

Too often we... enjoy the comfort of  
opinion without the discomfort of thought  
- John F. Kennedy

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Opinion 5

BROKEN PROMISES:

# Plight of Lankan women and its economic costs

By SUNIMALEE MADURAWALA

The United Nations celebrated the first International Women's Day on 8th of March in 1975. Since then, the International Women's Day has been celebrated each year on the 8th of March, all across the world. On this day, women are recognized and appreciated for their past struggles and achievements in the economic, political and social spheres. Most importantly, International Women's Day is an opportunity to highlight issues and problems faced by women all over the globe. "It is an occasion for looking back on past struggles and accomplishments, and more importantly, for looking ahead to the untapped potential and opportunities that await future generations of women". The theme for the 2013 International Women's Day is: "A Promise is a Promise: Time for Action to End Violence against Women".

## What is Violence against Women?

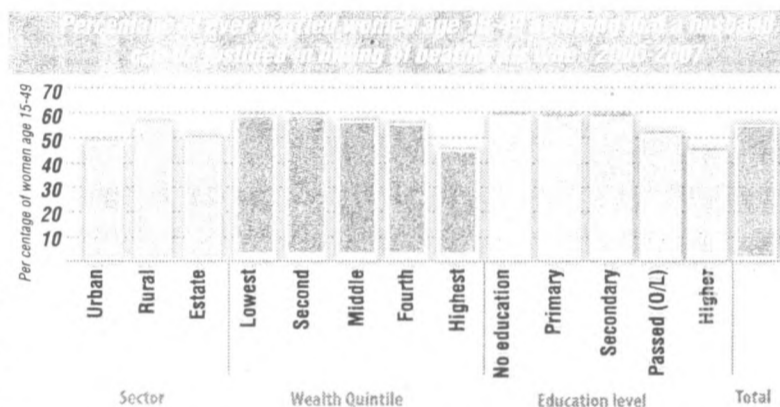
Article 1 of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVW), declared by the UN General Assembly in its resolution 48/104 of 20 December 1993, defines the term Violence Against Women (VAW) as: "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life". VAW is usually categorized as being physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, economic, and digital (Information and Communication Technology).

Sri Lanka has ratified all key international covenants on human rights. The country has ratified four major international covenants, which have relevance to rape and other forms of gender based violence [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights-1966, Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)-1979, Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)-1989 and the Convention on Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment -1984]. Further, Sri Lanka has signed the Vienna

Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women in 1993, the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act No. 34 of 2005 (PDV) was passed, and the Forum against Gender Based Violence was set up in 2005. A separate Ministry was set up to work on women's issues in 1983 (The Ministry of Women's Affairs - currently this Ministry is known as the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Affairs). Several initiatives have been taken to combat VAW by the governments and civil society organizations.

Despite the promise of more action, the promise of aligning ourselves with international statutes and conventions, the reality of the situation remains dire. According to the Gender Based Violence Forum in Sri Lanka, rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, sexual violence, forced prostitution and trafficking are the most prevalent types of VAW in Sri Lanka. The Forum further states that these crimes are not specific to a particular region or locality, but they are reported across class, race, religion, and ethnicity. Prevalence of domestic violence in Sri Lanka, ranges from 27% (Perera, 1990), 32% (Samarasinghe, 1991) and 40% (Jayatilake et al., 2010) to as high as 60% (Deraniyagala, 1992). In the case of VAW, obtaining reliable data is difficult mainly because victims are reluctant to reveal such incidents due to social stigma. However, Sri Lanka's Demographic and Health Survey (2006/2007) conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics has revealed that regardless of background, women are highly susceptible to violence (see Figure 1).

This is partly because a majority of the women, regardless their level of education or income has the perception that a husband may be justified in hitting or beating his wife. Fundamentally, VAW is a violation of human rights. It affects negatively on a woman in many ways. Violence against a woman damages her health and well-being, thus hindering her empowerment. Further, it also has an inter-generational affect. Violence against women damages not only the health and well-being of women, but also health and well-being of their children.



