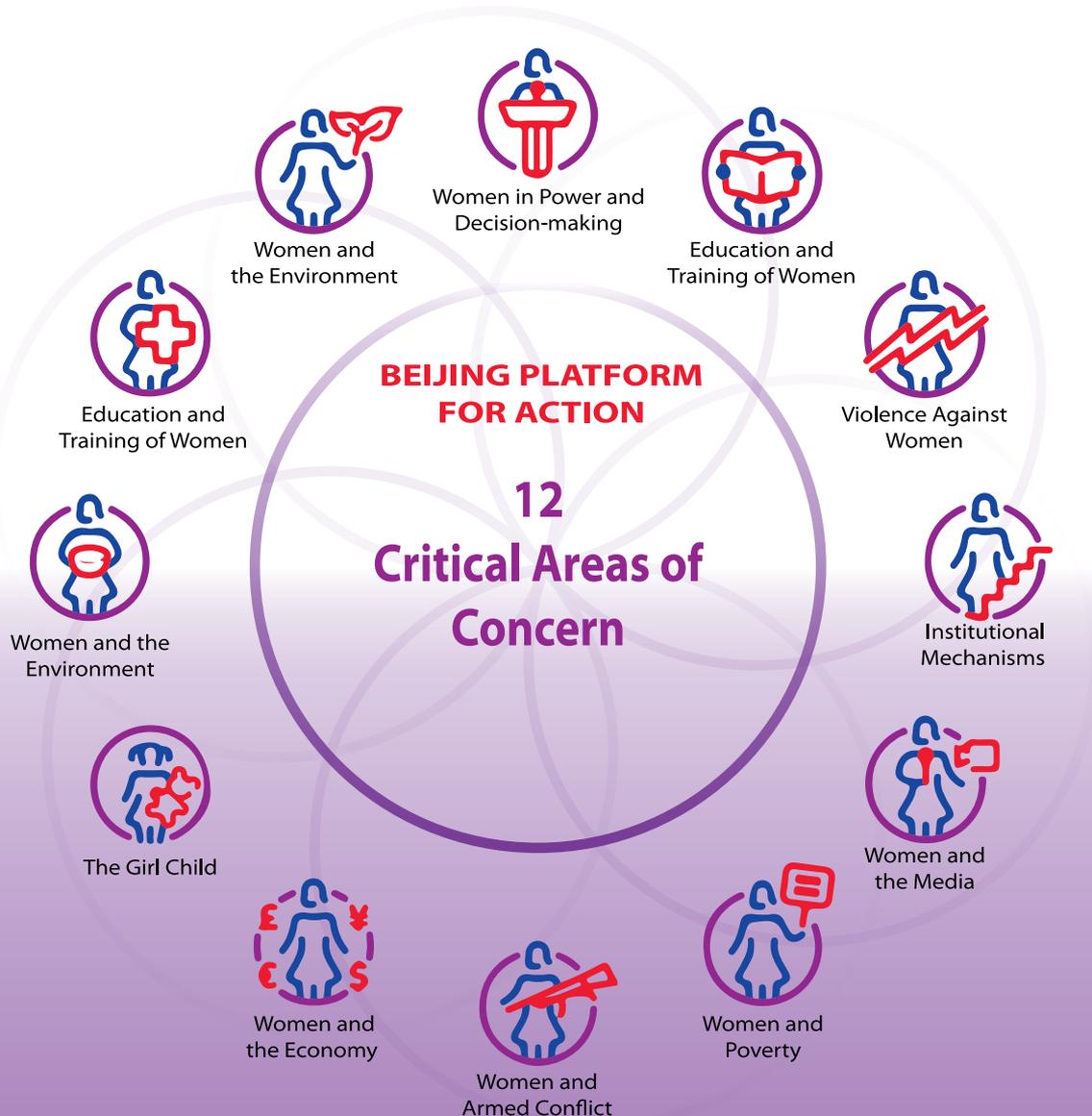


PRAVAHINI

Newsletter of Women's Education and Research Center

A JOURNEY OF 25 YEARS (1995 -2020)



WERC works towards achieving gender justice through education, research, consciousness raising, capacity building and advocacy, by using feminist intersectional approaches. PRAVAHINI is its annual newsletter which is distributed free of charge to sensitize youth to current women's/gender issues.

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Editorial

The cover page of our current issue of Pravahini, takes us back to the 4th World Conference on Women which took place nearly 25 years ago in Beijing. This conference which had a gathering of more than 17,000, gave birth to a landmark document for advancing the rights of women and gender equality worldwide titled the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA). The global community gathered at this conference reached a consensus and agreed to a comprehensive blue print of commitments supporting the full development of women and their equality with men in 12 critical areas of concern. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action firmly set in place an agenda for empowering women by integrating their concerns in national plans and policies. Hundred and eighty nine Governments (including Sri Lanka) and the UN agreed to promote gender mainstreaming as a strategy to ensure that a gender perspective is reflected in all policies and programs at the national, regional and international levels. Throughout the 11 day conference, voices of women and men working for justice were heard including those of Mother Theresa, Benazir Bhutto and Bella Abzug. At the event, the then U.S First Lady, Hillary Clinton famously declared that "human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights.

