

## **Team 1325 and Women in Sri Lanka: Building a Common Platform for Peace**



**Dr. Paula Green, Director of Karuna Center for Peacebuilding**

### **Summary:**

In September 2008, Karuna Center partnered with gender expert Sanam Anderlini and AWAW, Association of War Affected Women, to offer a seminar for women that combined peacebuilding and gender issues in war and peace. Topics included specific knowledge about UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, as well as training in coalition building among women across differences of ethnicity and regions within Sri Lanka. The workshop participants developed an action component for their continued engagement and collaboration in 2008-09. Their five days together culminated in a UN Resolution 1325 conference in Colombo to further encourage the implementation of 1325 through the inclusion of women in future peace processes and peace negotiations in Sri Lanka.

### **Country overview:**

In 2002 a cease-fire was negotiated by Norway between the Tamil Tigers and the Sinhalese-dominated government, ending 19 years of civil war. However, the cease-fire did not hold. By 2006, the parties had returned to violence, and in January 2008 the Government of Sri Lanka officially abrogated the cease-fire. When the guns are once again silenced, hopefully in 2009, the challenge of power sharing, reconstruction, and reconciliation in this long-divided country will confront the weary and wary population, as well as their international partners.



### **Karuna Center's history in Sri Lanka:**

Karuna Center began leading seminars in Sri Lanka in 1994, working throughout the country with a variety of civil society organizations to teach the skills and practices of conflict resolution, increase mutual understanding between identity groups, foster social responsibility, and encourage communal harmony.

From 2003-05, Karuna Center led a two-year training-of-trainers program, *Preparing for Peace: Leadership Training for Dialogue and Reconciliation*, for 25 participants who were mentored in leading their own reconciliation projects for all sectors of society. This program was supported in part through a grant from the United States Institute of Peace. During the course of the program, participants created projects that they led in multi-ethnic teams. Participants also worked with Karuna Center staff to develop a peacebuilding training manual that has been translated into Tamil and Sinhalese and widely distributed. Our participants, representing all ethnic and regional groups in Sri Lanka, are now actively engaged in their own NGOs, implementing what they have learned to promote a renewed peace process.

### **Women and the political process in Sri Lanka:**

Women in Sri Lanka enjoy many of the same benefits that men do, especially in times of peace. Most receive 13 years of education and there is free access to schooling for women throughout most of the country. Many Sri Lankan women have equal access to jobs in addition to playing a central role in Sri Lanka's home life. However, despite being one of the first countries to allow women to vote, having a Ministry of Women's Affairs, and creating a Gender Sub-Committee as part of the official peace process, Sri Lankan women hold only 2 % of elected positions in local government posts and make up only 4% of representatives in central government. Unlike neighboring countries, Sri Lanka does not have a quota requiring a certain percentage of women to run for local office. This has been a focus of women's groups in recent years, but the campaign to introduce a quota has gained little traction in Sri Lanka's deeply conservative polity.

The obstacles for women's participation are directly related to the difficulties Sri Lankan democracy faces in general. A highly centralized decision-making structure and deeply ingrained patronage systems keeps the political process closed to women. In this context, women face related and reinforcing challenges. Women are rarely selected to run for office by the existing, male dominated patronage culture. Those who do run for local office face a very aggressive election system that uses violence to intimidate candidates and shape voting patterns. According to a number of studies on women in politics, women also tend to face more abuse and aggression in public life in Sri Lanka than men. Families, witnessing the violence associated with Sri Lankan politics, often (and understandably) stand in the way of women seeking to run for office. Due to the level of intimidation and the power of the patronage system, the status quo is maintained, with women remaining marginalized and excluded from the political process.

### **Team 1325 workshop:**

This workshop for AWAW was the culmination of a six-month training program for women activists led by AWAW Director Visaka Dharmadasa. Members of the group were drawn from all districts of the country, and thus included women whose communities are engaged in warfare against each other. Some of the women came from severely war-affected communities that are dealing with displaced people and acute losses of life, property, and security. Others came from regions of Sri Lanka far from the battlegrounds, and thus had limited comprehension about the extent of suffering of their colleagues. Additionally, the government is currently waging a partially invisible war by blocking media presence in the war zones and silencing the opposition. In this environment, the women spoke of the violent conflict cautiously and focused on UN Resolution 1325 and on building coalitions for improving the political participation of women. We learned, however, of extremely difficult circumstances for women in the zones of conflict in the north of Sri Lanka.

Visaka Dharmadasa is a well-known activist, organizer, and visionary in Sri Lanka, and a woman determined to make a difference in her country. She won a Humanitarian Award from InterAction in 2006 and was among the One Thousand Peace



*UN Consultant Sanam Anderlini and  
NGO Director Visaka Dharmadasa*

Women nominated for a collective Nobel Peace Prize. Visaka works with women, soldiers, community leaders, and government actors to achieve her aims of political participation, social inclusion, and peace. In her work with Team 1325, Visaka has introduced the participants to advocacy campaigning, media usage, grant proposals, political participation, and other core skills essential for NGO leaders.

Taking the political exclusion of women into consideration, Visaka and the Association of War Affected Women requested a workshop to help strengthen the role of women as political representatives and as peacebuilders in Sri Lanka.



*Team 1325 women in Colombo for conference*

#### Workshop Objectives

- To empower a greater number of women in Sri Lanka with the skills they need to engage effectively in public life and improve democratic governance practices.
- To refocus attention of women's groups on advocating for a quota for increasing women's participation in the political process in Sri Lanka.
- To operationalize Security Council Resolution 1325 in Sri Lanka by promoting the election and selection of women at all levels of decision making.
- To impart dignity and confidence to women who are potentially seeking political office through the facilitation of a stronger network of women (in NGOs and local government) that is dedicated to ensuring women's empowerment.

The workshop focused on peacebuilding skills and concepts as well as on details and implications of Resolution 1325. The women strengthened relationships with each other through small-group reflections, an important issue in such a deeply divided society where women's coalitions for peace are weak or nonexistent. We examined the impact of



*Images of Sri Lanka at peace*

violence on identity and examined how cycles of violence further narrow and solidify identities, reducing tolerance and making inter-group cooperation difficult and dangerous. We studied women's coalitions and peace-generating activities in other countries, and explored methods for coalition building in the Sri Lankan context. Group members learned about the history and progress of UN Resolution 1325, and then developed priorities and strategic plans for 1325 application in Sri Lanka. We ended the workshop with visions of the role of women in a future Sri Lanka and concretized the visions with commitments to actions and milestones.

Following the workshop, which took place in Kandy, the group traveled to Colombo for a 1325 conference at which invited dignitaries, international guests, and gender activists heard reports and plans from the participants and also learned more about UN Resolution 1325 and its implications for Sri Lanka. The audience endorsed the need for coalition building to create nationwide representation of women in Sri Lanka, which all believe will help end the scourge of civil war and bring the parties to the table for renewed negotiations.