

Policy Brief on
**Inclusion of women with and without disabilities in
Sri Lanka's reconciliation and development processes**

CONTEXT

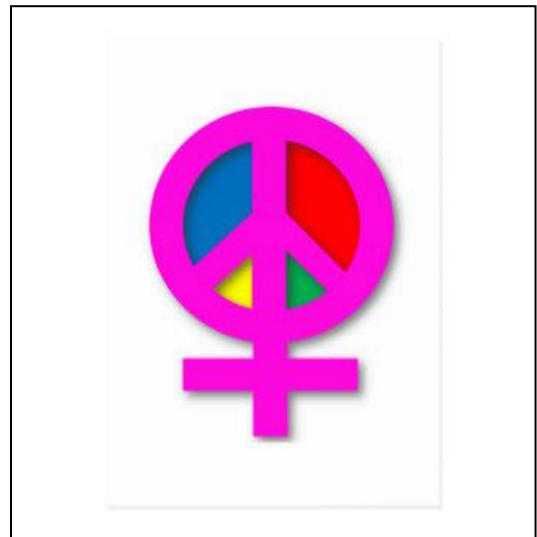
In 2016 the female population in Sri Lanka was reported at 10,938,000 (Department of Census and Statistics) representing 52% of the total population. UNESCAP (2006) reports that in Sri Lanka the proportion of persons with disability was 7% of the total population; and the Sri Lankan survey on National Blindness, Visual Impairment, Ocular Morbidity and Disability (2014) reports that prevalence of disability is 'significantly higher in females than in males' (especially in lower socio-economic strata and among rural districts), while there were no reported differences by ethnicity. Within this context;

The Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission Report recommended (9.100) that necessary **national legislation be put in place to realize the rights of persons with disabilities** in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Such action would have a positive impact, including obtaining international assistance, on matters affecting a largenumebr of disabled persons, especially in the conflict affected areas, AND that (9.104/h) Post-conflict development and reconciliation efforts and their implementation must take into account the **gender balance and rights of women** as well as relevant provisions of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women peace and security.

And, the Women's Charter (approved by the government of Sri Lanka) article 15 affirms that the state shall (i) work towards the elimination of negative social attitudes towards widows, divorcees, single parents, single women and any vulnerable groups of women (ii) take all steps to ensure that such women do not suffer social and economic discrimination; and (iii) take **positive action to ensure their participation in the mainstream of society;**

And the Sri Lanka National Disability Policy of 2003 highlights (p 23) that women who have disability are subject to marked discrimination. With a total employment rate of 16% among people who have disability, gender-wise it stands at 22% for men and 8%

for women and that Females encounter a greater degree of negative attitudes. Families tend to protect their female members who have disability from a society which rejects and stigmatizes them. As well as social abuse, females need also to be protected against sexual abuse. Families and authorities who for one reason or another are responsible for the well-being of females with disability tend to "protect" them from the male sex. The protection quite easily leads to over-protection, and some times to what some may consider even to be oppression. As **women who have disability say, "We have no opportunities for education, no chance of doing a job and no prospects of marriage. So what is our future?"**



Evidence from our qualitative study conducted in the districts of Kilinochchi and Kandy demonstrate that:

Women with and without disabilities have opportunities for inclusion in development processes at their village level only if they are members of a community based organization, while women with disabilities are often not members of mainstream community based organizations such as women's rural development societies, except if inclusion is facilitated by an external non-governmental agency.

Women with disabilities have membership in disabled peoples organizations but have limitations to decision making opportunities or give direction to the activities of the DPO as evidence shows that women with disabilities rarely/do not get elected as President in DPOs; and further divisional based social services officers oftentimes act as the decision making authority for the DPO.

Women with and without disabilities have only been included in dialogue forums on reconciliation and transitional justice, if they are affiliated to a civil society organization/ non-governmental organization which has acted as a facilitator in linking grassroots women with and without disabilities to any government led initiatives to hold consultations.

Women with disabilities from low income households, did not have the right information about social protection programs entitled to them and often the information and types of social protection schemes assigned to them are determined (often arbitrarily) by the respective social services officer.

Economic empowerment through livelihood training programs for women with and without disabilities from low income households are rolled out by respective Divisional Secretariat Divisions. But women with disabilities face challenges in accessing the training programs because of barriers to transportation, distance and training language/methods. Further, the categories of livelihood training programs are conventional, such as sewing, candle making, envelop making, bag/handicraft making and therefore do not facilitate market oriented business opportunities.

Despite the adoption of National Action Plans on Disability (instrument to implement the Disability Policy), on Women, on Sexual and Gender Based Violence, and the role of the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms, what is learnt is that grassroots women with and without disabilities in Kandy and Kilinochchi continue to face discrimination, exploitation and deprivations.

Based on the findings we propose the following

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a vital cadre of grassroots officers in Sri Lanka's civil administrative outreach. However, national level decisions on new policies and actions plans are not effectively communicated to this cadre and related knowledge enhancement and capacity building are not transferred in a timely manner. This gap between policy and practitioner creates a barrier in ensuring that the policy delivers the mandated improvement to the people. Therefore, **we recommend that new policy design is accompanied with an annual implementation plan which includes activities and indicators to monitor implementation of the said policy; and subsequent annual implementation plans to be drawn up by the relevant stakeholders.**

Government facilitated community based organizations such as women's rural development societies (WRDS), rural development societies (RDS) and disabled people's organizations (DPO) are seen to create further exclusion of persons and women with disabilities by assigning their membership to DPOs. **We recommend that a circular issued by the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Rehabilitation stipulate that women with disabilities are included into the membership in women's rural development societies and give equal access to credit programs and livelihood/economic empowerment interventions carried out by WRDS**

An absence of efficient coordination among government stakeholders results in women with disabilities not being able to access and enjoy economic opportunities available to mainstream women. Therefore, **we recommend a strong collaboration between the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Ministry of Social Empowerment and Welfare and the Ministry of Economic Development (and other livelihood skills development authorities) to ensure that women with disabilities have access to mainstream livelihood development initiatives and credit programs.**

Women's experiences from the war are different to that of men's experiences, and majority of disability among women in Kilinochchi are a direct impact of the war. **We urge the adoption of a Sri Lanka action plan to implement UN Security Council resolution 1325 to ensure that women's grievances related to the war are given prominent redress and that women with and without disabilities from all geographical districts in Sri Lanka are included in consultations related to reconciliation and transitional justice.**

Sri Lanka has witnessed concentrated efforts at formulating National Action Plans to translate policy into action. However, evidence from the grassroots indicate that action plans are not implemented and this includes National Action Plans on Disability and Women, in line with the focus of our study. **We urge that (i) A National Commission for Women and a Disability Rights Commission are established (ii) CSO and government stakeholders coordination and implementation mechanisms are established to follow up with action plans (iii) independent monitoring committees (with CSO members, commission representatives and government focal Ministry representatives) are established to monitor violations of women's rights and rights of persons with disabilities.**