The Sri Lanka Women's NGO Forum facilitated the participation of over 45 women NGO representatives from Sri Lanka, thus paving the way for the formation of a strong network that would give voice to women's issues in the country. This important conference impacted in Sri Lanka with greater discussions on women's rights to include violence against women and related laws, women's leadership and political participation and economic concerns. Gender concerns were identified and given voice to in areas such as the environment, human rights, population and armed conflict. The country also adopted gender mainstreaming as a strategy to advance women's rights in the country. The year 2020 marks 25 years of the Beijing Conference and this is a time for us to individually and collectively review the progress of women in Sri Lanka.

This edition of Pravahini also records our shock and sadness at the terrible violence that took place in the country on Easter Sunday, 2019. This issue carries two articles by two guest writers that reflect on the event and its aftermath.

Readers will also find interesting articles that question stereotypical attitudes that continue to project women in secondary positions despite an increase in women opting for and excelling in career paths hitherto dominated by men. Happy reading, everyone!

Shari Jayawardhana
Editor

2020, the year of Beijing +25



Discussion - Regarding Sri Lanka NGO parallel report

It was in the year 1995 that women from all over the world gathered in Beijing, China, to focus on ways the status and situation of women could be improved globally and in the countries from which they came. A landmark outcome of this global event was the agreement negotiated at this conference, known as the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) - a document that outlines actions under 12 critical areas of concern (refer cover page). The Platform for Action was birthed after long hours of discussion and debate in order to make it into a meaningful document for women, globally. The twenty five years following this event has been a journey marked by the tragedy of war and conflict, the ardent pursuit of peace and reconciliation - some successful, some a failure, environmental disasters, economic progress in some regions and famine and starvation in others. All in all, the reality is that women the world over suffer twofold by the negative effects of war, economic decline, environmental catastrophes and weak governance structures.

Next year, in 2020, after 25 years of Beijing, women change-makers of all ages will gather once again to review this journey, to mark its successes and failures. The gathering will be a global mobilization of women belonging to all generations - a happy mix of the next generations of women's rights activists and the gender equality advocates and visionaries who were instrumental in crafting the Beijing Platform for Action. Issues that continue to discriminate women the world over, will galvanize this dynamic partnership of women, in their drive towards securing a better world for women in the future.

While globally and nationally we have seen progress in many areas, women are still far from achieving equality. Persisting high levels of violence against women, economic exclusion of women and other systemic inequalities continue to keep women in disadvantaged positions and impede the journey towards attaining lasting solutions. We are yet to fully realize the dreams and hopes voiced at the Beijing Conference of 1995. Therefore, at the event next year women will demand equal pay, equal sharing of unpaid care and domestic work, an end to sexual harassment and all forms of violence against women and girls, adequate and quick

legal redress, responsive health-care services and equal participation in decision-making in political as well as all other areas of life and above all, an end to war.

In preparation for the event in 2020, NGO parallel reports are being prepared. This is a universal exercise with countries looking at the progress as well as the challenges in fulfilling the promises of the Beijing Platform for Action. Here in Sri Lanka, Women and Media Collective organized two consultations in Colombo with women's groups, to provide input for Sri Lanka's NGO parallel report. While identifying the progress made in significant areas, they also pointed out the need for greater action to promote women in public life including introducing mechanisms that facilitate the smooth functioning of the 25% quota of women in the local councils. The effective implementation of measures already introduced, ensuring the rights of women and girls affected by the conflict, the LBT community, reparation for survivors of war and the reconciliation process were also put forward as important issues to be addressed. The delay in criminalizing marital rape was raised as a matter of concern. Non-recognition and under valuing of unpaid care work also featured prominently in the discussions. Introducing safe and secure child care services both in the government as well as the private sectors and the setting up of accountable and effective mechanisms to protect the rights of IDP's were also highlighted.

Very closely tied to the Beijing review is the 2030 global agenda for Sustainable Development. Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) focuses on gender equality and reiterates the strong call for the equal status and advancement of women, defined in the Beijing Platform for Action. The decisions made and the issues raised at Beijing +25 therefore will certainly impact on the march towards the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will be five years old in 2020. We as individuals and women's organizations in Sri Lanka together with the rest of the world, remain hopeful that the gains made at Beijing +25 will serve to fashion a better future for women in our country and the world over.

Shiranee Mills
(Executive Director)

Volunteers at WERC in 2019



Catalina & Irene

Maria Catalina Franco Torrente from Colombia and Irene Campanario Ruiz from Spain served as interns in our organization as exchange students of the

International Association of Students in Economics and Management (AIESEC) for a period of 15 working days beginning from 22nd January 2019 to 28th February 2019.

Maria Catalina Franco Torrente studied at the University del Rosario in Bogota (the capital of Colombia) while Irene Campanario Ruiz studied at the University of Valencia, Spain. During their time with us, they assisted us with a variety of tasks. They were initially given an overview of our organization and all our projects and thereafter assigned the task of a comparative analysis of the women's situation between their countries and Sri Lanka, with a focus on women's political participation. We also facilitated their visit to other women's organizations in order to give them a brief overview of the way in which women-related NGO's work. Here are a few words from Catalina:

"The experience at WERC, has been one of the best in my life. Working at WERC has helped me to know the situation and the reality of women in Sri Lanka. I was able to research into the factors that made women in Sri Lanka vulnerable and identify measures that could remedy the situation. The experience strengthened my knowledge and helped me to work with vulnerable groups in the society."

Irene had the following to add:

"My experience at WERC has been great. Thanks to the women who work in the NGO, I have been able to better understand the plight of women in Sri Lanka. I have also been able to work in a multicultural environment and

the assigned tasks have been a great help in my professional career. I am very grateful for the support of WERC and the role they perform within the Sri Lankan society with the objective of improving women's rights."



