

COUNTRY BRIEFING: SRI LANKA

COUNTRY CONTEXT

- **Almost three decades of violent conflict in Sri Lanka has left a legacy of widespread human rights abuses, displacement and vast numbers of casualties on both sides.** Ethnic tensions between the majority Sinhalese government and the Tamil community continue, impacting Sri Lanka's full progress towards reconciliation, reconstruction and sustainable peace. The Easter Sunday bombings of 2019 highlighted vulnerabilities in national security and drew attention to the presence of Muslim extremist factions within the country. There have also been periods of civil unrest and protest as social and economic instability increases in Sri Lanka.
- **Many IDPs are still waiting to be resettled or relocated.** During the war more than a million Sri Lankans belonging to the country's Northern and Eastern provinces were displaced from their homes. While the majority of those affected by the conflict have received aid to return, relocated or assimilated within their new communities, some IDPs are still waiting to be resettled or relocated 15 years after the end of the war.
- **Women and girls, especially those from the most conflict-affected regions, are disproportionately affected by the war in Sri Lanka.** Women, particularly widows, wives of the disappeared and female ex-combatants continue to face challenges and disproportionate hardship relating to economic insecurity, social stigma and limited access to justice for the many forms of violence they have endured. Though the empowerment of women and gender justice are understood as critical elements of post-war reconciliation in Sri Lanka, progress has been hampered by patriarchal norms, displacement, economic dependence and inadequate legal mechanisms.
- **Women's rights reforms are instrumentalised** Political actors use women's participation in politics and the recent gender quota requirement to detract from human rights abuses in the country and to uphold ethno-racial and anti-feminist policies.

KEY FINDINGS

Return Migration

- **There are multiple motivations for return migration to Sri Lanka.** Return migration is driven by negative conditions and experiences abroad, as well as positive developments at home, and a desire to contribute to progress in Sri Lanka. Younger and second-generation migrants in particular, want to reconnect with their roots and cultural identity. These returnees bring valuable expertise, particularly in health, education, and information technology and help to promote innovation in the country.
- **There are gendered experiences in return migration** Women face significant discrimination and challenges on return and patriarchal norms impact on their public and private roles. Despite facing gender-based discrimination, women returnees continue to be instrumental in promoting gender equality and development within their communities.

OVERVIEW

This brief focuses on two separate but interconnected aspects of post-conflict Sri Lanka. Firstly, the brief looks at the current realities for returning migrants and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Jaffna District in the Northern Province, one of the areas where there is a large IDP population. The findings show how gender and intersecting forms of marginalisation inform experiences of displacement and determine access to resources and opportunities for displaced households.

Secondly, this brief presents an overview of the value of culture to women in conflict settings. It explores gendered economic exclusion and its relationship to peacebuilding, economic agency and empowerment. It shows how communities of women in conflict contexts rely on coded and tacit knowledge to rebuild their lives and how cultural practices continue to exist and are a form of resistance in these challenging contexts. In doing so, it evidences the critical link between gendered knowledge, peacebuilding and economic development through sustainable livelihoods.



Internally Displaced Persons

- **IDPs face social and economic marginalisation.** IDPs have limited access to economic and livelihood opportunities, leading to protracted displacement and deteriorating living conditions. Land and housing grants are insufficient and IDPs have been reluctant to accept what land has been proposed by the Government because of its poor quality and fertility and its location in areas with a lack of livelihood opportunities.
- **Compromised health and sanitation for women and girls.** Displacement severely affects access to healthcare, clean water and sanitation, with pronounced impacts on women's reproductive health. The lack of basic necessities like sanitary products and clean water further marginalises displaced women and girls.
- **The global discourse on displacement is not embedded in the realities on the ground.** It is difficult to translate global discourse on displacement from actors such as the UN into national and subnational contexts, and then marry this up with developments on the ground. For example, at the international level Sri Lanka appears to be putting proactive policies in place that are gender aware. However how local laws and policies reflect these priorities is unclear. This damaging gap between rhetoric and action is built on the assumption that high level discourse is both indicative of forthcoming policy and that it drives decisions, but this is not the case on the ground.

