

**Thank you. I present this statement on behalf of the Women's Action Network (WAN) from Sri Lanka.**

During the previous UPR cycle, Sri Lanka received 11 recommendations on preventing and eliminating violence against women, 6 recommendations to ensure equality of men and women in the law, and 5 recommendations on the right to dissent and protection of civil society space.

First, some welcome news. In March 2022, the Sri Lankan government amended the 1935 Land Development Ordinance to permit both male and female children to inherit state land. However, women impacted have yet to see any implementation of this vital reform.

Violence against women is at disturbing levels. A 2021 UNFPA survey found that 20.5 percent of women in Sri Lanka have experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime. In 2021, the National Commission on Women received 3 times more domestic violence calls than in previous years. Since the COVID pandemic and this year's economic crisis, WAN has recorded further increases in domestic and sexual violence and curtailed mobility and resources for women's groups providing victims with protection, legal-aid and other services. The government's budget has cut essential services such as support services and safehouses.

Access to justice is shrinking, including police not even recording women's complaints. Victims have been unable to obtain protection orders or file claims against their abusers.

Women seeking government help -- including from police, the judiciary, health sector, and educational institutions -- are often subjected to sexual bribery. These acts are not punished nor even criminalised in the Bribery Act.

Especially in Sri Lanka's north and east, civil society faces continuous state surveillance and intimidation that derail our response to victims' needs.

Women are victims of increasing Government repression of unarmed students and other activists. Women are commonly physically assaulted during protests and while in police custody. Female officers who come to victims' defense are also assaulted. The Prevention of Terrorism Act and new De-radicalization and Rehabilitation Bureau Bills further repress dissent. Women are themselves arbitrarily arrested and suffer sexual bribery and economic harm when male family members are targeted.

Gendered hate speech vilifies women in social media and complaint mechanisms are unresponsive. Female public figures and women rights activists are particularly targeted.

No law exists in Sri Lanka prohibiting discrimination in employment based on gender.

The government is pushing women to seek employment abroad to remit much needed foreign currency and has removed safeguards, including lowering the age of migrant workers.

Horrendous stories of SL young women trafficked for sex trade in Oman hit the media this month and about 90 of them are still trapped in shelters and some complaint they are further abused by Sri Lankan embassy officials. Sri Lanka has no bilateral contracts with receiving countries and women are exploited without redress.

Trafficking inside Sri Lanka has increased. Women trafficked from rural areas into urban centers are forced to engage in sex or other forms of labour. Young women and girls in Sri Lanka are increasingly employed in the commercial sex industry, including child sex tourism.

Free trade zones and tea plantations are other major sectors where women are subjected to poor labour conditions and wages. There is no compulsory minimum wage policy that incorporates the cost of living. Union busting is rampant. Sexual harassment is normalized.

The 1951 Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA) contains numerous discriminatory provisions. It is administered by 'Quazi' judges and only men are allowed in this position. There is no actual minimum age of marriage for Muslims. The Act fails to require women's consent for marriage, and allows unconditional polygamy, there is no mandatory requirement of registering marriages and unequal, gendered divorce terms.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting is still practiced by the Moor, Malay and Bohra communities although it is not criminalised and remains largely unrecognized and unaddressed.

#### **Our Recommendations:**

1. Increase the number of domestic and sexual violence shelters nationally, including specific shelters for forced marriage victims.
2. Ensure that SGBV victims have free and fair access to culturally appropriate, non-biased resources to address the crimes committed against them including justice and reparations. Implement mandatory training for officials receiving reports of gender-based violence.
3. Amend the Bribery Act to prohibit sexual bribery.
4. Stop surveillance of civil society organisations and state violence against protesters.
5. Repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act and release remaining prisoners arbitrarily detained under the PTA.
6. Hate speech laws should address gendered hate speech and establish a special mechanism to handle complaints swiftly.
7. Ratify ILO C190 and amend laws to prohibit workplace sexual harassment and gender-based employment discrimination.
8. Enforce existing labour laws including union laws and empower women to form their own unions.
9. Immediately repatriate SL women migrant workers who are trapped in sex trade.
10. Enforce the minimum wage for all workers, incorporating cost of living in free trade zones and tea plantations.
11. Reform the MMDA to comply with the Constitution's Fundamental Rights Chapter and bring the administration of justice of MMDA within the national judicial system.
12. Ban and criminalise FGM.