Vishmee

Vishmee Warnachapa has been interning with us since 20th February 2019. She holds a Diploma in Social Sciences and a BSc. (Hons) degree from the Royal Institute of Colombo. During her time at WERC she has been actively working on updating the newspaper articles related

to Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV), child abuse, women empowerment etc. In addition, she is involved in writing a project proposal for a Sinhala academic conference on Culture and its impact on women and compiling the WERC Progress Report for January 2018 to June 2019. She had the follow to say about her experience at WERC:

"It is a privilege for me to be a part of an organization that strives to bring awareness on women's rights, empower women and overcome gender inequalities within society. WERC has helped me gain new knowledge and exposure to areas such as human rights, gender budgeting, gender training through the projects that have been carried out, and the organization's take on gender issues has given me a better understanding and a renewed perspective on how issues can be addressed and preventive measures that can be taken so that rights of the people are preserved. Access to books and articles through WERC's extensive collection of library materials that present the different aspects of women's studies across the globe has been a tremendous opportunity as well. Interning at WERC has been a cheerful and positive experience because of the pleasant work environment and welcoming staff members."

Responding to Tragedy..... What Is The Way Forward?



Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48218907>

It was a beautiful Sunday morning. Some of our population started the day by dressing up in their Sunday finest and heading to Church to celebrate Easter, a day of great significance to all Sri Lankans. For others, it was a typical idyllic Sunday, punctuated with the usual chores and activities that help us rewind prior to a week at work. What none of us expected was that by mid-morning, the sense of calm relaxation attached to a Sunday would be shattered dramatically.

The Easter Sunday attacks that took place in a number of places across our beautiful island completely shattered the hearts of those in our motherland. Whether we are Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist, all of us felt the impact of these attacks in our hearts. It is not simply those who know the victims that are grieving even today, months after the attack; the population as a whole grieved, are grieving, and will continue to grieve for many months to come.

Our response and reaction to the Easter Sunday attacks has shifted and metamorphosed over the past months. Most of our readers will be able to relate to the numbing and paralyzing fear we all faced those first few days, on a hyper vigilant alert for more bad news. Readers will also be able to relate to the sense of anger, sense of betrayal, and the need for revenge that was sparked within us. A more recent shift, readers may be able to relate to a conflicted return to status quo, a feeling of falling back into an older routine, punctuated with moments of sadness and

anger and bitter memories of what happened. We have spoken to many people who carry a sense of guilt, survivor's guilt, in returning to life as it was. Many individuals who feel insensitive when they share moments of little joy. This is common and natural following a crisis such as what happened. Research on how communities grow resilient and bounce back after adversity have consistently shown this pattern of slow recovery.

It is said, that the true character of an individual or an institution is seen in how they respond to a crisis. In this light, we can really commend the youth of Sri Lanka for demonstrating strong character in the response to crisis. History is punctuated with stories of how youth responded negatively to crisis; how they fueled their grief and frustration into rebellion, risky behavior, substance abuse, and in furthering conflict. Here, we saw many youth find productive and proactive outlets for their grief. By noon on Easter, the number of passionate youth signing up to volunteer in relief aid and support had grown exponentially. Groups of young people mobilized support for those who were affected indirectly – running errands, fetching medication, and generally supporting families who were unable to leave their homes due to fear. Small professional networks immediately started sharing advice and tips for the common man on how to proceed and be prepared; from how to pack an emergency bag, how to determine false news, how to handle adverse emotional responses to crisis, how to improve sleep, youth groups across the country equipped the people with simple bits of information to survive and thrive. Other groups arranged pickup points and mechanisms to collect donations to meet the resource deficiencies in the afflicted areas and in the hospitals. Expats stepped up with large donation pools. Our youth and our people redefined the 'fight' in the 'fight'-or-'flight' reaction.

Following the emotional wave, a second wave hit. That of ethnic conflict, dispute, racism, and spreading of hate. In the same manner that masses

were using social media to propagate hate and unity (what is the opposite of unity), another faction turned to social media to endorse unity, love, and togetherness as a nation. A commendable effort by Gehan Blok and Dno Corea comes to mind; the video about Our Little Island. A beautiful and poignant piece of media on how revenge-driven-conflict could destroy our nation, this video not only shifted attitudes on ethnic conflict, it also reminded us of hope, of rebuilding, of opportunity. Today, it is being used as an educational tool in certain debriefing sessions on the Easter Sunday attacks, to help communities understand the perils of ethnic conflict.

We stand here, months after the attack, a little confused. In the wake of assurances that the terrorist group responsible for these heinous acts has been wiped out, we are unsure how to proceed as a nation. Our organizations and institutions have commenced the rebuild. The hotels whose infrastructure were partially destroyed, are opening their doors to guests once more. Organizations are slowly but surely crawling out of the debris and aspiring to rise again in profitability and productivity. Employees around the country, are committing their hard

work to rebuilding the economy through their hard work. But there is still work to be done.

We are all responsible to rebuild and recover as a nation, and grow to greater strength as a country. As solo individuals we can each contribute to our economy in a simple way by contributing to local businesses wherever possible. We are all micro-ambassadors to the brands we consume; by purchasing a local brand instead of an international one, we are making a choice of standing in solidarity with our country-men. We can acknowledge and be aware that the emotional wounds are still not fully healed. That if anything, we are more vulnerable than ever. We can be present with kindness and compassion to our fellow citizens, to support and link them with the resources to manage this emotional upheaval. Finally, we can choose to be driven by the value of love. Love to our countrymen – irrespective of race, religion, caste or creede. Love to our country – the focal point of our vision as a nation. And love to those departed – who we can honor every day by striving to create a world where they would not have perished.

