**WOMEN IN PEACE & SECURITY: A SRI LANKAN PERSPECTIVE (by Yumna Azeez)**

The common narrative concerning women and security is as follows:

Women are a vulnerable group of individuals who often, require protection. Society rarely views women as potential protectors or guardians. This narrative has been strongly highlighted during and after the Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009), but in truth, a different story unfolds. The story of how women were forced to become strong, independent breadwinners for their families, and protect their remaining loved ones in the absence of men while continuing to fulfil their traditional duties. This version of the story is seldom spoken of. An important lesson conflict has taught us is to not underestimate the capability of women. While it is true that on the one hand a woman is subject to exploitation and harassment and is vulnerable to social insecurity, on the other, she has the potential to transform herself in the face of adversity and to be so much more than a vulnerable individual.

This commentary sheds light on the involvement of women in the security sector, their contributions and the reason it is necessary to involve women in peacekeeping and law enforcement efforts in Sri Lanka.

**Women In The Military And Law Enforcement: Where We Stand**

It would be fitting to start by explaining Sri Lanka’s problem with women in power.

Sri Lanka’s first female Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of the Police was appointed nearly 70 years after women were first recruited to the force (Although the Sri Lanka Police was established as a formal institution in 1866, the recruitment of women to the Police Force began in 1952.) However, the celebration was short-lived. Six months later Jasin Arachchi was removed from her duties by a three-bench panel of the Supreme Court. The decision was the result of a fundamental rights petition filed by 33 male senior superintendents of police (SSPs) challenging her promotion by stating that the appointment violated the standard procedures followed in the promotion of senior police officers.[[1]](#endnote-1) The petitioners claimed that Jasin Arachchi’s appointment was irregular as the provisions that allow for the appointment of DIGs do not include the word “woman.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Jasin Arachchi’s removal is a clear example of the systemic discrimination set in place, underpinned by strong patriarchal notions embedded into the security sector. It comes as no surprise that the female cadre position had been created with the underlying motive of maintaining the balance of power in favour of men. Positions for women above the rank of Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) have still not been created by the male-dominated Police Force despite not doing so is a blatant violation of Article 12(2) of the Sri Lankan Constitution which stipulates that “No citizen shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, place of birth or any such ground.” Also, there seems to be no mandatory quota system that exists in the Sri Lankan military or Police for the enlistment of women.

Why is it that to reach the top, women must fight tooth and nail every time? Apart from fighting the discriminatory system many women, in the police as well as the armed forces, must prove their mettle to male bosses. Women feel they are forced to work twice as hard and be twice as good as men but with no guarantee of reward.

This is the grim reality of women in security in Sri Lanka.

The perfect soldier, globally, has always been made to be a man. In Sri Lanka, women are rarely given a ‘perfect soldier’ title despite many women serving on the frontlines. Countless female soldiers have sacrificed their lives when serving the motherland in one of the most prestigious women's battalions in the South Asian region,[[3]](#endnote-3) the Sri Lanka Army Women Corps (SLAWC). Though SLAWC has listed war heroines on their website,[[4]](#endnote-4) to what extent this information is shared with the public is unknown. Members of the Women’s Corps, both of combatant and non-combatant nature are not only considered brave soldiers, but also good wives and committed mothers who have set fine examples for society at large. While the Army allows married women to enlist, interestingly, the Sri Lanka Air Force Women’s Wing disallows married females to be eligible to be enlisted as Lady Officers/Airwomen.[[5]](#endnote-5) Women in the Sri Lankan Navy were first limited to the medical branch. Currently, female officers can join any branch of service.[[6]](#endnote-6)

When resorting to statistics, the percentage of the armed forces personnel by sex indicates a stark contrast with each other. According to available data for the year 2017, the male percentage in the army is 96.6%, compared to 3.4% for females. The Navy is no better concerning female representation. The male percentage is a strong 97.7% with only 2.3% of females to its name. The Air Force indicates a slightly better representation with 6.3% of women in its force alongside 93.7% of men.[[7]](#endnote-7) Police personnel and civil security personnel by sex should be taken into consideration as well. In 2017, against 89.8% of male police personnel, only 10.2% of women were present[[8]](#endnote-8) while 14.1% of the total number of women served as civil security personnel alongside 85.9% of males.[[9]](#endnote-9)

The statistics above indicate that females are less likely to be represented in the Tri-forces and tend to be more involved in civil security and policing. The numbers show that there is immense room for improvement in participation.

