

PRAVAHINI

WERC Newsletter of the Women's Education and Research Centre

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Volume 29



Here at WERC, we strive for a gender-sensitive, equal, and equitable society in which women's rights, freedoms, autonomy, and aspirations are recognized, upheld, and realised. Pravahini, WERC's newsletter, is produced to sensitise youth to current issues that affect women and gender.



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Editorial

Sri Lanka was named one of the countries to be reviewed next year as part of the CEDAW review process. Sri Lanka signed the Convention to Eliminate all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) around 40 years ago. However, it appears that we have a long way to go in ensuring that we uphold CEDAW obligations.

In relation to this, a few of the most pressing issues Sri Lankan women face include domestic violence, employment issues, and issues related to women's health.

Further, with the start of the lockdowns following the pandemic and the economic crisis that followed, the number of domestic violence cases in Sri Lanka has increased exponentially. The previous CEDAW report noted that domestic violence in Sri Lanka is largely underreported due to a lack of access to services that can assist women in these situations, low perpetrator conviction rates, cultural attitudes etc. The committee also noted that the requirement for victims of domestic violence to take part in mediation has resulted in them withdrawing their complaints. Apart from this, the attitudes of society and law enforcement who trivialise domestic violence have also magnified the issue.

Due to the economic crisis in Sri Lanka which has resulted in many people falling below the poverty line, the double taxation of sanitary products such as menstrual pads (while condoms are subsidised) remains an issue for many women and girls, the latter group even missing school because their families are unable to afford sanitary products. This issue could be addressed in many ways - for example, first by removing the taxation on pads and then by (ideally) providing them free for those who need them most. This is just one of the ways in which women's health has been affected by the crisis. Women often bear the brunt of looking after families through unpaid care work, which means that a majority of those in the recent UNDP study (which found that a devastating number of people in Sri Lanka are multidimensionally vulnerable) are women. It is women who struggle to ensure that there is food on the table - that their children can go to school, and struggle to somehow collect water and help rebuild the family following natural disasters.

Another issue faced by women is the lack of female participation in politics. If qualified women take part in politics, they can be a voice for women and help ensure that the issues that need to be highlighted to improve the lives of women are raised in places where decisions are made such as Parliament and the Cabinet. Shocking images released by a think tank a year or so ago showed the stark reality through images where all the men in Parliament and Cabinet were erased. What was left was just one or two women with large spaces between them where the men were standing.

This leaves the question - where do we stand as a country? Ask most economists and they will state that businesses have picked up, the Central Bank Governor has been named in the list of top 21 Central Bank Governors in the World, and it seems as though that the IMF package is working.

However, when measured by other factors such as the incidence of Violence Against Women (which studies have shown has a clear correlation to the economic empowerment of women), the ability of parents to send their children to school, the availability of well-paid jobs for women and other marginalised communities, it seems that the math doesn't add up. A lot of criticism has been made about how this "progress" is leaving the most vulnerable behind. This begs the question - is this what we want as a country?



Celebrating Four Decades...

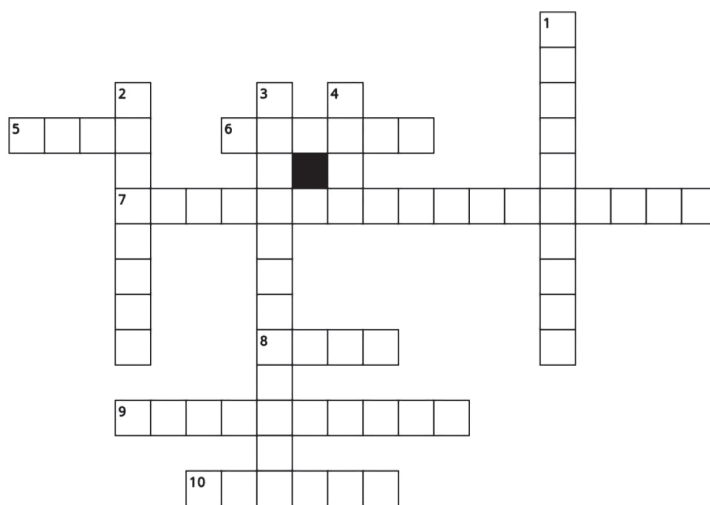
The Women's Education Research Centre (WERC) was established significantly close upon the heels of Sri Lanka ratifying the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1982. Named as Women's Education Centre (WEC) at its inception with its focus on raising awareness and education on gender equality among all levels of society, the name was changed to include "research" as an integral part of the organisation taking into consideration that mere education and awareness raising was not sufficient if the organisation were to fulfil its ultimate goal of establishing a society devoid of discrimination based on gender.