Rozaine Cooray
(Guest Writer)

Seeing is Believing: Women Role Models Inspire Girls to be Strong, Smart and Bold

"Think of Win-Win Situations"

Continuing our efforts at encouraging young women to venture into career paths that are of interest to them rather than going down the beaten track, WERC recently initiated a pilot project to drive home the message that the sky is the limit when it comes to career options for women and girls.

Three young girls between the ages of 18-22 years were invited by WERC to interview their favorite female role model and to report back on their interview experiences. The three school leavers went on a mission to find and feature three inspiring women in their chosen fields.

Anagi's Conversation with Indresh



Ms. Indresh

Anagi Fernando chose to interview Indresh Puvimanasinghe Fernando, Chief Process Officer at Softlogic Holdings and previously the Chief Operating Officer at Softlogic Finance, a public quoted company. Indresh is an accountant by profession, and a fellow of the Chartered Institute

of Management Accountants (CIMA). She credits her success to the competent teams that she was able to build and influence and



Ms. Indresh credits her success to the competent teams that she was able to build and influence

to the incredible supervisors that have helped her reach her potential and extended a hand whenever she fell.

Indresh talks of the importance of making lasting friendships and her advice to young girls who are interested in a similar career was to ensure that one is surrounded by competent people and to be fair towards people the workplace and empower them.

What was the lesson learnt? "One needs to think of "Win-Win" situations and to find a way to help other women rise on the way to the top." She concludes her insightful write-up by encouraging other girls to embrace their strengths and what makes each one unique.

Thenuji Interviews Prof. Arosha Adikaram



Prof. Arosha

the many tokens of appreciation seen on her role model's desk indicating her popularity among students. Thenuji was also encouraged by the fact that Professor Adikaram who is a wife and a mother is able to achieve a balance between her professional and personal lives.

The next interviewer Thenuji's role model was Professor Arosha Adikaram who is attached to the Department of Human Resources Management at the University of Colombo. Upon her arrival at Professor Adikaram's office, Thenuji stated that she was taken up by

In her write-up Thenuji recommends Professor Adikaram's book titled "Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: A Guide to Employers and Employees" to young women who are commencing their professional

careers. In conclusion, Thenuji stated that she admired Professor Adikaram's attitude towards life which was being content and thankful to what life has to offer.

A Career to Explore



Mrs. Andrea

young professionals. Just like her role model, Malisha writes that she too wants to form her own business in the future.

During the interview with Mrs Andrea, Malisha realized that her role model places a great importance on education as it gives one independence and decision making ability especially for women. Melisha treasured the advice given by Mrs. Andrea which was to work hard, listen to your heart and be bold. She concludes her write-up by stating that her role model has motivated her to start her own company one day and that she wants to walk in the footsteps of Mrs. Andrea by working hard to become a successful business woman, a good wife and a role model mother.



Thenuji & Prof. Arosha

Building bridges to the future...



Nishi Uggalle
Source: daily mirror

In early march, many Sri Lankans took pride in the achievement of a young girl. Nishi Uggalle, claimed the title of child genius in a competition held in the United Kingdom. On receiving the trophy Nishi mentioned that she hoped to dismantle the stereotype that girls were not able to perform well in subjects such as Mathematics and Science. Although

many women scientists and mathematicians from the yester year such as Ada Lovelace and Marie Curie have done the same, old-fashioned ideas are menacingly perpetuated.

Today, in a world that is steadily being overtaken by technological innovations, we as women have arrived at a critical juncture. We must re-build bridges and build many more afresh in order to ensure that girls and women are well-equipped to take on a tech-driven world where innovation and exploration will soon be made mainstream.

Unstable bridges

In Sri Lanka, much has been done and undone in this regard. Information and communications technology (ICT) education has been introduced across the island but little attention has been paid to the unequal distribution of resources. Moreover, although a significant number of children gain access to ICT education at the primary school level, statistics indicate that only a handful of girls show interest in pursuing ICT education at the tertiary level.

From this minority even fewer persist in finding jobs in the sector while those who gain entrance to the tech-sector are assigned roles that are inadequate for their educational qualifications. Therefore, it is evident that women are treading on unstable ground – one that doesn't provide stability for their present nor their future.

A firm foundation

Girls will be girls and boys will be boys. Isn't this what we are told from a young age? Gendered roles are ingrained to ensure that the futures of both genders are performed in a scripted manner. It is during her formative years that a girl is made to believe that she is incapable of excelling in certain subject areas such as Mathematics and Science – subjects that are now widely recognized as an integrated whole, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics).

By ensuring that girls follow the path paved for them, gender roles are undisrupted and sectors such as the tech industry remain dominated by men. It's time to disassemble the status quo and for this we must start at the foundation. Within families and schools, we have to encourage girls to pursue their interests in Science and Technology and also arouse curiosity among those who feel they are incapable of tackling these areas of study. After all, parents and teachers are akin to the bricks and the mortar that provide a solid foundation for a child's future.

Integrating the parts

Today, a cohesive learning experience is essential for ensuring the practical application of education. STEM education does not simply mean the four subject streams are taught in isolation. Instead, they have to be taught in an integrated manner where one stream feeds into the other; bridging the gap that has been long-established between each subject area. This helps develop well-rounded individuals and ones who are also keen innovators. In our world and the future that awaits us, both girls and boys must be equally responsible for creating innovative solutions for a sustainable future.

