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Paving the Way for Action: Women's Rights Organizations' Contribute to the Strategic Action Plan of the Sri Lanka National Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy

A significant milestone was reached on July 29, 2023, as the "Contributions from Women's Rights Organizations to the Strategic Action Plan of the Sri Lanka National Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy" was submitted to the Ministry of Women, Child Affairs, and Social Development. This submission represented the collective effort of partner Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) involved in the Women's Voice and Leadership Sri Lanka (WVL-SL) project, who generously contributed their valuable insights and perspectives. The recommendations in the report, reflecting the collective effort and dedication of the contributing WROs, aimed to strengthen the implementation and impact of the National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, Sri Lanka. The depth of information in the report underscores the importance of fostering partnerships between WRO's and governmental bodies to formulate (and later implement) targeted actions to fulfill the objectives outlined in the national policy document. WROs expect that the recommendations will be incorporated into the strategic action plan of the national policy.

This will be a significant step in advancing gender equality and empowering women and marginalized communities across Sri Lanka.

The document was officially handed over to Ms. Yamuna Perera, Secretary of the Ministry of Women, Child Affairs, and Social Empowerment by Aneesa Firthous, President of the Islamic Women Association for Research and Empowerment, which focuses on empowering Muslim women in Kattankudy, Batticaloa district; Sivalingam Chandramthi, Coordinating Secretary of Social Welfare Mandram, empowering women from plantation communities in Amebgamuwa, Nuwara Eliya district; and Champika Dayani, President of Gampola Udapalatha Prajashakthi Development Foundation, which provides economic empowerment to rural women in Doluwa and Udapalatha, Kandy district. The report was compiled in English and carried the original submissions in Sinhala and Tamil languages as annexes to the main report.



Handing over the "Contributions from Women's Rights Organizations to the Strategic Action Plan of Sri Lanka National Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy" by the Women's Voice and Leadership Sri Lanka project partners to the Ministry of Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment (21 July, 2023)

Compiling the Strategic Action Plan Recommendations

On May 9th and 10th, 2023, the WVL-SL project (funded by Global Affairs Canada and implemented by The Asia Foundation, aimed at strengthening the capacities and the activities of women-led women's rights organizations and movements in Sri Lanka), facilitated a workshop titled "Contributing to the Strategic Action Plan of the Sri Lanka National Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy". The workshop, conducted in both Sinhala and Tamil languages, brought together 42 participants representing 34 WROs from across the country to facilitate discussions on the government's policy commitments set out in the national policy and brainstorm recommendations for the strategic action plan of the national policy to submit to the Ministry of Women, Child Affairs, and Social Empowerment. The workshop was aligned with the WVL-SL project objectives of enhancing WRO's advocacy capacities and providing opportunities to foster networking and collaboration among WROs.

The workshop follows a discussion organized by WVL-SL on the 'National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment' for over 50 WROs (partner WROs as well as others), on the 20th of February 2023, which facilitated a discussion on important issues concerning gender equality and women's empowerment in Sri Lanka, and also served as a platform to gather feedback and input from WROs on the draft policy.

The national policy is the first of its kind developed by the Ministry of Women, Child Affairs and Social development. The policy's primary aim is to promote substantive equality by focusing on non-discrimination, ensuring equal opportunities, access to opportunities, benefits, and outcomes, and facilitating equal power distribution. This will strengthen women's agency and contribute to achieving a just society. The policy has since been passed

and is regarded as a successful advocacy effort for WROs across Sri Lanka. The policy itself is an important tool for WROs to hold the Government of Sri Lanka accountable for its commitments to advance gender equality and women's empowerment, and to contribute to the Government's efforts on implementing the national policy.

With the policy now passed, it is imperative to identify strategic and timely measures to address the common themes outlined in the national policy. Recognizing this, WVL-SL created an opportunity for WRO's to give their direct inputs, leveraging their wealth of information, expertise, practical approaches, and strategies cultivated through decades of representing diverse groups of women, girls, and gender and sexual minorities in various contexts.

During the workshop, partner organizations participated in a series of group discussions under each theme presented in the national policy, proposing potential actions to be undertaken that aligned with the corresponding thematic areas. At the end of the two days, a report with all proposed actions was compiled and presented to Linda Ehrichs, Counsellor (Development) and Head of Cooperation from the High Commission of Canada.