**Attempts to combine women and security in Sri Lanka**

In many conflict situations, it has been proved that women in the military aid in preventing and reducing sexual and gender-based violence against women and children in war, according to research and the UN.[[10]](#endnote-10) They have proved that they are ‘smarter and better’ and can make a significant difference in a conflict situation.

Sri Lanka continues to be a conservative nation, with cultural norms and traditional gender roles being deeply embedded in the fabric of Lankan society. Often, it works as a powerful force against women's empowerment. However, in recent years, attempts have been made to identify women’s meaningful inclusion and participation in peace processes through a ‘rights-based’ approach.

1. National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security - The Plan aims to respond to the needs and priorities of conflict-affected women. It stresses the importance of women’s equal participation in maintaining peace and security. The Plan takes into account the transformative potential of women in accelerating economic recovery after conflict and crises.[[11]](#endnote-11) Following the national-level validations, it was decided to be submitted for Cabinet approval in 2022. However, no follow-up on this matter occurred. It is interesting to note that the development of NAP is to be supported by Japan, as the Government of Japan pledged USD 2 million to implement the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Sri Lanka in 2019.[[12]](#endnote-12) The project focuses on supporting the economic empowerment of women by increasing participation in peacekeeping and conflict resolution efforts.
2. UN Security Council Resolution 2122 – This seeks to strengthen women’s role in all stages of conflict; conflict prevention, resolution, and recovery by encouraging the military and police in contributing countries to increase the percentage of women in military and police deployments to United Nations peacekeeping operations. In 2018, at an international seminar on ‘Increasing women in United Nations Peacekeeping,’ the need for a national policy in the Sri Lankan military to have a quota of 25% for women to train as peacekeepers to bring more foreign exchange to the country rather than sending women as domestic aides was highlighted.[[13]](#endnote-13)

It was interestingly pointed out that if the number of female contingents to the UN peacekeeping missions was increased, each peacekeeper would be paid $ 1,000 and other financial benefits. This would no doubt, lead to the improvement of the living conditions of their families.

1. UN Resolution on Women, Peace and Security (S/RES/1325) - The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction. It stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. The adoption was a landmark in the country’s efforts to recognize women's contribution in this regard. In 2017, on the 17th Anniversary of UN Resolution 1325, the need to combat the cultural, systemic and structural gender biases that prevent the inclusion of women in the peace and security agenda was emphasized. Attention was drawn to the added value of having women in these processes.[[14]](#endnote-14)
2. The war prompted many women to take on public roles in civic organizations. Many became grassroots peacemakers, actively involved in mediating violence and seeking peaceful solutions. To end the abuse of female internally displaced persons, in particular, women’s groups strongly advocated for the deployment of military and policewomen to provide security in and around IDP communities. [[15]](#endnote-15) The case was made that greater female participation could aid reconciliation, diversify the armed services, and strengthen law enforcement on violence against women. It was argued that empowering women to take the lead in the national reconciliation drive, peace-building efforts and political transformation, could prove the key to achieving peace.[[16]](#endnote-16) Fortunately, the advocacy efforts paid off in 2013, leading to 95 Tamil women joining the Sri Lanka Army – the largest such group to join at once.
3. The occurrence of Covid-19 and its recovery has also led to the discussion of women’s inclusion to be revisited. If Sri Lanka is to leverage its women's peace and security agenda for effective COVID-19 recovery, women must play an essential role in leadership as well. When women lead, participate, and benefit equally in all aspects of life; societies and economies will thrive, thereby contributing to sustainable development and peace.[[17]](#endnote-17)