Crossing the bridge

We are in the midst of a digital revolution but many women in the tech sector sense their career growth is hampered. Societal and institutional perceptions dictate that women are unable to take on challenging roles related to tech. In Sri Lanka, there are only a handful of women who occupy

managerial positions within the sector. Many are also dissatisfied with the positions they are assigned at their place of work. In the short term, these issues can be rectified when the heads of organizations re-think and reformulate popular ideologies concerning what men and women are capable of achieving. However, in the long term, it is family and education institutions that can help nip these issues in the bud by reimagining the tasks assigned to boys and girls.

Beyond the bridge?

Given the unprecedented changes taking place at present, it is almost impossible to imagine what lies beyond, but, whatever comes our way whether it is life in exoplanets or time travel, it is important that women establish their position as scientists, astrophysicists and innovators in whichever field they choose to pursue.

Fleur Ockersz
(Guest Writer)

Reflections in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks



Source : <https://www.denverpost.com/>

I live in Batticaloa. On the 21st of April, we were returning from Colombo as the holidays were coming to an end and school was starting the next day. We had set off early in the morning. As we were getting close to Batticaloa, we heard the news of the multiple attacks in Colombo, and the attack at the Zion Church in Batticaloa town.

We learned that my brother and his family narrowly missed attending mass at St. Anthony's Church in Kochchikadai. I felt my stomach churn when I thought of the bombing of this church. My mother, who practiced many religions, used to visit this Church along with other places of worship regularly. How could a place so sacred and precious be violated in this way? I had last visited the Kochchikadai Church in July 2018. The attacks struck very close to home, even more so than we had initially realized.

In the days immediately following the attacks, we started gathering together in small groups as friends, to remember those who had died and were injured. In Batticaloa, we learned that former colleagues and family friends had lost family or had children in critical condition at the hospital. We started visiting some of the families who had lost loved ones or were caring for the injured in hospital. Simultaneously, we also started visiting our Muslim friends in the nearby towns. In the towns where Muslims were living, there was heavy military

presence, house-to-house searches were being conducted and many arrests were made. These towns were gripped by fear.

My daughters have been going to school since school reopened. Sometimes there have been two children in the class, and at other times ten. When my eldest daughter (12) returned to school, she found out that one of her classmates died in the blast at the Zion Church. She also told me later that this classmate's best friend was a Muslim girl – the kind of relationship that would rarely be acknowledged in the weeks that have followed the attacks.

Just like most children, mine too had many questions about what happened on Easter Sunday and the situation in the country since. They often asked me these questions at night before they fell asleep:

Why Amma?

Why would you explode a bomb on yourself?

What is a bomb?

Why are they checking my bag at school?

How big is a bomb?

What is curfew?

Were they mothers and fathers? Those people who exploded the bombs? Then what will happen to their children now?

As the days moved on, public shock turned into anger and sometimes towards terrible violence against the Muslim community. Everyday there were stories of actions of humiliation and of prejudice, particularly against Muslim women and girls. It is a common experience shared by women in many parts of the world, where violence and hatred towards a community is often taken out on women's bodies.

A friend said she was asked to remove her head cover at the hospital by the doctor who refused to treat her otherwise. Another friend said she was told at a check point 'oka galavanna naththang api galavannang'...remove that or we will remove (undress you). Another friend shared a story of her daughter being scared to say her own name and instead used another (non-Muslim) name. She had internalized the fear that people would be angry and aggressive towards her if they knew she was Muslim. Teachers from the Muslim community were asked to come to school in sari and not the abaya that they were accustomed to wearing. Women and girls became the focus of the wrath unleashed upon the Muslim community.

There were notices in town asking 'Tamils' not to go to Muslim shops by various groups that were claiming to 'protect' the 'Tamil community'. It broke my heart when I heard people in the Muslim community were burning precious old family books and journals of Islamic teachings, as they were scared that they would be arrested for having these. My daughter's friend (a non-Muslim) told her to be 'normal' but also 'careful' with their Muslim classmates.

As more news about Zaharan and the National Tawheed Jamath (NTJ) surfaced, it emerged that some of the groups responsible for the attacks were said to be from the nearby Muslim

http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=204220

majority town of Kattankudi. The anger for many non-Muslims became more and more real. A barrage of accusatory questions flooded the minds of non-Muslims directed to the Muslim community as a whole: how did you not know all this time? Didn't your money support these people? Why did you not speak up earlier about this group? Simultaneously multiple voices emerged from within the Muslim community, some of which addressed these questions. Many responses however were of deep anguish about the destruction that had been brought upon Batticaloa and Sri Lanka as a whole by a few people in the name of their faith. Many in the Muslim community publicly acknowledged the factors that led to the growth of groups such as the NTJ and individuals such as Zaharan in their midst and ask questions of themselves and their own community.

Then we saw the violence that was unleashed on the Muslim communities in the Western and North Western Provinces on the 13th and 14th of May. More than 500 shops and homes were attacked, and one person died of injuries¹. It emerged as common knowledge that the Police didn't stop the violence. These days the prejudice against Muslims on social media and in daily life has become open and common. Unfortunately, this prejudice and hateful rhetoric is not new. It has been around for years on social media and has been simmering under the surface in everyday life.

In this context, I would like to share some of my own thoughts.