Today we celebrate WERC's 41 years, remembering with appreciation and gratitude its founders and those who have and who continue to walk with the organisation in its journey. Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran who continues to serve as a member of the Governing Council of WERC, is WERC's first Executive Director who strove hard to build the organisation from a space in a small office to a building of its own, housing a library rich in resources on gender and intersectional subjects. The contribution she makes through her writings is immense. We remember Ms. Bernadeen Silva, a vibrant feminist activist who toiled with the people to bring a new perspective to life. The radical changes she struggled for in society and in her journey of faith, marks her as one of the sincerest human beings who was rooted in her quest for equality at all levels. Dr. Kumari Jayawardene, is one of the stalwarts, who conceptualised WERC and gave it form, who continues to inspire, encourage and teach, making a tremendous impact both in the Asian region and worldwide.

WERC reviewed its Strategic Plan in November 2022 taking into consideration the evolving situations in the country and the needs of the various communities that we serve and came up with five strategic goals for the period 2022 to 2027, namely, reduced violence against women and inequality with greater access to redress mechanisms including the judicial system; increased representation of women in governance at all levels; increased confidence and rights consciousness including economic rights among vulnerable groups of women to take control of their future; increased advocacy / collective action on gender issues through related networking and movement building and institutional strengthening with a focus on greater institutional capacity, accountability, transparency, efficiency and effectiveness.

This newsletter contains a spectrum of all our activities implemented with a committed team of professionals. Our thanks to our donors who continue to be sensitive to our organisational goals and to our sister organisations who have shared this journey with us in a true spirit of comradeship.

I Shiranee Mills, Executive Director, WERC



Down

1. Another word for freedom and what women want with regard to patriarchy
2. A movement against patriarchy
3. _ health - healthcare related to women of childbearing age
4. A right that first-wave feminists struggled for

Across

5. Unpaid _ Work - work done in the home which is primarily done by women for no financial benefit
6. _ wave feminism - what followed first-wave feminism
7. Feminism that deals with the differing needs of different women
8. The ILO convention against sexual harassment at the workplace
9. A system of beliefs that holds men as more valuable than women
10. A famous hashtag that helped feminists talk about incidents of harassment and abuse

Her Story

Her father was an architect. Growing up, she lived in several metropolitan cities such as London in her childhood but upon returning to his village in Sri Lanka, he didn't allow her to go to school after Grade 8 because she was a girl. She and her mother weren't allowed to go beyond their garden, but her brother was allowed to study. He's a lawyer now. Her father did allow her to have the Ordinary Level and Advanced Level textbooks and she somehow studied at home and passed her exams.

Her mother was not very supportive either. Maybe it was that her father used to get drunk and beat her before turning on them or maybe self-preservation had taken its toll. Either way, she was first married off at the age of 19 to a man who was 27. By 21, she had her first child, a beautiful daughter, and then her second child, a bonnie son was born three years later. By 25, he had left her and his sister had taken her children away because she was too depressed to look after them. She didn't even fight it because his sister was nice and they were all supportive of her even if they didn't do anything against his violence, except pay her lip service.

By the time her husband left her, she had a basic qualification in Human Resources because he always used to say "At least go and do some work and make yourself useful because otherwise, you'll have to work on the streets if something happens to me". So she enrolled in classes. However, he told her not to speak to her teachers because they were male and told her that if she had a question she could write it on a slip of paper and give it to another girl in class to ask the teacher. He was not in the class but she still obeyed, for she was so full of fear. Her hard-earned qualifications helped her find a job. She worked hard and soon started earning well.



In her office, there was a nice man. He was from a different race but he was so handsome and he paid special attention to her. They spoke about everything that bothered her and he was very kind. He told her he wanted to marry her. Finally, she had found happiness.

One day, he took her to a nice hotel and they had a good time over the long weekend. She was so happy, thinking about building a life with this man. However, once they got back from the trip he stopped answering her calls and texts and completely ignored her. A week later he was with another woman, then another, and another. He once got drunk and told all the men in the office about her and how he had tricked her and then they started making comments and calling her names. "I thought I was getting married to this man - why are they judging me?" she thought sadly before leaving for another job.

