



**Global Tamil Forum's (GTF) 2014 International Women's Day statement:
'The insecurity of Tamil women in Sri Lanka'**

This year, International Women's Day celebrates the theme of **'Equality for women is progress for all'**. This idea should be at the core of a drive towards fairer societies and a better world. However, in many countries the rights of women continue to be denied, ignored and undermined.

Sri Lanka is one such place where women's rights – particularly those of Tamils who reside in the former armed conflict areas of the North and East - are under sustained assault.

Sexual violence in conflict

The Nobel prize nominated work of the 'Sri Lanka Killing Fields' and 'No-Fire Zone' documentaries revealed shocking evidence of systematic murder, abuse and sexual violence from the end of the war. Dead Tamil female fighters appeared to have been sexually assaulted. Witnesses described surrendering to the Sri Lankan military only to be raped, and footage showed Tamil women's corpses stripped of their clothes and dumped into trucks. Within the internal displacement camps, sexual abuse was rife with reports of Tamil female refugees forced into prostitution rings run by officials.

In their joint statement, from February 2014, on the need to prevent sexual violence, US Secretary of State, John Kerry, and UK Foreign Secretary, William Hague, said that not only does this egregious act destroy lives but *"is often perpetrated alongside other human rights abuses, including forced marriage, sexual slavery and human trafficking. It undermines reconciliation and traps survivors in conflict, poverty and insecurity."*¹ The militarisation of Tamil areas in Sri Lanka since the end of the war in 2009, by state security forces who are almost entirely ethnically Sinhalese, provides a textbook illustration of this argument.



¹ John Kerry and William Hague – Huffington Post, 'Preventing sexual violence is a national security imperative', 24th February 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/johnkerry/preventing-sexual-violence_b_4856070.html



The denial of women's rights in the North and East

In 2011, the International Crisis Group released a comprehensive report on women's insecurity, in the North and East, which detailed cases of sexual violence and the trafficking and exploitation of women.² By October 2013, levels of insecurity and sexual violence were on the increase, according to Minority Rights Group (MRG). In the same year, a report commissioned by the UN Secretary-General revealed grave concerns regarding the on-going incidents of human rights violations committed against Tamil women and girls, as well as the lack of accountability for sexual violence crimes.³ Despite the seriousness of these issues and the consequent damage done to the advancement of equality in the North and East, the Government of Sri Lanka has taken no measures to stop this abuse. A culture of impunity exists and many women are afraid to report cases of intimidation and ill-treatment to the authorities. Whilst Tamil women are particularly vulnerable, due to underlying ethnic tensions, the issue of gender inequality goes beyond the North and East. A UN multi-country study on men and violence in Asia and the Pacific found that 97% of rapists in Sri Lanka faced no legal consequences for their actions.⁴ This abysmal attitude to the prevention of abuse is reinforced by the Government of Sri Lanka's unwillingness to join over 140 other countries in endorsing the UN's 2013 'Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict' and for recently refusing a visa to the US Ambassador on Women's Affairs.

The denial of women's rights in the North and East also means that they are often shut out from key decisions made regarding the rehabilitation and reconstruction processes. This is a particular issue of concern for the estimated 89,000 war widows and tens of thousands of female headed households, who live in these areas. Whilst the Government may claim that progress has been made in terms of peace and development, as MRG notes, *"women are not benefiting from the peace dividend, are marginalized from development programmes, and struggle to access basic livelihoods to support their families"*.⁵



² International Crisis Group, 'Sri Lanka: Women's Insecurity in the North and East', 20th December 2011, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/217-sri-lanka-womens-insecurity-in-the-north-and-east.aspx>

³ Report of the UN Secretary-General, 'Sexual violence in conflict', 14th March 2013, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1325944_0.pdf

⁴ The Republic Square, 'UN survey on violence against women in Sri Lanka: 97% of rapists face no legal consequences', 11th September 2013, <http://www.therepublicsquare.com/briefs/2013/09/11/un-survey-on-violence-against-women-in-sri-lanka-97-of-rapists-face-no-legal-consequences/>

⁵ Minority Rights Group, 'Minority women in Sri Lanka facing increasing levels of sexual violence and insecurity', 16th October 2013, <http://www.minorityrights.org/?lid=12117#sthash.14gsb0DD.KA74KRvz.dpuf>



Tamil women as agents of change

Despite and because of these terrible conditions, it is important to celebrate the courage and resolve of women in the North and East who seek to act as agents of change in their communities.