Who was Zaharan? I heard a story about him as a young boy. He was a fiery personality and asked lots of questions. He challenged norms and rules. He argued back and didn't do well with authority and discipline. Finally, he was expelled from his religious school. Later he became a dynamic speaker, but in the absence of any positive mentorship, he made choices that were available to him that moved him towards violent extremist views. We know of other leaders like that in our country's history.

This detail left me with a range of questions about the young people in our societies and how we are raising them and what spaces – how much and of what kind - we provide for them.

The image of the soldier walking out of the destroyed house where Zaharan's supporters and

family members were hiding in Sainthamaruthu has stayed with me. The soldier was carrying the little daughter of Zaharan - Rusaina in his arms. She had been injured in the blast that killed 15 people including 6 children who were in that house.

Why have these two images stuck with me? Of a strong, opinionated and grossly misdirected young boy, and a little girl being carried out by a soldier in the midst of violent destruction?

Those of you who are fans of the Star Wars movies, like I am, know that Darth Vader was not always Darth Vader. When he was Anakin Skywalker, he was a strong-willed young man who challenged authority and then made decisions that led him on a terrible path until he became the heartless monster called Darth Vader. In later episodes, Luke Skywalker, Anakin Skywalker's son and the blue-eyed hero and chosen Jedi, could not prevent his internally conflicted nephew Ben Solo (later known as Kylo Ren) from choosing the path which led to the death of his own parents and his uncle, Luke. The Star Wars movies speak eloquently about the mutual existence of all powers of the universe within us – the light and the dark; the good and the evil – and the eternal struggle within us all to find balance. We can all become Darth Vader, or Kylo Ren or Zaharan. We are not born that way. We become what we become through the choices we make or are forced to make.

And this is why the image of the soldier and the little girl stays with me. Even in the middle of so much hate and violence, there are precious moments of humanity in us. Within the person that became Zaharan who brought such brutal destruction upon so many innocents, there was an opinionated, defiant young boy.

I can't speak for Zaharan and what led him to become a Darth Vader. But I can speak for those of us left behind with the repercussions of the actions spearheaded by him and his group. I strongly feel that the time we are living through is a moment of reckoning for us. It is ten years since the end of a brutal war. We are still attempting to deal with that loss and that terrible history. We are barely attempting to right some of the injustices that were committed during the course of over three decades of armed conflict. This path is hard as the powers that be are far from committed to justice. The voices of the mothers of

the disappeared, for instance, echoes through our land as they have continued to ask, for more than twenty years now, "where are our loved ones?"

We who are living through this historical moment have to honestly ask questions and reflect on our own ethics, identities and ways of being. It is not enough to just say we are all Sri Lankan and we are the same. Clearly, we are not. It is not enough to say Sri Lanka unite! We have to face the realities of the society in which we live with all its divisions, hierarchies and brutality in every aspect of life as we live it.

I would like to propose that we dig deeper than the often articulated 'causes' and 'explanations' for the bombings: that this was a small secretive group of extremists and that they don't represent everyone from these towns; that nearly 2 million Muslim citizens of this country cannot be held responsible for the actions of a small extremist group; or that Islamic religious extremism has been spreading in Sri Lanka for a while now and thus Muslim communities are responsible for what took place.

These perspectives may each have a kernel of truth to them and need to be explored. But they still remain within the bounds of a view of society that is irrevocably bound by divided ethnic identity. The possible issues that this current moment brings up are those that impact all of us in this country irrespective of identities and are much deeper. If we dig deeper than the perspectives mentioned above, we can open up the space to ask questions of our society as a whole.

Are we creating spaces for our youth to ask questions? To speak up when a rule, even a religious-one, feels unfair and not right? To positively challenge authority? To find guidance when they don't conform or fit into normative roles that are thrust upon them? Are we creating spaces that allow them to be different? Do we create space for our young people to make an informed and honest choice about who they are and how they want to live? Do we actively make space for them to imagine and live lives free of ALL violence?

Are we creating space within our own families and cultures to question inequality everywhere-within the family, one's own community and society as a whole? Are we silencing all dissent? Why don't our schools encourage searching for knowledge rather than dictating pre-made answers? Why

don't our schools promote interactive engagement with each other's religions and cultures rather than enforce rote learn of dogmatic versions of identities we are born into? Why don't we nurture the ability to challenge and ask questions? Even now, after such tragedy, there is silence in our schools. They have been told to focus on the studies. "Don't ask questions or talk about what happened" is what children have been told.

Do we have a choice about what religion or religions we want to follow? Do we have a choice, beyond pre-decided ways of being, - socially, politically and spiritually?

Ambedkar, the father of the Indian Constitution, converted to Buddhism and encouraged many of the oppressed caste to convert because of the brutal caste-based discrimination, untouchability, hatred and violence within Hinduism.

Is there space for Buddhist children to stand against violence? Or to make meaning of Buddhist selves by questioning the Sinhala Buddhism that justifies violence as having little to do with the teachings of the Gautama Buddha?

If Christianity holds as its core value, unconditional love, is there space to question Church leaders who endorse the death penalty?

Feminist scholars and activists, many of whom are of the Islamic faith, have been arguing that there are multiple interpretations of the Quran and that this plurality is positive. They have argued that Muslims should be free to choose the most progressive interpretations that ensures the rights for all, particularly women and girls. Why isn't there more space for these debates?

Shouldn't the Tamil civilians of this country who have borne the brunt of anti-terror laws and mass scale collective discrimination over the past four decades stand up for their Muslim neighbours who are being subject to the same treatment now?