She married her second husband three years later. She was more careful this time and thought she had chosen wisely. He was very nice to her - except when he got drunk and beat her. At that time he used bad words and called her a traitor for having been in a relationship with someone who wasn't Sinhala. He wasted their money and cheated on her. Afraid of being alone, she stayed with him for almost a decade.

However, that's not where her story ends. She invested wisely, saved as much money as she could, and built her career. She took every opportunity she could to learn and now she enjoys a life of solitude, surrounded only by people and animals who bring her joy. She became tough and strong and became a feminist, advocating for rural women and the younger generation to enjoy the things she didn't get to enjoy.

Her message to any young girl or woman is to study hard, save their own finances, and somehow build their own life. "Trust people, but always have a safety net so that you are independent and strong. Never give up because you can always build the life you want".



Written by Kaveesha Fernando based on a true story of a former colleague and friend who has always inspired and supported her

Unpaid Care Work



Experts say that in Sri Lanka, women do not adequately take part in the workforce. When looking at the statistics, they are looking mostly at women who are employed in full or part-time jobs in the formal sector.

This leaves out two categories

- Women who work in the informal sector (e.g. women in domestic work)
- Women who stay at home to ensure that the house is running smoothly

While previously dismissed as “chores” or “housework”, now it is recognised as unpaid care work.

Unpaid care work looks at the work undertaken by women who stay at home and its impact on the economy.

Because this work isn’t paid, it is literally not considered “work” by many including most academics and society in general. However, if every woman who undertook unpaid care work woke up tomorrow and decided not to do anything, the entire economy would collapse. This is because unpaid care work includes not just work such as cooking food and ironing clothes for children and spouses but also looking after children and the aged and performing many tasks that are considered “menial” but are essential for the day-to-day functioning of everyone, and therefore impacts the economy. Without unpaid care work, the smallest unit of society, the family, cannot function and the working population cannot go to work, which impacts society, and nations as a whole.

How is this related to Economics?

Although it isn’t valued in terms of money, some estimates suggest that care work contributes between 10-39% of a country’s GDP. Care work prevents women from entering the formal workforce, which in turn hinders the economy of a country because a sizable portion of the population who could be working in the formal sector and earning an income is performing care work instead. UN data has shown that in South Asia, women perform three times the amount of housework as men and globally the number is 2.3%.

How does this impact Women?

Women who are unable to enter the workforce and earn money face several issues such as poverty, lack of autonomy and independence, a lack of savings, and several other financial issues. This can leave women vulnerable to domestic violence, a lack of access to essential services, and many other interconnected issues that leave them disempowered. Further, their talents and capabilities are hidden behind the care work that they perform on a daily basis.

Unpaid care work also impacts women who enter the formal workforce. As those in the formal workforce also end up being forced to perform unpaid care work, employers are prejudiced against the hiring of women, (deciding on salaries, etc.) Further, even women who work in equitable workplaces are fettered by childcare and other responsibilities such as having to pick up children from school or daycare and going home and doing house chores.

How can the situation be improved?

The burden on women can be reduced by valuing unpaid care work through monetary compensation for women, including it in employment statistics and policy decisions. Attitudinal changes in society where women and men share in caregiving will also go a long way in improving the situation.

It is also worth noting that unpaid care work often replaces essential services and infrastructure that should be in place - affordable child care or creches at work, quality aged care services, etc. - most of which should be provided by the government. Men and women should also get equal maternity and paternity leave to ensure that women aren’t seen as the sole caregivers of children.



WERC at work

Training for CSOs

WERC initiated the project raising feminist consciousness among civil society organisations in the country in order to sensitise finance, administrative and program staff of Civil Society Organisations in the Central and Northern provinces of Sri Lanka.

As part of the project, WERC successfully conducted a two-day session for CSOs in the Central Province in Kandy on July 14 and 15, 2023.

This program brought together the administrative, finance, and program staff of each CSO to help understand and initiate collaborative approaches to program implementation in their respective organisations and to help them implement programs in a more gender-sensitive manner.

This initiative was funded by Diakonia Asia.



Strengthening Women Leaders



The project Strengthening Cohesive Action by Women Leaders of the Mullaitivu District, Northern Province, aims to enhance the quality of life of women in Mullaitivu and strengthen their voices through more significant cohesive action by the female leaders of the Mullaitivu District as well as strengthening the network of women leaders in the Mullaitivu District to address issues that concern women in the area.