Culture and women's economic independence

- **Creative practices face negative gendered biases.** Even in contexts where policy makers focus on women's economic empowerment, there is still pushback against craft making and art-based practices. These creative industries are often framed as hobbies rather than a source of culture and livelihood. This is a general pattern where any (perceived) non-economic benefit facing labour is relegated as a hobby. The women craft makers are then excluded from engagement with that policy space because they are not seen as artists but as hobbyists.
- **Loss of indigenous knowledge and techniques.** Traditional knowledge is slowly being erased through generational change. This is exacerbated by the political and economic crisis the country faces. These practices are often remembered with fondness, but shifting access to cheaper raw material from outside Sri Lanka are slowly replacing this knowledge and hand-craft techniques. The regional relationships for trade in Sri Lanka include supply chains from India and China within the creative sector. Very often this is damaging for the local eco system as chemical dyes, sold at cheaper prices, and easier to access are used by craft makers.
- **Women's role in peacebuilding in Sri Lanka is crucial.** A culture-focused approach and the creation of peer committees has successfully brought together communities of women that had

been fractured. These women use craft making as a method to build bridges between communities impacted by war and violence and to mend the social fabric that has been under stress since the war and post the 2019 Easter Bombings.

- **Co-designed and co-produced policies and programming for economic development leads to more impactful and long-term engagement.** Cowritten and programmed interventions from women are more inclusive and perceived as more meaningful by the women. In the context of drawing upon traditional craft practices, there is better uptake, deeper engagement, and a cascading of training when the programme is designed collaboratively and in a bespoke manner.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Government of Sri Lanka

- **Encourage return migration.** Develop and implement policies to attract and integrate highly skilled returnees, recognising their potential to contribute to economic development and peace. This includes establishing return policies and institutions that facilitate reintegration and capitalise on the diaspora's human, cultural and social capital. In addition to this the Sri Lankan Government needs to engage and mobilise experts within the diaspora, focusing on gender justice and inclusive peace. This involves developing strategies to effectively leverage the diaspora's resources, including knowledge, skills, and economic contributions.
- **Provide housing and restitution for IDPs.** The Sri Lankan Government needs to increase the current land and housing grants to IDPs in line with inflation. In addition to this there needs to be a continuation and expansion of work to document the experiences of IDPs to inform policies of protection and assistance in resettlement and relocation, and to consider the sources of livelihood of IDPs when proposing alternative land.
- **Future peace and economic dialogue should be integrated with ongoing conversations about identity and culture.** Working within craft making and culturally significant and valued practices, builds and supports the collective Sri Lankan identity. In addition, working within crafts provides a democratic and equal space for women irrespective of their individual identity constructs. Training workshops that support women to turn their craft practices into sustainable livelihoods in Sri Lanka must be taken forward as a guide for how to productively engage communities living within conflict and to promote inter-communal understanding and healing whilst simultaneously bolstering economic stability.

Donors and funders

- **Support participatory and arts-based methods.** Donors and funders need to recognise and financially support art-based research methodologies for their unique contributions to

data collection, learning, and dissemination. Funders should appreciate the process and the output equally, promoting innovative and impactful research approaches.

UN agencies and those working on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda

- **Reframe and broaden what economic empowerment is and can look like in the context of WPS.** While the WPS agenda acknowledges the importance of economic empowerment, agency and sustainability it fails to adequately emphasise how such work can and often does emerge organically and informally from the bottom up in conflict-affected contexts led by women themselves. Economic livelihood does not just mean formal employment in jobs that require qualifications, it also means the vast and varied informal sector and home-based economies which are often rooted in cultural practices and craft making.
- **Develop a fifth WPS pillar that focuses on women's economic development and sustainable livelihoods.** While historically addressed in the Relief and Recovery pillar of the WPS agenda, further attention and resources are needed to focus on women's economic development and sustainable livelihoods in ways that are led by women and for women.

Academics and researchers

- **Explore innovative ways of engaging in research commercialisation projects that tangibly improve the livelihoods of participants while also advancing knowledge and practice.** Theoretically constructed projects which provide data and insights value only the lead researcher and their publication-based outputs. Projects that bring material or tangible benefits to partners and participants, which are sustainably designed, and equitably led/co-produced should be viewed as a key method of conducting research, building decolonial approaches of non-extractive research.

- **The methodology of research needs to be adaptive and accommodating of lived realities and challenges that population groups face.** Micro identity based systemic inequalities should be explored within each aspect of research. A methodology that is codesigned with research teams should be adaptive to crisis, which can only be achieved through shared leadership of the research methodology. Training of researchers in methods which are relevant can be achieved through collective participatory action-based research.

FURTHER READING

- R WD Lakshman, K Amirthalingam, A Ekanayake & B Blitz, "[Gender and Displacement in Jaffna, Sri Lanka](#)", (UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub, 2020).
- "[Culture and Conflict: Sri Lanka](#)", (UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub, 2024).
- N Raina, '[Research and knowledge exchange: notes from South Asian neighbourhoods](#)', in S Leighton & E Barrett (eds.) "[Careful Collaborations: Ethics and Care in Cultural Knowledge Exchange and Trans-Disciplinary Research](#)", (National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange, 2024).

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