Beyond this, what more can we do? Fear and anger are real and valid. But we must strive to always engage from our humanity. We must be brave in our everyday interactions and take a step forward even if we are afraid. We must not give into 'othering'. We must do all that we can to put an end to more and more exclusions amongst us that lead us to not know enough about other communities that we live amongst

and with. This only leads to lack of understanding and dehumanising resulting in greater prejudice.

Choose to hold the hand of your Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Sinhala or Tamil friend, because she is your friend first. I hope my daughter can be friends with her Muslim classmates – a friendship that is true rather than a performance of being 'normal' but 'careful'.

We must speak up when someone is being harassed in the bus. One of my colleagues sat next to a passenger in an abhaya and said hello when others in the bus were loudly making hurtful comments about her. That small gesture goes a long way.

We should speak up against hateful or prejudicial speech on social media, and not share anything that might fuel anger, misunderstanding and hatred.

We must create the space for all of us to intimately interact with each other and understand our differences; to challenge each other but with trust and openness. We must try to find love within us even when, or perhaps especially when, the emotions of fear and the anger threaten to overwhelm us.

There is much to be changed and questioned about ourselves and our normative practices. There is much yet to be learnt about our diverse histories, through a process of critical learning and not rote learning of stereotypes as fixed truth. We must nurture pluralism and encourage and protect the choice of each one of us to be whom we want to be.

The reasons why we can't do this are much deeper than any easy explanations. We need to question the fundamental structures of our society.

This is hard work. It will cause discomfort to sit with one's own fear and anger while finding empathy and love within. It will take enormous strength to move beyond our deep inbuilt assumptions and prejudices and seek truth and love instead. But this is the only way for us not to repeat the horrors of our very recent past yet again.

The wounds are many and are deep. But, as the 13th Century mystic poet Rumi says: "The wound is the place where the light enters you". In the case of Sri Lanka, whether it will be so is up to us.

Sarala Emmanuel

(Feminist Activist, Batticaloa)

A Tribute to Jean Arasanayagam



Jean Arasanayagam

Jean Arasanayagam (nee Solomons), one of Sri Lanka's leading contemporary English voices passed away on the 30th of July 2019 at the age of 87.

Jean was a graduate of the University of Ceylon, Colombo, and received her M. Litt in Literary Linguistics from the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland. Her prowess as a writer has been recognized by numerous National Awards, including the coveted Gratiaen Prize 2017 for her poetry collection 'Life of a Poet'.

Being born to a Dutch Burgher family and married to a Jaffna Tamil, Jean often inter-wove her poetry with the multiple heritages of her identity. This together with the Sri Lankan Civil War, Gender and Post-Colonialism were her main themes. Many of her works have been translated into various languages including Danish, Swedish, French and Japanese.

Here is a poem from her collection titled "Reddened Water Flows Clear"

Beneath the Snow

It is on these rainy nights I remember
When dark like an earwig crawls in
To seek the dry of listening ear
Then the dream returns through wind
Wrapped like wet hair swathes
Coiling and coiling round and round
My mind, glistening strands sparkling with
Moisture and fragrant with the Queen of the Night
That grows by my window

When your face lies on my palm
Cupped memory and I stroke it softly
Moulding and moulding it, crystal gazing
Into your eyes is now a no future from a present
That was so quickly becoming a past

At the same time the bombs in Dionysiac
Rage make a welter of limbs spurting with
Their wine blood out of the burst goat skins
Of flesh to splurge the pavement of our lives
Those of us who escaped take henna patterns
Of blood decorating the soles of our feet,
The palms of our hands painted with death flower
Petals that have a different fragrance,
We are the brides of death
Widowed so early in our grief

There, the flowers breathed beneath the snow
The ice fragrance of no colour buried beneath
A hard earth and the winter flakes fell
As we stood at the window looking out on a
changing
View turning your cheek from darkness to light
From season to season towards a spring
We would never share or never know

WERC Concludes its Sixth Batch of Women's Studies Course!



Awards Ceremony of the Women's Studies Course 2018-2019

It was with a sense of satisfaction that WERC organized the awards ceremony of the Certificate Course in Women's Studies (Batch 2018) on the 27th of September 2019 in the WERC Auditorium. The course conducted in the English medium was of a year's duration and commenced in January 2018. The participants of the course included officers from the Sri Lanka Police and development officers from the NGO sector.

The entry requirements for the course were, a degree from a recognized university or G.C.E. Advanced Level, with a minimum of 3 years of experience in the field of social science or development sector.

Eminent lecturers from universities and organizations delivered essential modules such as Social Construction of Gender, Feminist Theories, Gender and Law and Feminist Research Methodologies. There was ample space provided for discussion of the emerging concerns in the field of gender.

WERC congratulates Ms. Ruvina de Fonseka, Ms. Malka Thushari de Zoysa, Ms. Chamalee Ahangama and Ms. Shari Jayawardhana who successfully completed the course.

The Guest of Honour at the event was Ms. Sulakshana de Mel, Member of the Governing Council who delivered the key note address and presented the certificates to the awardees.