\*Note: Women were asked if a husband was justified under at least one of five scenarios: 1) if she goes out without telling him, 2) if she neglects the children, 3) if she argues with him, 4) if she refuses to have sex with him, or 5) if she burns the food. Source: Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, Demographic and Health Survey 2006/07

## Economic costs of VAW

The Economic costs related to VAW can be broadly classified as 'Direct Tangible Costs' (e.g. health care costs), 'Indirect Tangible Costs' (e.g. lower earnings due to lower productivity), 'Direct Intangible Costs' (e.g. pain and suffering, and the emotional impairment due to violence) and 'Indirect Intangible Costs' (e.g. negative psychological effects on children who witness violence which cannot be estimated numerically). Therefore, VAW has a significant impact on an economy. For instance, in the United States of America, the annual cost estimation of intimate partner violence amount to US\$ 5.8 billion. The economic burden of VAW and their children to the Australian economy was estimated to be US\$ 13.6 billion in 2012. As most cases related to VAW are hidden and untold, the real economic impact is likely to be much larger. The economic costs of VAW occur in different forms (see Table 2).

Almost from the very beginning, women have played an important role in the economic development of Sri Lanka. Women form the backbone of the Sri Lankan economy (associated with tea, garments, and remittances). Especially in such a backdrop, it is rather alarming to observe that 83 % of females in the estate sector are victims of gender based violence; 57 % of female gar-

ment workers experience sexual harassment at the work place, and 11% of returnee migrant women are sexually abused. Further, 62 % of female employees in the industrial sector have experienced unwanted and unwelcome sexual advances at the workplace at some point of their lives. Exposure to VAW at the work place hinders the productivity of the worker, while also resulting in the discontinuation of the job and eventual withdrawal from the labour force. This in turn means lower income levels on a household level and lower female labour force participation on a national level. There is no doubt that economic development will be hindered for as long as VAW persists in society.

## Effecting changes

Incidence reports appearing in newspapers, and complaints made at police stations are just the tip of the iceberg; the magnitude of the problem is much greater and most of the time hidden and unspoken of. While it is true that there have been continuous efforts made by various parties to eliminate VAW from the country, available data, literature, and anecdotal evidence prove that prevalence of VAW is still high in Sri Lanka. In this context, it is important to mobilize the community through better awareness and effecting attitudinal and behavioural changes. It is also important to fully grasp the economic implications of VAW, and to understand that the nation as a whole has to cover the cost.

The sooner we begin to implement effective policies and programmes, along with a national effort to instill an attitudinal change to end VAW, the sooner we can begin to reduce the economic costs of VAW.

Sri Lanka made a promise to its women when it became a signatory to the international conventions protecting the rights of women. However this has been left on the backburner for too long and the plight of the country's women is beginning to exert a very real economic impact on the country as a whole. Policy makers and implementers might find that it is always better to keep a promise, rather than bear the costs of a fall out. (This article originally appeared in *Talking Economics with citations*)

Table 2: Economic Cost of Violence against Women (Cost Categories)

Cost Category	Types of Costs Included
Pain, suffering and premature mortality	Costs of pain and suffering attributable to violence. Costs of premature mortality measured by attributing a statistical value to years of life lost.
Health costs	Includes private and public health costs associated with treating the effects of violence on the victim/survivor, perpetrator, and children.
Production-related costs	Includes costs associated with: lost production (wages plus profit) from: absenteeism; search and hiring costs; lost productivity of victim/survivor, perpetrator, management, co-worker, friends and family; lost unpaid work; retraining costs; permanent loss of labour capacity.
Consumption-related costs	Includes costs associated with: property replacement; settlement of bad debts.
Second generation costs	Includes private and public health costs associated with: childcare; changing schools; counseling; child protection services; remedial/special education; increased future use of government services; increased juvenile and adult crime.
Administrative and other costs	Includes private and public health costs associated with: legal/forensic services; temporary accommodation; paid care; counseling; perpetrator programs; interpreter services; funerals.
Transfer costs	Includes 'deadweight loss' to the economy associated with: government payments and services; victim/survivor compensation; lost taxes.

Source: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Australia (2013)

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