

Comrade H. I. Samanmali: She Who Rose Beyond Siloed Struggles, Leaving a Legacy That Lives On in Every Feminist and Labour Movement

Dabindu Collective

It is with deep sorrow and profound grief that we, the Dabindu Collective, express our deepest condolences on the passing of our beloved mother of the Dabindu Collective, H. I. Samanmali, who passed away on 12 November 2025 at the age of 77. While she co-founded the Dabindu Collective in 1984, Comrade Samanmali was a veteran feminist activist in the labour movement who transformed feminist politics in Sri Lanka. This statement is issued to pay tribute to the memory of our founding member, to reflect on her invaluable service, to appreciate her dedication and determination, and to mark the continuation of the strength she built.

Born on 16 February 1948 in a conservative and patriarchal home, she entered the labour movement through her husband, Comrade P. K. Somapala. She was the strength behind Comrade Somapala's struggle for worker justice, proving to be a source of leadership for women in labour struggles. Comrade Somapala was a member of the Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers' Union (CMU) and a member of the Revolutionary Marxist Party (RMP). Their home, located near the Ekala Industrial Estate, was always full of workers—a hive of activity where they were constantly involved in strategising, supporting strike actions, discussing worker grievances, and building solidarity. Saman was both activist and mother, managing schoolwork and food, cooking and cleaning as she went, and making innumerable cups of tea.

Union strikes such as Polytex and Thripasha were decisive moments in Sri Lanka's workers' struggles. Within these struggles, Comrade Samanmali and

Comrade Somapala, along with their children, carried out hat-collections to provide meals for workers. When an opportunity arose to organise women within the RMP, the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) was formed. This enabled women in the factories of the Ekala Industrial Estate to unite, organise, learn, and share knowledge. Comrade Samanmali, along with Kumudini Samuel, Kumuduni Rosa, Philomena, Mala Ratnaseeli, and Mallika, took the initiative to organise study circles where they discussed labour exploitation in garment factories and export processing zones, the oppression of women, and their double and triple burden.

Comrade Samanmali took a leading role in organising, unionising, and mobilising the Polytex strike, a monumental event in the working-class women's movement in Sri Lanka. By December 1982, Comrades Bandu Shanthi, Leela Ferdinands, and Padmini Matharage formed a trade union at Polytex Garment, which erupted into the historic Polytex strike. Comrade Samanmali was central to this process as she was the only one with direct access to the women workers 24/7.

However, the trade union movement at the time, much like today, was a conservative, male-dominated space. The question remained: how do we organise women and prioritise their social issues, especially sexual and gender-based violence, within the labour movement? Organisations like the Women's Centre and Dabindu were born to bridge this gap. As Comrade Samanmali's work in the industrial estate and the Katunayake Free Trade Zone grew, she joined others in

organising recreational centres, libraries, and medical and legal clinics for women workers. The Dabindu Collective, the Women's Education and Training Center, and *Kalape Api* became active in mainstreaming and amplifying women workers' struggles.

Accordingly, in 1984 she started the first newspaper in the free trade zone, *Da Bindu*, providing a platform for workers to learn and voice their struggles. Apart from the newsletter, Comrade Saman was key in publishing educative material such as *Dabinduwen Nimtherata*, *Trade Union Rights*, *Sustainable Development Through Equality*, and others.

With her upbringing, humanitarian values were clearly reflected in Comrade Samanmali. She was part of resistance movements against the religious and racial oppression of Tamil and Muslim people. This upbringing influenced her socialist activism, which expanded throughout the north as well. In 1981, she supported the strike at a glass factory in Paranthan, Jaffna, through MIRJE (Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality). Due to the constant presence of workers in their home, the Comrade Somapala-Samanmali family faced police surveillance and threats during the 1983 Black July riots. Samanmali also joined forces with Women for Peace (*Saamaya Sandhabaa Kaanthaawoo*) to conduct research on the lives of women living in the Vanni during the ceasefire and to amplify the stories of families separated from their husbands and their living conditions. These roots in the north continue today in Dabindu's activism in the Kilinochchi and Vavuniya Districts.

Dabindu's activism was never isolated because Comrade Samanmali envisioned movement building. Between 1994 and 1997, the Dabindu Collective, in collaboration with Savisthri, began to organise women farmers, fishers, plantation workers, and industrial workers. Similarly, the Mothers and Daughters of Ceylon (*Lakbimee Mawwaru saha Dhiyaniyo*) intervened at the national level for peace during the 30-year war and terror, and during 1991–1992 supported displaced Tamil and Muslim people living in refugee camps in the north and east.

With the establishment of Dabindu in 1984, the Labour Aid Centre (*Neethi Upadhes Madhyasthanaya*), *Kamkaru Sevana*, *Kalapaye Api*, and the FTZ Workers' Solidarity Committee were formed with several

organisations working within the zones to protest and amplify the struggles of workers. The first protest through the Solidarity Committee was held on 7 November 1992 in Katunayake, resisting the arbitrary rule within the Zones that oppressed workers. This is an indelible moment in the history of Free Trade Zone struggles.

Moreover, Dabindu organised the support of other social organisations and provided national and international publicity for the Biyagama Ansel Lanka strike in the early 1990s. Through Comrade Samanmali's leadership, Dabindu intervened by providing legal aid and financial support to secure the release of workers who were arrested during the strike.

The enactment of the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act No. 34 of 2005 was another victory achieved by the women's movement in Sri Lanka. This was not handed down on a silver platter but won through the hard work of social activists, including women's organisations, healthcare workers, and many others.

Comrade Samanmali's struggle for workers' rights extended to the international level. In 1991, she participated in the Committee for Asian Women Conference, representing women workers. Since then, she worked in various international spaces as a member of the Asian Women's Committee. Comrade Samanmali was active in resistance against international brands and buyers exploiting women in factories through networks such as the Asian Floor Wage Alliance and the Clean Clothes Campaign.

This is merely a glimpse of Comrade Samanmali's life as a social activist. She was not just the founder of Dabindu; she was the heart that gave life to the leftist feminist movement in Sri Lanka. She was a beacon for women workers in the free trade zone. The steps she took, strengthened by courage and unwavering commitment, became giant leaps for the working-class women of Sri Lanka. She rose beyond siloed movements for justice, marking the end of an era. Comrade Samanmali's vast and impactful legacy lives on in the hearts and struggles of everyone in the feminist and labour movements, and it is one that will not be forgotten.

May she rest in peace and power.

14 November 2025.