A girl tired of being a girl

*Will I ever breathe a breath of free air?
Will I ever show my body without fear?
As a girl in this world when will I dare?
Roam with defiance in my eyes?*

*When will I ever walk the roads with no fear?
Of catcalling and unwanted touches?
When will I ever walk to the beach at night?
And lie down on the beach until dawn?*

*When will I ever dress what I want?
And don't get remarks on them passed on
When will I ever swim in the ocean?
In broad day light without men looking on*

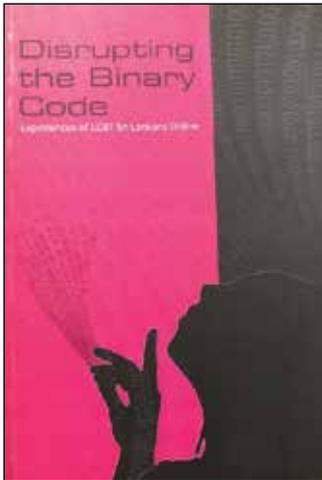
*When will we build a world where women are
human beings?
Where they have equal rights and are equally free
Where they are not observed as sexual beings
But people with a right to enjoy what they need*

By: Naduni Dineisha

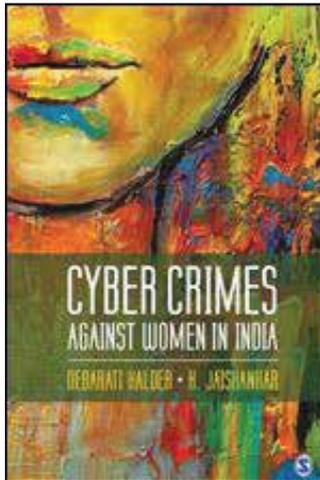


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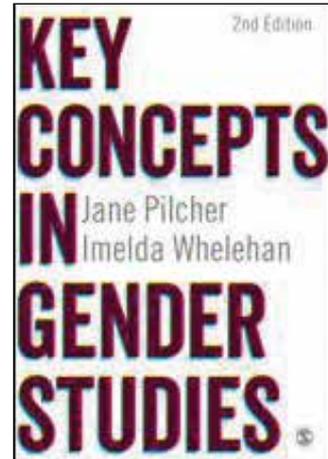
Some New Additions to the WERC Library



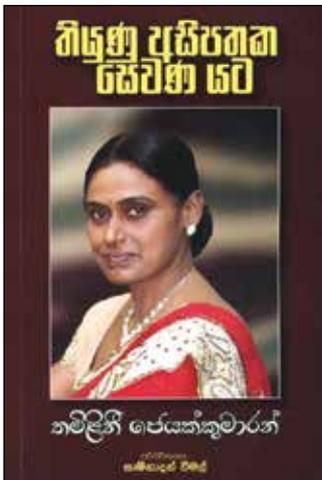
*Disrupting the Binary Code:
Experiences of LGBT Sri Lankans Online
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(Available in Sinhala and Tamil)*



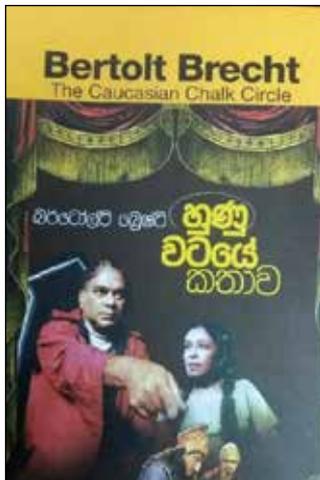
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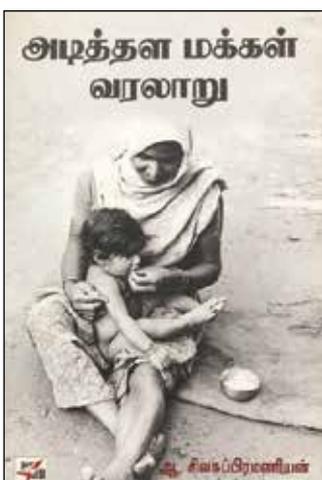
*Thiunu Asipathaka Sevana Yata
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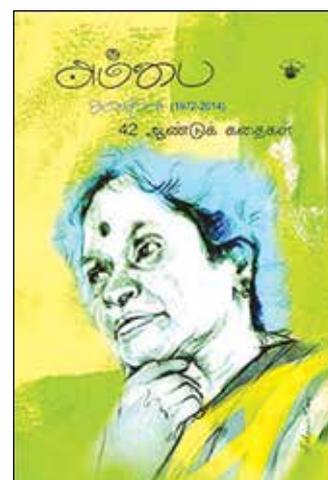
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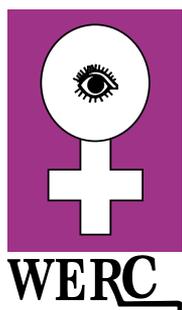
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Do you want to know more about women's Rights?

If you want to know more information about Gender Studies, Religion, Media, Child and Youth, politics and Culture, visit our office, we have different services that might interest you:

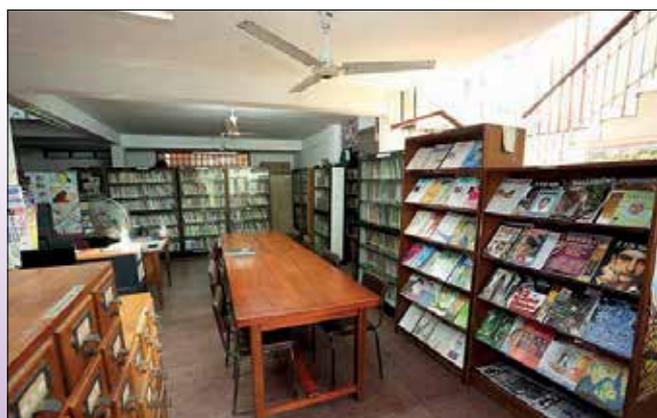
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