
WOMEN'S CHARTER: A SOCIAL CONTRACT BETWEEN THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE OF NEW DEMOCRATIC FRONT AND THE WOMEN OF SRI LANKA

MY PLEDGE

Sri Lankan women constitute 51.8 % of the population. As the Presidential Candidate of New Democratic Front, I strongly believe it is imperative to facilitate women reaching their full potential as equal citizens, if Sri Lanka is to reach its full potential. We cannot any longer forge forward if we prevent more than half of the country's population from contributing to its development and if we fail to address their concerns.

I am aware that there exists a gender division of labor that assigns different productive and reproductive and community work to men and women. I am aware that different values are ascribed to this work depending on whether its men or women who carry it out. I am aware of the gendered power relations that are skewed in favor of men.

I am committed to introducing gender-specific and gender-redistributive policies that will increase women's access and control over resources and improve their condition and position in view of their status and role in society at large. Further the new policies will not only address practical gender interests or needs in response to inadequacies in living conditions of women but also strategic gender interests and needs that will transform their lives.

I am committed to ensuring equality for all Sri Lankan women in all domains of their lives, including equal treatment in private and public life, access to legal institutions and access to justice, meaningful participation in the economy, access to high quality education, access and contribution to development and infrastructure, equal opportunity to participate in civic and political life, enjoyment of quality family life and lifestyle choices sans discrimination, contribution and practice of culture and religion without discrimination, access to high quality health care facilities and independent decision making about their own bodies and access /contribution to media promoting positive portrayals of women. This Women's Charter will compliment and will be implemented together with Women's Charter developed by the National Committee on Women adapted by the Government of Sri Lanka in 1993.

1. INDEPENDENT NATIONAL COMMISSION ON WOMEN

The history of implementation of existing laws and policies dealing with women has been uneven, ad-hoc and not well coordinated due to a high degree of politicization and lack of substantive understanding about women's rights. An independent women's commission is proposed at national level to respond to discrimination against women.

1.1 The Independent National Commission for Women will consist of a Chairperson and members.

- 1.2 The President shall on the recommendation of the Constitutional Council, appoint the Chairperson and members.
- 1.3 The National Commission for Women shall aim to respond to the historic and structural nature of discrimination against women and the lack of substantive equality in many spheres of public and private life in Sri Lanka.
- 1.4 The National Commission for Women shall from time to time, make rules for such matters which requires rules to be made.
- 1.5 There shall be a Secretary to the Commission and such other officers appointed by the Commission.
- 1.6 The Commission shall be responsible and answerable to Parliament in accordance with the provisions of the standing orders of Parliament.
- 1.7 A law shall determine the powers, responsibilities, organization and functioning of the National Commission for Women and its relationship with other State organizations.

2. EQUALITY & EQUITY

The basic premise of this charter is equality. To achieve equality/ equity this Charter acknowledges that there are inequalities in the way women and men are viewed in society and ascribed gendered roles, and in the opportunity to access and control resources at present. It also recognizes that inequality between genders exists in present Sri Lankan society within a system of hierarchies.

- 2.1 Equality & Equity will be the basic premise in all government policies.
- 2.2 No person shall be discriminated directly or indirectly against on the grounds of sex, gender identity or orientation, ethnicity, race, religion, caste or social origin, marital status, maternity, age, language, mental or physical disability, pregnancy, civil status, economic status, conscience or belief, birth and widowhood or any other status.
- 2.3 The realization of this equality will be through a comprehensive plan of action that will be implemented in the form of constitutional reform, legislative and administrative reform.
- 2.4 Ensure the planning, implementation and evaluation of the state budget to be gender responsive.
- 2.5 Mandatory gender budgeting units in each ministry, inclusive of a functional focal point with relevant skills and capacity.
- 2.6 A mechanism through which women can share their ideas and influence this plan of action will be established.
- 2.7 Fulfill constitutional obligations on equality and non-discrimination and ensure special measures are introduced to protect socio-economic and political rights of women with special needs.

3. LAW & JUSTICE

Policy drafting, legislative priorities, and enforcement of all laws including its formulation, application, interpretation, adjudication will be done in cognizance of the position and status women occupy in society, in culture, in the economy and in politics.