Pictured here is a workshop held under the project in Puthukkudiyiruppu from June 6th to 10th this year. The workshop provided an understanding of gender concepts and ideology for female government officers and political leaders from Puthukkudiyiruppu and Maruththiyanpattru and assisted them to understand and integrate the concept of Women, Peace and Security into their work plans. This project is funded by Bread for the World.

Preventing Violence by Training Youth

The project Prevention of Violence Against Women through Stage Performances was initiated to raise awareness among Sri Lanka's youth regarding the prevention of violence against women using the tool of forum theatre. This project is implemented by training youth groups in four provinces (the Western Province, Uva Province, Northern Province, and Central Province) on the prevention of gender-based violence using newspaper theatre as a tool for raising awareness to prevent violence against women.

Pictured here is the youth group from the Central Province trained under the project, who conducted the first plantation sector performance at Ramboda Hindu College on July 2, 2023. This was followed by a fruitful discussion with all the participants, where school students and parents shared their thoughts. This project was funded by the Embassy of the Netherlands.



Uniting to Prevent GBV

Funded by Aus-Aid, the project Strengthening the Role of Women Leaders in Promoting Peace and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka aims to increase understanding, knowledge capacity, confidence, and strength among women at various levels by increasing their leadership and participation in dialogues at various levels in the districts of Killinochichi, Batticaloa, and Badulla.

This project focuses on several areas such as an increased understanding of the constraints faced by women leaders when relating to peace and reconciliation processes, thereby increasing the knowledge of women leaders on advancing WPS agenda.

Trainers trained under this project actively engaged with the community during our GBV awareness campaign at the Batticaloa Market by facilitating group discussions, conducting seminars, organising walks, and collecting written feedback from the community. These initiatives aimed to foster participatory and inclusive approaches, taking into account the local context and establishing a gender equality network throughout the entire campaign. By involving all community stakeholders, we seek to unite them for the struggle against GBV.



Understanding the Nexus Between Language and Gender



The project aimed to empower the National Languages Equality Advancement Project (NLEAP) language clusters to consider and include the nexus of gender and language rights in their activism.

The second and final day of the Central province sessions on Gender Equality and Women Empowerment for the NLEAP language clusters concluded on April 19

This project aims to empower the NLEAP language clusters to consider the intersection of gender and language rights in their activities.

Captured here are some scenes from the Tamil session in Kandy conducted by Lawyer Mangala Shankar which was held for language clusters across the Central Province.

Promoting Home Gardening as a Lifeline

Home gardening is such a pivotal activity for communities in Sri Lanka, especially at this time, as it supports the most vulnerable families to have their own homegrown vegetables, provides household food security, and tackles hunger during an economic crisis. Therefore, several crops were given to women in Mullaitivu under this project such as tomatoes, long beans, coconut etc. in the form of both seeds and seedlings with the required knowledge and tools.

The aim of this project was to help women in the district of Mullaitivu by offering them a sustainable solution to food security and livelihoods. This sub-project was funded by Women's Fund Asia under their Crisis Fund.



Redefining faith through Feminism

Under the Diakonia-funded project “Raising Feminist Consciousness Amongst Administrative Staff of CSOs”, the WERC team allocated a space for the creation of greater awareness on gender among religious institutions.

This activity was divided into two sections

Conducting a comprehensive gender training program with 30 students of theology from the Theological College of Lanka (TCL), Pilimalalawa, and additional introductory sessions for 12 first-year students of the TCL

Organising an interfaith dialogue involving the TCL students and religious leaders from the Kandy District to increase their understanding of the challenges and modes of pursuing dialogue with leaders of other faiths and to undertake collaborative action for social change.



Each session of the gender training included gender ideology, cultural and religious practices (that cause gender discrimination), and an understanding of sexuality. The interfaith dialogue focused on strategies to enhance networking with other religious leaders.

The sessions constantly encouraged students to question and revisit religious precepts through a feminist lens. WERC has received and continues to receive positive feedback and requests for more training sessions of this nature. There was an eagerness among the students to learn more about the practical approaches and strategies that would enable them to have successful dialogues with leaders of other faiths. The feedback WERC received also indicated that the sessions increased the students' understanding regarding other faiths and taught them ways in which to overcome the challenges they faced in this area of their ministry.