Overview of the Proposed Actions

Theme 1: Identity and autonomy

The action plan recommended by WROs focuses on recognizing women's identity and autonomy as fundamental to gender equality and human rights. It aims to challenge patriarchal attitudes and discriminatory practices through education and social sensitization. The plan emphasizes eliminating discrimination against women and gender

minorities, ensuring equal rights for women with disabilities, and securing voting rights for all women, including migrant workers. Inclusivity for the elderly and linguistic minorities is emphasized, along with protecting the rights and dignity of widows and single parents. Strengthening legislation and justice mechanisms is crucial to safeguarding women's, children's, and gender minorities' rights and ensuring the implementation of new laws while revising discriminatory policies.

Theme 2: Economic Empowerment and Productive Employment

WROs have proposed a comprehensive set of recommendations to advance gender equality and empower women across various sectors. Their suggestions include vocational training and advocacy for women in all professions, along with review, reform and robust enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and incorporating International Labour Organization Convention on Violence and Harassment (C190) into labor laws to ensure equal job opportunities. WROs emphasize increasing women's representation in leadership positions in the plantation industry and creating a conducive work environment with essential services to encourage women's participation in the formal labor force. They stress the need to strengthen job security and social protections for women in the informal sector, eliminate wage disparities, and provide occupational safety rights. Measures to safeguard the rights of migrant workers, empower women with disabilities, recognize and address unpaid care work, and promote women's productive involvement in ensuring food security in rural areas are also highlighted.

Theme 3: Social Equality and Empowerment

The recommendations provided by various WROs covered key areas such as education, health, basic needs, and media to promote gender equality and inclusivity.



Education: WROs suggest reforms to create a socially sensitive educational system that ensure gender equality, vocational opportunities, and comprehensive sexual and reproductive education. Efforts are proposed to reduce school dropouts and early marriages by ensuring equal resource distribution, parental awareness, and access to essential resources like sanitary napkins and nutritious lunches.

Health sector: universal access to health care services for marginalized groups is emphasized, along with improving reproductive health services and mental health care. In the context of poverty and basic needs, targeted actions are recommended to empower vulnerable groups, address poverty issues, promote food security through home gardening and local agriculture, and ensure access to clean water, sanitation, and housing.

Media: the focus is on promoting equal representation and empowerment of women and gender minorities by establishing gender-sensitive media institutions, providing resources, and encouraging active participation in the industry.

Theme 4: Environment and Disaster Management

To ensure a gender-responsive approach to environmental management, disaster preparedness, and climate action,

WROs highlight the importance of including women's needs in disaster management plans by establishing training centers for women and girls to learn self-protection during disasters, conducting awareness campaigns on disaster preparedness for women, and making provisions for using public buildings as safe spaces during emergencies. To ensure full participation of women, girls, and gender minorities in all environmental aspects, WROs recommend empowering women, girls and gender minorities to take an active role in environmental and disaster management. This included encouraging equal participation of women in environmental protection groups, raising awareness on deforestation and empowering women to take action, and increasing women's involvement in disaster management teams. The recommendations also suggested improving draining systems in low-lying areas, implementing proper menstrual waste disposal mechanisms, providing waste management training for women and girls, and establishing accessible toilet facilities in public spaces, schools, and offices, to reduce effects of flooding which is a serious issue in areas that many WROs work.



Theme 5: Equality in Decision-Making

To ensure equal representation of women in decision-making positions across all sectors, WROs recommend adopting affirmative actions and supportive national measures. Their suggestions include creating political

awareness at the community level, advocating for 50% representation of women in political parties, and ensuring proportional representation of women in national Commissions. WROs also emphasize raising awareness and involving political party leaders to promote the inclusion of women in decision-making processes. They propose increasing the presence of women in mediation boards and addressing obstacles women face in household decision-making through empowerment programs. Strengthening the political status of women was seen as crucial, involving increasing women's representation in political parties, providing and accessing education on politics, conducting workshops on budget management, including involving women in Local Government budget preparation. WROs advocate for programs to nurture grassroots-level women leaders, enhance women's leadership in village development committees, and increase women's involvement in various professional associations.

