



SRI LANKA

Statement

by
Mrs. Swarna Sumanasekera,

Chairperson, National Committee of Women,
Sri Lanka

At

The Forty-ninth Session of the

Commission on the Status of Women

New York, ^{7th} March, 2005

Please check against delivery

Madam Chairperson, Excellencies, Distinguished delegates,

It is an honour for me to present a brief overview of the progress made in Sri Lanka during the last decade in the realisation of the objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action. Our commitment to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action is witnessed by the preparation of a National Plan of Action, which aimed at both coordinating and monitor the work of respective state agencies and monitoring their performances in terms of the Beijing Platform for Action.

The period under review is characterised by growing attention in regard to promotion of women's rights, action against violence against women and their empowerment. It is the decade in which the recognition of the need to have a gender perspective in government activities came to be fully realised, as evidenced by the phenomenal increase in the participation of women in education and economic activities. Community based initiatives bear testimony to the visible empowerment of women in the rural sector. These positive impacts are in consonance with the critical areas identified in the Beijing Platform for Action.

Numerous far reaching policy and legislative changes have been introduced to ensure the promotion of the rights of women. A Women's Rights Bill has just been drafted to strengthen the institutional arrangements for monitoring women's rights. Studies undertaken on gender responsive budgeting paved the way to allocate 10% of the Ministry budgets for programmes to improve the status of women. The 2005 Budget has made provisions to extend maternity leave benefits from the previous period of three months to one year for all live births, also for the continuing of payment of half salary to the widows of soldiers who died in the line of duty, in the event of remarriage.

Important changes have been introduced in national legislation, the most notable of which are the Penal Code amendments introducing new offences and enhancing punishment for sexual offences. A Domestic Violence Bill has just been presented to the Parliament. In the area of eliminating sexual and gender based violence, steps have been taken to establish and strengthen Women and Children Police Desks as well as to sensitise the law enforcement agencies such as the police, army and the judiciary. Campaigns have been held to promote legislative reforms to arrest the situation. Discrimination against women has been eliminated through reforms to Maintenance and Citizenship laws and Land Development Ordinance.

Education is the major contributory factor in improving the status of women in the country. We have a literacy rate of 97% for women. Girls participation in primary, secondary and tertiary education has surpassed that of boys and is gradually extending to technical and vocational areas. The gap in technical and vocational areas is being addressed through specific interventions. Gender parity in primary education as given in the Millennium Development Goals has already been achieved.

An enlightened health policy, providing free health services and an easily accessible island wide network of primary health care services has contributed significantly to the promotion of women's health. Gender equity is ensured in the new reproductive health policy.

In the on going poverty reduction programmes women play a major role specially in the micro credit programmes - 80% of the participants of this programme are women.

In our efforts to implement the Beijing Platform for Action, one of the important areas in which we realise more work is required is that of gender mainstreaming. In this regard, steps need to be taken to make gender mainstreaming a priority, including creating advocacy mechanisms and providing strong technical support . Further, women lag far behind in power and decision-making, compared to their achievement in the areas of social development. However with lobbying campaigns both by the Government and NGOs it has been possible to get Cabinet approval for a 33 1/3 % quota of women in local government institutions.

Sri Lanka's women have suffered much in this period in a prolonged internal conflict. We are of the view that more opportunities need to be provided for women to participate in on going conflict resolution and post conflict peace building as mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

The impact of the tsunami that devastated three fourths of the coastal belt of the country last December has had serious repercussions on the lives of women, who formed the majority of those displaced. The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Social Welfare is actively engaged in helping these women to rebuild their lives by engendering policies, providing livelihood and psycho social support, and addressing their safety issues in collaboration with the NGOs and civil society groups. We wish to acknowledge the important technical support we have received in this regard from UNIFEM and UNFPA.

I acknowledge the vital role that our dynamic women NGOs play in the promotion of women's rights in the country.

In conclusion Sri Lanka reaffirms its strong commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action and places great importance on the outcome of this Forty Ninth Session of the Commission on the Status of Women. In our forthcoming endeavours, we hope to place more emphasis in the areas of poverty reduction, violence against women, power and decision making and women affected by the armed conflict.

Thank you for your attention.