The Women's Education and Research Centre is happy to be able to implement this project because it aligns strongly with several organisational principles of WERC such as harmony among different races and religions and advocating for meaningful change in all spheres of society through transformative and collaborative dialogue and discussion that helps enact sustainable and meaningful change. WERC is confident that this project can have a deep and long-lasting impact across the country while promoting renowned feminist principles such as the United Nations concept of Women, Peace, and Security.



News and Events

WERC at the "Say No Together" campaign



WERC conducted an awareness session on workplace harassment and the importance of ratifying the ILO C190 Convention in Sri Lanka at the "Say No Together" exhibition held to commemorate the 16 days of activism against Gender-Based Violence last year.

During the session, WERC used tools such as questionnaires and awareness videos to educate participants about the nature of workplace harassment in Sri Lanka, the harms caused by it, common misconceptions, and action that can be taken.

Pictured here is WERC Project Coordinator Vishmee Warnachapa explaining to News First Sri Lanka what the session was about and the importance of ratifying the ILO C190 Convention in Sri Lanka. This session was based on WERC's project on the C190 Convention in partnership with USAID.

The Nexus between Language and Gender Rights



Our Executive Director Ms Shiranee Mills explained how the Women's Education and Research Centre trained language clusters in Gender and Women's Empowerment under the National Languages Equality Advancement Project (NLEAP) symposium in May.

The language clusters had already been working for years to further language rights by teaching the link language (Sinhala for Tamil students and Tamil for Sinhala students) and understanding language rights to identify violations and raise awareness in their areas.

Participants, including trainers of the clusters who were trained on language rights, also received gender sensitization training and were taught to explore the nexus between Gender Equality.

Theatre Performance on Violence Against Women



The first forum theatre performance of the Western Province under the project Prevention of Violence Against Women supported by the Embassy of the Netherlands in Sri Lanka and the Maldives was held successfully on April 28th, 2023, at St. Paul's Church in Milagiriya.

This was followed by a discussion between the audience and the performers on the importance of addressing issues of gender-based violence and the youth's role in preventing it.

Captured in this image is a scene from the performance, which depicts the subjugation of women and the horror of violence against women.

Standing Tall in Netball



Recently retired Tharjini Sivalingam will enter the annals of history as one of Sri Lanka's best netball players. At 6ft 9in, she is the world's tallest netball player but is known for more than her height - her sports achievements are equally legendary.

Tharjini was born in Jaffna and recalls a time when she was bullied for her height and was also affected by the war in Sri Lanka. None of these deterred her and she started playing for Sri Lanka in 2009, the year the war in Sri Lanka ended. She told local media that her netball career started late due to the war in Sri Lanka and was able to start only when she joined the Eastern University in Batticaloa to study Economics. She was spotted by a Sri Lanka netball coach when she took part in a university tournament.

Following the completion of her degree, she worked at Seylan Bank and participated in National Pool Practices.

She was soon recognized as one of the most successful shooters ever. Local media reports that despite Sri Lanka's first-round exit in the 2011 World Championship, her impressive performance saw her score 290 goals during the tournament and that she "shone through to be crowned the best shooter in 2011".

Since then, she has participated in many international matches, including Netball World Cups and Asian Netball Championships. She made her 100th international appearance for Sri Lanka during the 2019 Netball World Cup and became the first Sri Lankan to do so. She is also the most longstanding player to have been a part of the Sri Lankan netball team.

Although she has retired from international netball, Tharjini hopes to play netball at the club level in Australia where she resides. She spoke of the challenges she faced playing for Sri Lanka while living in Australia, commenting that she faced difficulties due to the limited practice time she had with the Sri Lankan team.

As she embarks on a new chapter of her life in Australia, Tharjini states that she will never forget her roots.

"Although I say goodbye to international netball, I will never forget Sri Lanka. Representing Sri Lanka is the reason I'm a world-renowned Netball player," she told local media upon her retirement.



Image credit: local media

Microfinance Chaos



Microfinance is seen as an alternative for individuals who don't have access to formal lending from other sources such as banks. People who promote it state that it's a way to help alleviate poverty and help small businesses grow. However, this seems far from the case in Sri Lanka.

Most Sri Lankans are aware of the predatory lending practices of microfinance companies and how they started becoming infamous in the North and East of Sri Lanka in 2009 following the end of the war. With so many female-headed households due to the deaths of so many men in the North and East, many families were struggling to make ends meet. Microfinance companies swooped in and offered an easy fix - loans that were accessible to them and could be paid off on "easy terms". However, due to the lack of financial literacy of these borrowers who came from vulnerable communities, little did they realise that the terms were far from easy - instead, it was a lifetime trap for most.