**The Takeaway**

Men and women comprehend and experience conflict differently. Therefore, peace is understood differently as well. By increasing the number of female military and police personnel and peacekeepers, women will be empowered, a reduction in conflict and confrontation will likely follow and the support and security for local women and children will increase. It is unfortunate that by design, women have been excluded from sectors like security and politics. For example, women in Sri Lanka make up 56% of voters, but only 5% of legislators which paints a picture of how strongly the patriarchal system operates.[[18]](#endnote-18) A lacuna in specialized research and reforms relating to women and their involvement and contributions in the security sector exists. Though there has been discussion about involving more women in processes of peace and security, leadership and peacekeeping, effective change through legislative reform is yet to be seen.

It is time to amend the existing regulations on enlistment and promotions to facilitate men and women on a level playing field. The country should revise systems and structures that discriminate against women aspiring for power, not only in security but in the subnational and national government and the private sector as well. Most importantly, rather than solely designating a certain percentage for female participation it would be better to create a conducive environment for females to get involved in the security sector. Reported and unreported instances of sexual harassment in the security sector, sexism and discrimination deter women from joining. Thus, laws that spell out their rights and remedies should be firmly implemented.

1. Namini Wijedasa, Male dominance in Police Department robs women the chance of getting top positions (Sunday Times, 15 November 2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Lihini Ratwatte, Sri Lanka’s Problem with Women in Power (The Diplomat, 26 May 2021) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Manohari Katugampala, SLAWC Women on the Frontlines (https://www.defence.lk/Article/view\_article/4435) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Sri Lanka Army Womens Corps, War Heroines (<https://alt.army.lk/slawc/war_heroines>) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Sri Lanka Air Force, Women’s Wing (https://airforce.lk/pages.php?pages=womens\_wing) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Sri Lanka Navy, (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri\_Lanka\_Navy) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Department of Census & Statistics, Percent of armed forces personnel by designation and sex 2017 (<http://www.statistics.gov.lk/GenderStatistics/StaticalInformation/WomenEmpowerment/Percentofarmedforcespersonnelbydesignationandsex2017>) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Department of Census & Statistics, Police personnel by designation and sex 2017 (<http://www.statistics.gov.lk/GenderStatistics/StaticalInformation/WomenEmpowerment/Policepersonnelbydesignationandsex2017>) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Department of Census & Statistics, Civil Security personnel by designation and sex 2017 (<http://www.statistics.gov.lk/GenderStatistics/StaticalInformation/WomenEmpowerment/CivilSecuritypersonnelbydesignationandsex2017>) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. United Nations Peacekeeping, Women in Peacekeeping (https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/women-peacekeeping) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Validations begin for National Action Plan on Women, Peace & Security (Daily News, 26 November 2021) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Zainab Hassen, Government of Japan pledges USD 2 million to implement the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Sri Lanka (UN Women; Asia and the Pacific, 18 September 2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Shanika Sriyananda, Sri Lanka ready to send more female ‘Blue Berets’ (Daily Ft, 29 March 2018) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. A Discussion on Increasing Women in Peacekeeping, on the occasion of the UN Security 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the United Nations, 31 October 2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. What the Women Say - Elusive Peace, Pervasive Violence: Sri Lankan Women’s Struggle for Security and Justice (International Civil Society Action Network, Brief 8, Spring 2013) [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Government of Sri Lanka, The Role of Women in Peacebuilding: a Sri Lankan Perspective

    (<https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/role-women-peace-building-sri-lankan-perspective>) [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Lihini Ratwatte, Why Sri Lanka should leverage the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in its COVID-19 recover (LSE Women, Peace and Security, 25 November 2021) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Bansari Kamdar, Women in Sri Lanka Make up 56% of Voters, But Only 5% of Legislators - Money, pedigree, sexism and social norms keep Sri Lanka’s largest electorate – the country’s women – out of politics. (The Diplomat, 25 September 2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)