Groups such as Women's Action Network (WAN) - a collective of 11 women's organisations from the North and the East – have played a key role in highlighting the abuse suffered by women, particularly Tamils coerced into joining the army. Their work has helped to illuminate issues that are often ignored by the mainstream media.

Without any material assistance from the Government, a number of women in the North and East have formed or are a part of co-operative thrift and credit societies, which seek to work around and alleviate the harsh economic realities. Of the 1350 such societies in the North, 75% of members are women of which an estimated 3000 are war widows.⁶

Individuals are making an impact too. The Northern Provincial Councillor, Ananthi Sasitharan, representing the Tamil National Alliance, has been at the forefront of calls for truth and justice regarding cases of enforced disappearances and abductions at the hands of the military. By seeking to give a political voice to thousands of Tamil war widows, she has faced constant intimidation from the security forces and was threatened with a period of incarceration in a 'rehabilitation facility' earlier this year.

All these efforts, and those of many other organisations and individuals in the North and East, are about seeking to empower women and trying to transform a dire situation into one in which respect and equality are commonplace. They should be commended for their actions and supported in their attempts to both challenge the culture of impunity and to call for truth, justice and accountability for all human rights violations.

"Equality for women is progress for all". It is a disgrace that the Government of Sri Lanka does not accept this truth.



⁶ Rajani Iqbal – Groundviews, 'Co-operatives as a means to uplift war affected women in Sri Lanka', 20th November 2013, <http://groundviews.org/2013/11/20/co-operatives-as-a-means-to-uplift-war-affected-women-in-sri-lanka/>



GTF calls on the Government of Sri Lanka to:

- Promote and protect women's rights; take concrete actions to end gender based violence; cease and desist the coercion of Tamil women into the military.
- Fulfil its commitments to the 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women' and support the provisions of Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls for women's full and equal participation in post conflict governance and reconciliation measures.
- Sign the UN's 'Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict'; and attend the Global Summit on this issue in London, in June 2014.
- Demilitarise the Tamil majority areas; restore complete civil administration to all militarised government departments and national institutions; and ensure that the military desist from involvement in any economic activities which undermine the livelihood opportunities for inhabitants, particularly women, in Tamil areas.
- Facilitate adequate witness protection so that the perpetrators of human rights violations can be held accountable for their actions. Release immediately all those who remain in arbitrary detention.
- Grant full access to the International Committee of the Red Cross and other international aid agencies to the North and East to help facilitate the rehabilitation process.

GTF calls on the international community, including the United Nations to:

- Support the establishment, at the 25th Session of the UN Human Rights Council in March 2014, of an independent, international war crimes inquiry in Sri Lanka.
- Ensure accountability and justice for the sexual violence committed against Tamil women during the conflict as well as for the on-going cases of gender-based violence.
- Remain seized of the situation in Sri Lanka; call for the demilitarisation of Tamil majority areas; and ask the UN country team to monitor the ground realities for women in the North and East.
- Place conditions on aid and investment into Sri Lanka, which call explicitly for the promotion and protection of women's rights.

Global Tamil Forum (GTF) was established in 2009 by a number of grass-roots Tamil groups following the end of the armed conflict in Sri Lanka. It is the largest Tamil diaspora organisation with members drawn from across five continents. GTF is committed to a non-violent agenda and seeks a lasting peace in Sri Lanka based on justice, reconciliation and a negotiated political settlement.