Unethical or Downright Illegal?

Microfinance is intended to be given for people who want to start small businesses or develop their existing businesses. Ideally, the lender keeps tabs on the business and ensures that it is successful and even offers additional training for borrowers so that they learn the essential skills needed to develop their business - this is why defenders of microfinance feel that it is an acceptable practice (higher interest for loans that are accessible to those who cannot access loans any other way, plus added benefits). The merits of this ideal system are debatable. Even worse, what takes place in Sri Lanka is a gross violation of human rights which bears no resemblance to this ideal situation that is supposedly accepted practice. For example, many microfinance companies are unregulated. This means that there is nowhere that borrowers can complain except by initiating expensive or unaffordable legal proceedings, which means the companies can get away with unethical practices with little that the borrower can do.

It starts at the stage of the contract. "Sign here, here, and here" the lender will say and the borrower, eager to get the money for the television or new washing machine the microfinance company promoted to them, will sign. It is worth noting that many of these people have little to no legal literacy. When the contract is in English it is not understood by most borrowers, and therefore at best the terms are explained in their native language - Sinhala or Tamil. Borrowers say that they are not provided with a copy of the contract - not even the English version. Lawyers who have represented borrowers say that the terms their client says were explained to them were not the terms that were actually on the contract, which has much harsher terms. It's also unlikely that the borrowers realise that the interest rates can be higher than 100% - with some sources claiming that it can be as high as 220%.

Then comes the repayment. Weekly or monthly. Proof of repayment is printed on the same machine used to issue bus tickets - touch it a few times or leave it a few weeks and it will fade away, and with it any proof of repayment. When investigated, it has been found that some people have been paying microfinance companies even after their debt has been repaid. Should a borrower not be able to repay their debt, debt collectors (almost always men) will intimidate their lenders (who are predominantly women) by sitting for hours at the front of their house or even following them to their children's schools.

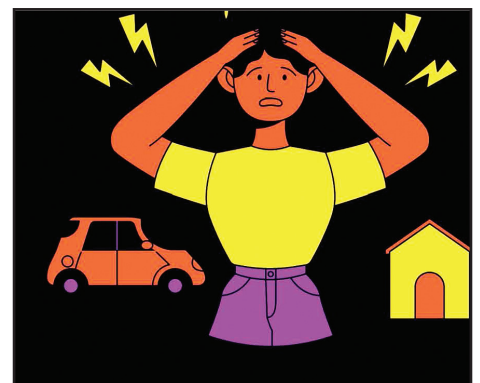
Caught in a Trap

By this point, the borrowers have nothing left to do but borrow more to pay off existing debt. It is common for borrowers to not know how much they have borrowed. They also often end up losing what little assets they do have, be it gold or properties that they put up as collateral on their loans.

Debt collectors are harsh and unrelenting - they threaten and intimidate women and are often reported to demand sexual bribes from desperate women.. This has led to a spate of suicides and a disturbing phenomenon of entire families committing suicide.

What's the Solution?

Microfinance companies need to be regulated and marginalised communities need to be educated so that they have the financial and legal literacy required to escape these debt traps. For existing borrowers, they need solutions that do not victimise them further. After all, if a country can default on loans, why are individuals who default from loans paying with their lives?



Hidden Figures

IWD movie screening



In alignment with this year's International Women's Day Theme, "DigitALL: Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality," a movie discussion forum was conducted by WERC, supported by Women's Fund Asia.

The movie "Hidden Figures" depicts the incredible untold story of three brilliant women in NASA during the time of the space race.

The participants engaged in a post-movie discussion that reflects the obstacles and challenges in the field of the digital world.

Movie Review: Hidden Figures



Katherine Goble Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson. Three women who worked as mathematicians at NASA during the space race and shattered glass ceilings by working diligently, and gracefully walking the tightrope between complying enough to work at NASA but also speaking up when needed, they teach us all that there isn't one right way to be a feminist.

Based on a true story, all three of them play an integral role in American astronaut John Glenn's launch into orbit, while also paving the way for other women.

However, being both female and African American, they were doubly disadvantaged at a time when race was still a big issue in the United States of America.