Theme 6: Access to Justice, Peace and Security

Access to Justice: WROs propose many actions to ensure equal and equitable access to justice. They suggested assigning officers proficient in local languages at government institutions to aid citizens seeking legal aid without language barriers. WROs emphasize protecting the dignity and privacy of women and gender minorities during legal proceedings, advocating for separate spaces for victims within courts and fast delivery of verdicts, especially in rape cases. Eliminating barriers for marginalized women and gender minorities is prioritized, focusing on mechanisms for female sex workers, sensitizing justice professionals, and collaborating with the Human Rights Commission for comprehensive guidelines to facilitate gender and sexual minorities' access to justice mechanisms (as currently the guidelines have been issued only for transgender persons). Sensitivity training for police, more female officers in Police Women and Children's Desks, and creating a complaint-

friendly environment are recommended. Decriminalizing discriminatory laws, expediting legal reforms, and promoting discourse on consensual adult relationships are seen as crucial steps. Building awareness of rights and justice remedies among women, girls, and gender minorities through education and awareness campaigns is seen as essential.

Peace and Security: To ensure equal protection during conflicts, WROs advocate peacebuilding and ethnic harmony through media awareness, empowering women to intervene against ethnic disharmony, and providing counseling services for women displaced by war and conflict. They suggest promoting equal leadership, local dispute resolution mechanisms with female participation, and the importance of ensuring language capacity to promote strong relationships and prevent identity-based conflicts. Ensuring land rights and supporting those affected by war are identified as vital steps. WROs stress the importance of promoting female leadership in peacebuilding and post-conflict mechanisms, calling for increased representation of women in interfaith groups and peace structures.

Theme 7: Freedom From Gender-Based Violence

To prevent gender-based violence (GBV), WROs propose a range of measures such as enforcing criminal laws against media content

that violates privacy rights and transforming social media platforms to create safe spaces for marginalized groups vulnerable to and affected by violence. Addressing stigma and discrimination related to prejudice and bias was seen as crucial, along with expediting legal proceedings on GBV cases and raising awareness among sectors such as police and health services. Increased State collaboration with non-governmental organizations on GBV prevention and enforcing laws related to sexual bribery are also recommended.

To ensure accessible and affordable GBV services, WROs suggest establishing sustainable mechanisms for assistance, support, and protection. This includes strengthening district networks, creating village-level structures for better access to justice, establishing shelters and relief centers, and enhancing monitoring mechanisms for addressing and redressing GBV. Regularly convening the GBV Task Forces at district level and providing mental health services at the local level are also advised. Advocacy efforts to pressure both government and non-government institutions to make services available are also identified. Strengthening legal aid is seen as vital, with WROs proposing more institutions for free legal aid to women, girls, and gender minorities. WROs further advocate for the ratification and implementation of the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention (C190) to address GBV in the world of work.



To prevent GBV stemming from harmful gender norms, stereotypes, and sociocultural beliefs, WROs recommend educating and counselling men and families, raising awareness among children, and empowering communities to report violence to change harmful gender norms to foster a violence-free society.



Theme 8: Children- With Special Focus on the Girl Child

WROs recommend integrating a focus on children with special consideration on girl children in all thematic areas in order to prevent and redress harmful practices, mental and physical violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation of girl children, and enable the full enjoyment of educational, health and recreational rights of all children with special focus on girl children.

About the Project: The Women's Voice and Leadership Project, Sri Lanka is funded by Global Affairs Canada and implemented by The Asia Foundation Office in Sri Lanka. The project's goal is to build the capacities and support the activities of local women-led women's rights organizations and movements seeking to empower women and girls, advance the protection of the rights of women and girls, and achieve gender equality.

About this Document: The Women's Voice and Leadership Sri Lanka project documents its workshops, trainings and events through a series of "Event Blurbs" such as this document. The documents succinctly capture narratives of the event, highlights important discussions and subsequent courses of action, while emphasizing the contribution to the project's overall objectives and goals. The documents also capture the voices of women from the project's networks and partner women's rights organizations.