- 3.1 Special gender awareness programs will be introduced in view of promoting gender equality in the legal system of the country.
- 3.2 Women will receive equal treatment during all legal proceedings.
- 3.3 An efficient grievance redressal mechanism to be established for those women who face discrimination and differential treatment during legal proceedings.
- 3.4 Opportunity for equal representation of women will be ensured in the selection of independent commissions and tribunals.
- 3.5 Ensure a victim-centered response including creating a safe and conducive environment for the effective realization of the right to access to justice within all institutions liaising with victims of crimes, including police stations, courts, counselling services, victim protection services etc.
- 3.6 Affordable and accessible legal aid services for women island-wide.
- 3.7 Facilitate the Office of the Attorney General to administer fair, thorough and speedy enforcement of the law in cases related to women and review the proposal of setting up an independent Director of Public Prosecutions.
- 3.8 Establish special courts in all 24 District to expedite cases relating to violence against women & children.

4. ECONOMY

Although Sri Lanka is ahead of its South Asian neighbors in education and other social indicators, women's participation in the economy remains a challenge. During the past two decades women's participation in the labor force has been a meagre 30-35%. Further recent research suggests that women in Sri Lanka have reduced access to quality employment, and even if they do obtain a job, they are paid far less and are subject to more harassment and limitations as compared to males working the same jobs.

- 4.1** Economic Policy of the country to have a central focus on women and their meaningful participation in the economy.
- 4.2** Gender stereotyping according to jobs to be eliminated.
- 4.3** Eliminate Gender Pay Gap in the Private/Civil Society/ informal Sector jobs.
- 4.4** Informal sector worker's protection ensured through revision of existing labor regulations including the introduction of an insurance scheme for all women in the informal sector including those in self-employment and domestic work.
- 4.5** Ratification of International Organization Conventions that protect the rights of rural workers, migrant workers, subcontracted workers, and domestic workers who are mostly women.
- 4.6** Enter into bilateral agreements with receiving countries to protect women migrant workers.
- 4.7** Ensure all working women are entitled to health insurance, social benefits, opportunities for further trainings/ education irrespective of which sector they are employed in.
- 4.8** Public-Private partnerships are entered to introduce quality Child-Care facilities/ Day Cares in offices for working women with small children.
- 4.9** Increase paid maternity leave to match World Health Organization's (WHO) recommendation of mandatory breast-feeding period.
- 4.10** New incentive schemes in place for women to re-enter labor market and successfully secure employment post maternity leave.

- 4.11 Expansion of opportunities for women to generate income in their homes_by providing a combination of technical and vocational training, financial literacy and business development training, access to credit and other financial assistance, and links to markets.
- 4.12 Special attention to be given to the needs of war widows and female-headed households.
- 4.13 Provide subsidies and tax incentives to firms that support women's employment such as those that hire and retain new female graduates or that participate in vocational training programs for women.
- 4.14 Include unpaid care work in the National Labour Force Survey.

5. EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Post-Colonial education reforms in Sri Lanka has mainly focused on schooling, tertiary education and vocational training. According to The Gender Gap Report 2018 of World Economic Forum Country Score Card, Sri Lanka ranks in 90th place in the world for Education Attainment. Education and training in this Charter will approach it as a basic right that one requires lifelong to meet one's full potential in all spheres.

- 5.1 The concept of gender equality will be incorporated into all school curricula from kindergarten to tertiary education and vocational training.
- 5.2 Access to 13 years of compulsory education.
- 5.3 New incentive schemes that will encourage women to enroll in technical training programs and skills development shall be introduced.
- 5.4 Expand industry linked internships and school-based business incubators and exposure programs for female students at the lower secondary school level.
- 5.5 An inclusive education system that understands the nuances in disability and special needs for children.

6. HEALTH

Sri Lanka is doing well in health indicators not only in comparison to rest of South Asia but also globally. However, there are still significant challenges to overcome especially in view of health of women and girl children.

- 6.1 Increase easily accessible mental health services that caters to women.
- 6.2 Introduce programs on locally sourced nutritional food for all pregnant and lactating mothers and children under 5 years of age
- 6.3 Ensure sanitation facilities at all child day cares in the Plantation Sector.
- 6.4 In view of sanitary challenges that schoolgirls encounter daily, provide sanitary facilities to all government schools.
- 6.5 Recognize ageing women population and formulate policies to take measures to address their specific issues, including housing, health, livelihoods, and transportation among others.

