack of commitment more recently to the goal of equal opportunity and the absence of compulsory education legislation have denied the right of every child to education, contributed to increase child labour and child abuse such as child prostitution and prevented gender equality in access to technology. We therefore, urge the following measures:

- 1) The introduction of regulations for compulsory education under Education Ordinance 31 of 1939, in a phased programme to ensure
  - i) Compulsory education for the 5 -11 age group by 1996.
  - ii) Compulsory education for the 11 - 14 age group by 1998.
  - iii) Compulsory education in schools on vocational institutions for the 14 - 16 age group by 2000.
- 2) The upgrading of at least two senior secondary schools in each Division to ensure equitable distribution of educational opportunities as well as equal access to all forms of tertiary education.

- 3) The revision of textbooks and educational materials to eliminate gender role stereotypes.
- 4) The introduction of a vocational counselling programme in each Division and advocacy programmes for employers to reduce gender imbalances in access to vocational training.

## VI. HEALTH

Women and girls have been specially affected by the decline in nutritional standards and the deterioration in health services. We urge the following measures:

- 1) To improve the nutritional levels of children, adolescent girls and women and in particular to reduce iron deficiency anaemia.
- 2) To eliminate occupational health care services.
- 3) To recognise woman's right to control her reproductivity and to ensure informed choice in the selection of family planning methods.
- 4) To strengthen primary and curative health care services.
- 5) To strengthen gender sensitive HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and care programmes and to guarantee confidentiality in the testing of HIV/AIDS.

## VI. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

We urge that women be given equitable representation in the nomination process at national, provincial and local government elections.

## VII. PEACE

In the present context of civil strife and extreme violence we urge that

- 1) Positive steps be taken to ensure sustainable peace and ethnic harmony.
- 2) The right of all displaced, specially women and children, to safe and secure resettlement be ensured.