Hidden Figures explores intersectionality through the marginalisation of these women by Caucasian women, who seemingly have an easier time at NASA and do not want to align themselves with African American Women and their issues. This is in stark contrast to what Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary do - they make it a point to lift each other up and ensure that success for one of them is success for all of them.

As noted by other critics, the quiet dignity of these three women is in stark contrast with what many consider activism to be. For example, when Mary petitions the court to attend night classes at a segregated school so that she can qualify and enter university, she's told by her husband that "you can't apply for freedom. . . . It's got to be demanded, taken". However, apply she does - representing herself and respectfully stating her case. She wins!

The key takeaway from "Hidden Figures" is not that the activism of women should differ from the activism of men, nor that activism takes any particular style. Rather, this inspiring movie teaches us that we can be an activist in more ways than one.

Hidden Figures is more than just the untold story of three women without whom John Glenn would not have made it into space - it's about having courage and conviction in the face of systems of oppression and ensuring that personal progress does not leave others behind.



A scene from the movie. Picture courtesy Pug

Women's Studies Course



The Women's Education and Research Centre signed a memorandum of understanding with Jaffna University to collaborate and conduct WERC's Women's Studies Course in Jaffna.

The Women's Studies Course is also being held in Colombo at WERC premises. Both courses cover a range of topics such as women's rights, women in law, gender-sensitive workplace practices, women in international law, and Sri Lanka's obligations in terms of international law.

The course in the Jaffna University is a full course offered in Tamil and is suited for university students and NGO workers, while the course in Colombo is a short course in English which is more suited for working professionals. The lectures are conducted by experts in their field.

Conducted by various experts such as lawyers, media personnel, police officers, etc., in different subjects. The course ends with the successfully completed coursework and the issuing of certificates for participants. The Women's Education and Research Centre's Women's Studies Course has been held since 2013 in all 3 languages and has been one of WERC's landmark projects since its inception. Commenting on the course, the Executive Director of WERC Ms. Shiranee Mills explained that the Women's Studies Course would help students understand their various fields of study and work through a gender lens.

"This course has been an integral part of the Women's Education and Research Centre since 2013 reaching out to numerous professionals, many of whom have voiced their appreciation of the course acknowledging that it gave them a deeper understanding of gender and the need to mainstream gender in the work they do," she stated, adding that she hopes that the course will help students improve their places of work and study to be more gender-sensitive.

A Lesson in Vocabulary

1. Emotional Labour - the unpaid, unnoticed labour that goes into keeping those around you happy such as smoothing out conflicts etc.

2. Gender role - a social role encompassing a range of behaviours and attitudes that are generally considered acceptable, appropriate, or desirable for a person based on that person's sex

3. Obstetric Violence - Violence against women while giving birth such as refusing to provide adequate information, making decisions on behalf of the patient etc.

4. Intersectionality - Considering the different needs of different women instead of grouping women together as one

Liberation

Still I Rise

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame, I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain, I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.



Leaving behind nights of terror and fear, I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear, I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.

- Maya Angelou -

The Grass is Really Like Me

The grass is also like me
it has to unfurl underfoot to fulfil itself
but what does its wetness manifest:
a scorching sense of shame
or the heat of emotion?

The grass is also like me
As soon as it can raise its head
the lawnmower
obsessed with flattening it into velvet,
mows it down again.

How you strive and endeavour
to level woman down too!

But neither the earth's nor woman's
desire to manifest life dies.

Take my advice: the idea of making a footpath
was a good one.

Those who cannot bear the scorching defeat of
their courage

are grafted on to the earth.

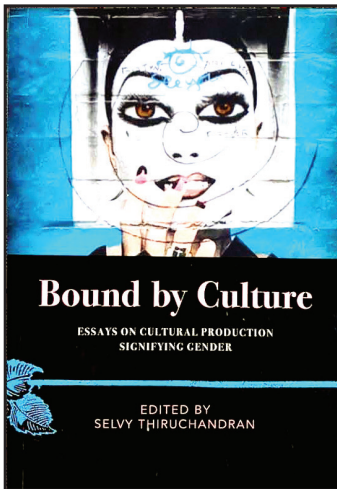
That's how they make way for the mighty
but they are merely straw not grass
—the grass is really like me.