7. POLITICAL AND CIVIC LIFE

Sri Lanka has one of the lowest levels of political representation in the world although Sri Lanka proudly speaks of having the first woman Prime Minister in the world. Similarly, although women have traditionally played a crucial role in community and civic life, their opportunities for decision making has been limited.

- 7.1 Take affirmative action towards creating an enabling environment for women that will ensure their greater participation in politics and all levels of governance.
- 7.2 Introduce mandatory legal provisions to ensure that all registered political parties have at least 25% women in their key decision-making structures
- 7.3 Maintain a frequently updated Database at Divisional Secretariats to document and identify the needs of women/ children.

8. GENDER BASED VIOLENCE (SGBV)

Different levels of gender-based violence experienced by women on a daily basis is a key concern. While it takes place in all spheres of life starting at home, in society, at workplace and in custody, the manifestation of it is many folds such as rape, incest, sexual harassment, physical-mental and verbal abuse, torture and inhuman treatment.

- 8.1 Promote women's right to be free from all forms of gender-based violence at home, in the community, at the workplace, in custody and in public spaces and their entitlement to a life of respect and dignity.
- 8.2 Launch a national awareness campaign on all existing laws on gender-based violence, (Prevention of Domestic Violence Act and Penal Code) Targeting State holders and Imprimatur.
- 8.3 A Women's police station establish all District
- 8.4 Introduce One-Stop Support center to provide legal aid, medical assistance, Psycho-Social Counseling other services which also will the migrate women workers.
- 8.5 Increase the number of Safe houses for SGBV victims island-wide.
- 8.6 Introduce measures to secure women's right to safe and secure public transport system.
- 8.7 Introduce measures to secure women's right to safe and secure travel at night.
- 8.8 Support community, civil society, and non-government organizations that provide psycho-social and psychiatric counselling to victims of violence.
- 8.9 Promote zero tolerance of sexual harassment policies and functional grievance redressal mechanisms at all work places in the public/ private sectors and civil society/ non-government organizations.
- 8.10 Enact laws related to cybercrimes targeting women and children.
- 8.11 Establish social protection and SGBV victim services for women in the informal sector.
- 8.12 Enact amendments to the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act 2005.
- 8.13 Each Women and Children's Desk to be staffed by adequately trained officers who are proficient in Sinhala/ Tamil languages as required and adequately resourced to offer this service over 24 hours of the day.

- 8.14 Enact amendments to the Bribery Act and explicitly include in its definition of bribery the act of compelling sexual bribery.

9. WAR WIDOWS & WOMEN HEADED HOUSEHOLDS (WHH)

It is estimated that there are 1.2 million households (23.5% of all households) island-wide according to the latest reports based on data collected from 2012 to 2013. It is not a phenomenon limited to the former war-affected regions, the percentage of WHHs is over 20% in every province. Though the high numbers in the north and east are likely a result of the war, the numbers in the other provinces demonstrate that this has been a steady, gradual process.

- 9.1 A special focus to be given to the needs of war widows & women headed households such as access to land, housing, access to services, livelihood opportunities, skills, credit and legal aid.
- 9.2 Implementation of a National Action Plan in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1325. On women peace and Security.
- 9.3 Development and the implementation the National Action Plan (NAP) concerning Women Headed Households (WHH).

10. HAPPY FAMILY

Increased family ties, is the foundation that a society is built upon. The fast paced lifestyle has affected family ties and made family unit more vulnerable. Due to economic hardships the family unit has fallen prey to social ills such as the drug menace, violence in the home etc. These issues often challenge the family unit isolating its members and exposing them to mental and physical hardships.

Women are often tasked with the duty to find solutions to such problems. The concept of ‘Happy Family’ is targeted to ensure the mental and physical wellbeing of the woman, and thus strengthening the family unit.

- 10.1 Awareness programs on the importance and contribution of the concept “Happy Family” will be held island wide.
- 10.2 Enhancing mutual understanding between husband and wife and providing the family unit with necessary advice and assistance.
- 10.3 Special programs to ensure the safety of children will be held island-wide.
- 10.4 Providing guidance and assistance to maintaining a drug free “Happy Family”
- 10.5 Expanding opportunities to offer special assistance and adequate support including mental health advise for families in need.
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Signature of the Presidential Candidate of the New Democratic Front

Last update on 14.10.2019

Signatures of Women/ Women Organisation Representatives

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Place and Date