- Kishwar Naheed -



A glimpse at our collection

Bound by Culture

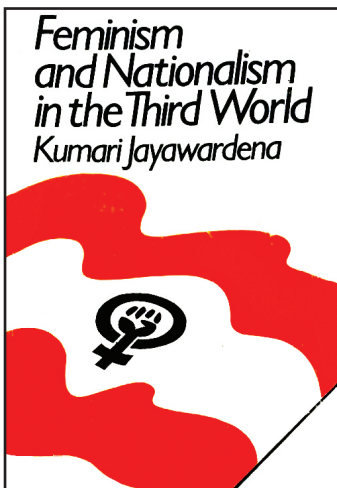


South Asian feminism emerged in response to and as a fight for equality against patriarchal nation-states, and it is female self-expression rooted in culture that is largely responsible for building cross-border solidarities and conversations among women in the region.

Bound by Culture presents the varied ways in which women from India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh produce and reproduce culture to shine a spotlight on their lived realities. The essays in this volume cover a wide range of cultural productions, exploring art, literature, fairy tales, folklore, street culture, films, theatre, and spoken word poetry through the prism of gender, particularly how feminist portrayals have been subverted into stereotypes in prevalent pop culture.

Available at the WERC library for Rs. 1500/-

Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World



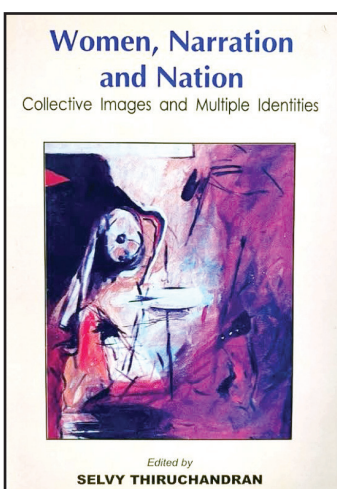
In this book, Kumari Jayawardene reconstructs the little known history of the political struggles of women launched in Asia and the Middle East from the 19th century onwards. She gives a detailed account of the Women's Movements in Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Korea, Japan, China, Egypt, Turkey and Iran.

She challenges the notion that feminism is a foreign ideology imposed on Third World countries and distinguishes between the growth of feminism, the movements for women's emancipation and women's participation in wider national and revolutionary struggles which have taken place.

Available at the WERC library in Sinhala, Tamil and English

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Women, Narration and Nation



This book makes an attempt to capture both the structural and emotional disturbances that affect women and children during times of war. Female-headed households in Sri Lanka emerged as a social phenomena in substantial numbers only after the two youth uprisings, one in the south and the other in the north, one among the Sinhalese and the other among the Tamils. Men went to war and died violently leaving the women and children to face their lives amidst uncertainty, insecurity and terror.

While undertaking a sociological inquiry into the lives of women and children, a political focus which is inevitable, enters the scene of the research. The role of the state, or rather the complicity of the state in creating coercive patterns of governance, also becomes visible in the process as a side-line. The women's narratives reveal a subjectivity which determines eventually the core theme of the research.

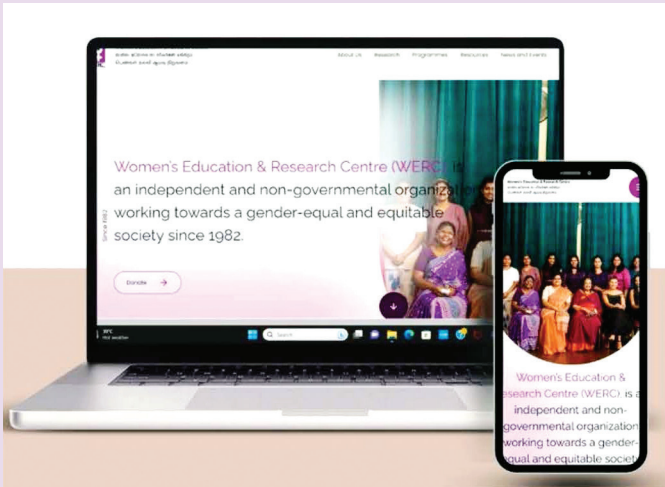
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WERC

Our Facilities

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Our Library



Founded in 1982, the WERC library began as a small collection of books which has now risen to over 7000 publications which contain a mix of our own publications and other publications of importance to Sri Lanka, and other publications of significance in the history of Sri Lankan feminism, the status of women in Sri Lanka and important international titles related to women.

Along with this, WERC also began to collect newspaper clippings on 16 areas including violence against women, women and crime, women and economy, etc.

The library is open to the public and in particular, welcomes university students and researchers who are interested in feminism and related topics.

The WERC library is open on all working days from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

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